**Singularity: Divergence**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/3738118](http://archiveofourown.org/works/3738118).

| Rating: | Mature |
| Archive Warning: | Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con |
| Category: | F/M, M/M |
| Fandom: | The Flash (Comics), The Flash - All Media Types |
| Relationship: | Barry Allen/Leonard Snart, Roscoe Dillon/Lisa Snart, Past Barry Allen/Iris West - Relationship |
| Character: | Barry Allen, Leonard Snart, Rogues (The Flash), Wally West, Bart Allen, Jay Garrick, Max Mercury, Hartley Rathaway, James Jesse, Mark Mardon, Mick Rory, Roscoe Dillon, Evan McCulloch, George "Digger" Harkness, Lisa Snart, Joan Garrick, Original Characters, Amunet Black, Darwin Elias, Bruce Wayne, Diana (Wonder Woman), Oliver Queen, Dinah Lance, J'onn J'onzz, Guy Gardner, Michael Holt (DCU), Pieter Cross, Kyle Rayner |
| Additional Tags: | Drama, Angst and Humor, Friendship, Dark, Implied paedophilia, implied hebephilia, Past Child Abuse, Slow Build, Barry has to deal with a lot in this one, it's a good thing he befriend the Rogues, Barry and Len grow closer over time, Len is a jerk at times, but he is trying, and Barry does his best to heal, the rest of the Rogues help too, Especially Sam, and Hartley, and james, Marco not so much at first, neither Lisa, but Barry eventually grows on all of them, very very slow built, I take my time here, I wanna explore their relationship, without a hurry, a lot of weight is on character development, and getting a feel for the whole situation, this is a very sad story at times, but it can be very sweet and humorous as well, I have been writing on it for about 5 years now, focus lays on Barry's and Len's relationship, it's a slow-burn, it can be frustrating at times with what happens to Barry, but despite what it looks like, I'm not out to give Barry a hard time, there is something else at play that does so, and I'm not a sucker for sad ending, so make of that what you will, ;-) |
| Series: | Part 1 of Singularity |

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**Singularity: Divergence**

by [Enina](http://archiveofourown.org)

**Summary**

Barry is robbed of his powers and locked away in Iron Height for a crime he didn’t commit.

Years later, shunned from his former friends and family, he is released on parole and has to
try and rebuild a life for himself.

It doesn't take him long to realize that he isn't as alone as he thinks, and he learns that, sometimes, people aren't what they seem and that one can find kindness in the unlikeliest places.

Notes

This story is very near and dear to me. I have started working on it in early August of 2013, and it has turned into something much bigger than I've initially expected by now.

It can get quite light-hearted at times but is generally more of a drama and deals with rather sad, grim, and adult themes throughout its run.

I hope you will enjoy it. :)
SEPTEMBER 1 st year

It is raining when Barry steps out of Iron Heights for the first time in over seven years.

The late September air is cool and crisp, and he keeps standing there, outside the high walls of the place he spent what feels like an eternity in, unsure what to do next.

He glances nervously back over his shoulder, but the guard who let him out is no longer there, and the door through which he has just left the prison is closed once again.

The backpack he is carrying feels light — there isn’t much left of his private belongings after more than half a decade. Not that he’s really worried about that, not about any long-gone possessions, anyway.

Barry shoots another nervous glance back towards the door he just exited, afraid that one of the guards would reappear at any moment to drag him back into that horrible place…

There is nobody, though.

He is all alone out here.

Hesitantly, he decides to make his way over to the bus stop that lies not too far from where he's standing.

As he walks it suddenly occurs to him how strange it is to be outside again after such a long time on the other side of those huge walls that limited his world like a cage, and finally away from all the awfulness that is hidden behind them.

The relief he is feeling is nearly smothering in its intensity, but there is still the lingering fear that all of this could have just been a mistake, and he silently prays to whatever higher entity there is that this nightmare is really finally over.
There is nobody else around at the small, uncovered bus stop, and he is glad for this brief moment of solitude that gives him the opportunity to calm his agitated emotions.

He seems to be the only one who was released today, and he appreciates the bit of peace and quiet he hasn’t had for years. Even so, the faint but persisting voice in the back of his mind keeps insisting on all of this being a ruse, a cruel prank they are playing on him.

Barry keeps standing next to the bench at the bus stop, too full of nervous energy, and unwilling to let his guard down until his ride finally arrives.

He doesn’t dare to look back again, the fear that he could spot one of the guards exiting and coming over to fetch him is just too daunting. It sits heavy in the pit of his stomach like a stone.

Instead, he looks down the street in the direction the bus will come from, studying it absentmindedly for a moment before he turns his gaze to the ground, frowning at the dirty wet road.

The change for the bus trip is in his trouser pocket, and he keeps his fingers firmly closed around it, worried that he could lose it by accident and would no longer be able to get away from here after all. It’s a silly notion, he knows that, but even so he can’t help it.

As he breathes in the cool air, eyes still on the dirty wet ground where he watches the rings the falling raindrops form on the surface of a puddle, he picks up on the familiar burning sensation of his injured back.

The pain is no longer unbearable, hardly more than an inconvenience thanks to the medication they gave him before he was released, and it seems that the nausea that has been following him around for the last couple of days is finally starting to ease away as well, which is even more of a relief.

The rain gets worse, and he wonders how the others are, whether they know that he is being released today, and whether they even care.

Barry closes his eyes and tries not to think, but to concentrate on the feeling of the cool rain on his skin and the light patter of raindrops around him.

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His first trip outside of the prison leads him to his parole officer.

Barry has met with Ms. Jenkins a handful of times before, and like then, she doesn’t seem all that fond of the fact that she is stuck with him as a parolee.

She is a very no-nonsense woman in her late fifties, and she keeps making biting comments about his alleged crimes. She also tells him point-blank that she does not believe him to be able to stay out of prison for more than a few months, with a look other people save for an especially nasty bug. Barry doesn’t argue with her, he feels mostly exhausted and overwhelmed, and just wants to go somewhere he can rest.

Ms. Jenkins gives him the address of his new place, which turns out to be a small apartment in the rundown outskirts of the Keys.

Barry travels there by bus to meet his new landlady. He is feeling rather cold by now, and tired enough that he nearly nods off and misses his stop.

The apartment consists of three rooms, of which he gets a brief tour from the middle-aged woman that is his landlady. He is so worn-out that he hardly picks up on what is said to him, only following
the small woman around quietly.

The entrance door leads directly from the rather dingy hallway into what is the living area and main room of the small apartment; and while it isn’t exactly spacious, it isn’t really that small either. He is a bit taken aback by its size actually, and after years of being mostly confined to a 6 by 8 foot cell, it is a bit overwhelming to have so much space to himself again.

There is also a small kitchenette attached to the room, and a couch that looks like it probably hails from sometime around the mid-eighties.

The bedroom is smaller and holds a full-size bed, which is again more than he expected to get; though he doesn’t miss that it looks like its better days have long since passed. It also takes up most of the space, and aside from it there is just a small cupboard squeezed in next to the door.

The last room of his apartment is a tiny bathroom that offers a shower, toilet, and sink.

The notion of being able to take a shower in private nearly chokes him up, and he notices again how his landlady keeps glancing at him nervously as they make their way back to the entrance. He gives her a small smile, which she doesn’t return. Instead, she eyes him with an uneasy frown as she tells him in a firm, stern voice that the rent is going to be due on the first every month.

“This is no shelter, if you're unable to pay you will get kicked out. Do you understand?”

Barry nods quietly and is glad when she finally leaves. He locks the door firmly behind her before he takes his shoes off and goes straight to the small bathroom. His back is hurting again, badly enough that he feels slightly nauseous due to it.

A faint and familiar trembling overcomes him as he pulls his shirt off and briefly views his mangled flesh in the mirror. He quickly turns away again.

After showering, he carefully dries the stitches and burns on his back, and applies the ointment he got from the prison’s infirmary. When he is done with it, he takes two of the painkillers they also gave him this morning before his release. He knows that he shouldn’t use them on an empty stomach, but he feels too exhausted to leave and buy some groceries with the money he got from his parole officer.

Instead, he decides to go to bed and sleep the rest of the day away.

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The second day after his release, Barry starts a job as a salesclerk in a small Asian grocery store that still lies within the Keys, but closer to the city center, and thus in a noticeably nicer area. He needs about fifty minutes by bus to get there from his apartment in the morning, and considerably longer after he is done at night.

Even so, he actually enjoys working there, as the owner is a very nice older Asian woman in her early seventies who treats him with kindness despite knowing that he is an ex-convict. It has him on edge at first, unsure of how to interpret her friendliness and patience towards him, but eventually he starts to relax and welcome the time he spends in the small store.

She introduces herself to him as Bo Ming, and doesn’t seem bothered by his stammer, or get irritated with him when he grows nervous enough while interacting with customers during the first couple of days that he starts being pretty much useless, unable to even get a word out. Instead, she simply stays at his side and patiently helps him through his first month working there.
Spending time at Mrs. Ming’s store, having a place where he is welcome and can actually do something with a purpose, quickly becomes the thing he looks forward to when he gets up in the morning.

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It is within the first two days that Barry spends in his new little home that it becomes apparent that the walls of his flat are not exactly soundproof.

They are thin enough that it becomes commonplace for him to have trouble falling asleep at night because some of his neighbors just don’t seem to care that they aren’t the only people living there.

To be fair, the noise that’s coming from the other tenants around him is only part of the reason for his sleepless nights. His persisting nightmares, which make it nearly impossible to get more than one or two hours of sleep at a time pose a far bigger problem.

His dreams are a jumble of what happened to him in prison — of Michael and the other guards, and of things that lie much further back. Sometimes, the judging and disappointed faces of his former friends mingle in with the rest, their disapproval and disappointment follow him around. Usually, he doesn’t hear them speak to him, but their disgust and judgement is painfully clear nonetheless.

Barry prefers not to try and go back to sleep after waking up from such a nightmare, which is also the reason why he starts to hate those very early morning hours that make it so much more noticeable how alone he really is.

Trying to cope with the pain and loneliness, Barry starts to sketch again to occupy his upset mind whenever he is unable to sleep. It is an old hobby he hasn’t pursued since his late teens, and with all the free time at hand and nothing better to do, it seems about as good as anything else to pass the time.

During those quiet moment, when Barry sits at his kitchen table and forces himself to think of anything but the awful memories and impressions his mind has forced upon him again, he can’t help but remember the address Len gave him about a week before his release.

The piece of paper that holds said address is still safely tucked away in the bottom drawer of his bedroom wardrobe, and like the other man himself, it is also something that keeps occupying his thoughts during these very early hours.

Unlike most other things, the memory of Len doesn’t hold any fear or agony.

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Weeks turn into months, and Barry’s new life becomes routine to him.

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January 1st year

Four months into his parole, Barry finally decides to go to the address Len gave him.

He still has his doubts about it, and he isn’t sure what he is promising himself from this, but he has grown tired of sitting alone in his apartment whenever he isn’t at work, and it is mostly this loneliness that urges him to finally seek out the other man’s company.

Aside from that, he hasn’t seen Len in quite a while, and he is a little curious about how he is doing.
None of the papers mentioned that any of the Rogues are currently in the Heights, for which he is grateful, though he never got all that close to most of them, they still made things easier for him in prison.

As usual, this relief is accompanied by a very familiar guilt, a cold, heavy coiled up knot of misery that nestles in the pit of his stomach and reminds him of who those people actually are. Barry tries not to think about it too much.

The address leads him to an apartment complex, which isn’t as seedy as his own, but comes quite close. It is a half-hour bus ride away from his place, and after he walks up to the building, he checks the address two times in the dim light of the close-by street lamp before he hesitantly enters through the open front entrance.

The floor looks gloomy but is not dirty, and while most of the ceiling lights are not working, Barry is still able to see that this place is a definitive step up from his own apartment building.

Len’s apartment is on the first floor, and Barry tries to concentrate on his steps as he climbs the stairs so that his nerves won’t get the better of him and make him turn around and leave again.

There is no buzzer next to the plain looking door that shows a six below the spyhole, and after hesitating for another moment he takes a calming breath and knocks firmly.

For a long minute, Barry is met by nothing but silence, which is somewhat discouraging. He starts to nervously bite his lower lip, uncertain whether he should knock again or take it as a sign and leave.

Then he hears a door being opened inside the apartment, followed by the sound of light footsteps making their way towards him just a second later.

It doesn’t sound like Len…

A woman in her mid- to late-thirties opens the door. She is pretty, rather curvy but not chubby, and has long, curly auburn hair that has a very faint reddish tint. Her face seems a bit plump due to her full cheeks, though her eyes are quite striking, big and brown like that of a fawn, the effect is amplified by her make-up.

“What do you want?” The impatience is plain in her voice as she eyes Barry with a rather annoyed frown. It is obvious that he must have disrupted her with something judging by how irked she seems by his presence.

Meeting this woman instead of Len catches Barry off-guard enough that he isn’t sure how to respond, and it certainly doesn’t help that he can feel his throat closing up on him again as well.

“What is your problem? Are you a bit slow or something?” She gives him a rather impressive sneer, and just like that she doesn’t seem so pretty anymore.

Barry swallows nervously before he forces himself to speak. “N-no, s-s-sor-ry, I-I’m llook-king f-f-for a-a…”

He breaks off, uncertain what to call Len.

An acquaintance? A friend?

Are they friends?

Deciding that asking her outright for the other man would be the best thing to do, seeing as he has
already made enough of a fool of himself, he starts anew. “I-is L-Len h-h—”

“For fuck’s sake, if you get any slower you’ll start speaking backwards,” she hisses impatiently.
“You're wasting my time. Come back when you're able to get a freaking word out without sounding
like an idiot.”

Taken aback by her harsh words and hostile demeanor, Barry can feel how his voice totally gives out
on him. He unsuccessfully tries to protest, but the woman simply dismisses him as she turns away
without another look.

The door is shut in his face, and Barry keeps standing there for a moment longer, unable to do
anything but stare at it in a mixture of embarrassment and frustration.

Maybe he got the address wrong?

This woman is a total stranger to him, and while Len mentioned something about a younger sister, he
knows that she is supposed to be blonde.

Feeling lost and really stupid, Barry turns back toward the direction he came from, and, after giving
the closed door one last glance, he starts to make his way back toward the staircase. He pulls the little
scrap of paper out of his pocket as he does so and reads it once more.

It is the right place, which means that the other man wrote down a fake address and lied to him.

Of course he has, why wouldn’t he?

Barry grits his teeth and tries to ignore the painful pang in his chest.

He is such an idiot. It’s his own damn fault that he let himself get hurt by something like this. Why
would he even expect anything else from a man like that to begin with? Cold is a criminal, after all,
and Barry… Barry is probably the last person someone like Len wants to deal with...

Not that he can really fault him for that.

Barry just reaches the top of the stairs when he hears a door being opened again behind him and the
rather agitated voice from the woman, he met just a minute ago reaches his ears.

Surprised, he turns around and the heavy knot in his stomach starts to ease somewhat as he spots
Len, who has stepped out of the apartment and is now standing in the dimly lit hallway.

Their eyes meet then, and unlike his own, the other man’s expression is as calm and collected as
usual. It doesn’t give away what Len is thinking of him turning up like this at his place.

Even so, Barry is pretty sure that Len must be surprised to see him, after all, it has been a while since
he made the offer for him to come by.

Len beckons Barry back before he re-enters the apartment while the woman keeps on speaking in a
low but audibly sharp tone to him. She doesn’t seem very happy about being disrupted with
whatever they were doing, and by now Barry has a rather good hunch of what that could have been.

His assumption is confirmed when he reaches the entrance of the flat.

“So what?! You send me away because of that snip? You booked me for the whole night, Len! And
look at that shitty weather outside! I’m sure as hell not going to look for another john tonight just
because you forgot that you’ve already got something else planned!"
Feeling a lot like an unwelcome intruder, Barry stops at the doorway and watches the exchange with a growing feeling of discomfort. The woman’s big curls jump slightly as she angrily waves her hands about, and he notices how her cheeks have turned slightly flushed due to her agitation.

“You’ll get your damn money, Izzy, stop chewing my ear off.” Len grunts and grabs his wallet from the back pocket of the faded jeans he is wearing.

The woman, Izzy, doesn’t seem appeased by that and eyes the two one hundred-dollar notes with open contempt before she snatches them and stuffs them into her purse.

“Fine, you want to spend your evening with that sissy-boy, be my guest. It’s your loss, after all.” Izzy gives Len another hard look before she turns around and starts walking toward the door. As she reaches Barry, she stops and studies him for an unpleasantly long moment.

A rather nasty smile appears on her face as her gaze moves up to meet his, after she finishes scrutinizing him. “You look like someone who can appreciate a good ride, can't you, sweetheart?”

Barry flinches slightly and averts his eyes. Nausea settles over him, and he can’t help but cross his arms in front of his chest, which annoys him to no end because he knows that he always looks like he is hugging himself this way.

“Back off, Izzy,” Len tells her sharply, and Barry watches how the woman turns toward the criminal with a rather dark frown.

She settles for a shrug in the end. “I’m going, I’m going. Don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

The look she gives Barry as she finally passes him and leaves is one of palpable dislike.

“Tata, sissy-boy.”

The door shuts with a loud smack, which causes him to jump, and he really hopes that he doesn’t have to cross ways with that rude woman again anytime soon.

Reluctantly, Barry turns back to Len, feeling a bit uneasy as her words haven’t just been crass but also very embarrassing.

A tense moment passes by in silence before Len smirks slightly and nods toward the couch behind him.

“Take a seat, I’ll grab you a beer.”

Barry hesitates briefly before he makes his way over to the offered seat.

As he does so, he lets his eyes move through the flat that doesn't seem to be much bigger than his own, and he can’t help but wrinkle his nose as he picks up on the mess that greets him everywhere. It’s probably been quite a while since someone took even just a duster to this place.

The couch looks old and worn out but is clean enough after he picks up two empty pizza boxes. Seeing that the small coffee table is stacked full with magazines, papers, empty beer bottles, and something that looks a lot like blueprints, he simply puts them on the ground next to his feet.

Out of the corner of his eyes Barry picks up on something glinting, causing him to look toward the cupboard next to the one window in the room. He raises his eyebrows in surprise when he realizes that the thing that caught his attention looks a hell of a lot like the Stanley Cup peering out in-between a mishmash of books and other stuff.
What is that doing here? And how did he even-

Something cool and hard knocks lightly against his shoulder and causes him to freeze up in alarm.

“Relax, it’s just a beer.” Len meets Barry’s embarrassed gaze calmly.

“Th-th-th—” Barry's cheek feel like they are going to go up in flames any moment now when his voice still refuses to work properly, and he breaks off, averting his eyes. Instead, he grabs the offered can and simply nods his thanks. He can feel the other man’s eyes on him for a long moment afterwards before he also takes a seat on the couch next to him.

It is a relief when Len leaves more than an arm’s length space between them, and Barry is honestly grateful for his mindfulness.

The familiar hissing sound of a beer can being opened fills the room while Barry just keeps holding onto his own, noticing how pleasantly cool it feels in his hands.

“So,” Len says after he takes swig from his beer. “You eventually decided to come by.”

Their eyes meet briefly when Barry glances to him before he turns back to the still unopened can in his hands. He nods wordlessly even though he knows that it wasn’t really a question.

“Didn’t think you would.” Len smirks as if he has just said something funny when Barry gives him a wary look. The other man shrugs and doesn’t elaborate because it isn’t really necessary. They did fight on opposite sides of the law for a long time, after all, and this right here is a bizarre situation, they both are very much aware of it.

They fall silent again for a bit, and while it isn’t exactly comfortable, it isn’t unpleasant either. Barry watches how the other man grabs the remote from amid the mess on the little table in front of them and turns the television on. The noise of some advertisement chases the quietness away before Len changes the channel to a football game.

It’s half-time right now, and cheerleaders dance across the screen in skimpy outfits, offering quite an impressive performance as they do.

Barry’s nerves start to settle down after a few minutes when he realizes that the other man’s focus is on the show right now. He isn’t sure whether he should feel a bit annoyed by this or not. He settles for the latter.

One big worry of his has been, aside from Cold reacting with hostility to his visit or not being there at all, that they would just sit around in a tense and awkward silence before the other man would kick him out again. This doesn’t seem to be something he has to worry about just yet, though.

The game is interesting enough even though Barry has never been a big football fan. That aside, it has been a very long time since he hasn’t spent an evening alone, and while they don’t talk, it is still nice to just have another person nearby, especially one he can feel no resentment coming from.

“You want something else?” Barry, whose eyes have started to grow heavy, startles in response to the unexpected question, and his body grows nearly painfully tense for a second.

“I got another beer,” Len explains when he meets his confused gaze and nods toward the still unopened can in his hand. “You want to stick with that, or should I grab you a Coke?”

The notion of having something other than beer is tempting, but he hasn’t had one in an eternity and actually wants to drink it. His stomach has settled down by now as well, therefore he shakes his head
and gives the other man a nervous little smile. “I’ll s-stick w-with i-it b-b-but c-could I-I g-get a-a g-glass o-of w-wat-ter?” Len nods and makes his way around the couch toward his small kitchen.

The game ends about forty minutes later, and judging by the other man’s lack of any real reaction he doesn’t seem to have been all that invested in it either. Barry, who stopped following it a while ago, rubs his tired eyes and fights against the urge to yawn. His half empty can of beer is warm in his hand, and he lifts it up to take another small sip. It tastes rather nasty now that it’s no longer cold, but he doesn’t like the notion of wasting it, especially after he has gotten it for free.

The TV is switched off, and Len gets up to grab himself another beer. Barry declines when he asks him whether he wants another one too.

“You don’t have to finish it.” Len nods toward the can in his hand, and judging by the look he gives it it’s obvious that he can imagine how it tastes.

“I-it’s f-fine.”

“It has to taste like piss by now.”

Barry makes a face and gives Len an annoyed look, which causes the other man to smirk in return and shrug. “Suit yourself.”

He comes back with a fresh beer and a bag of pretzels, and Barry’s gaze hardly falls upon it when his mouth already starts to water. Len doesn’t miss his look and holds the bag toward him after he has opened it. “Help yourself.”

The smell of the snack causes Barry’s stomach to growl embarrassingly loud, and he feels his cheeks heat up before he grabs a handful and mutters his thanks. He expects the other man to comment on this, maybe make a quip about how thin he looks or whether he can’t even afford to buy food for himself. It doesn’t happen though.

“Wanna play a game of poker?” Len asks instead, and Barry can’t help but turn back to him in surprise.

“P-p-pok-ker?” His face grows hot again as he listens to how bad his stammer still sounds. He really hates this damn handicap so much, especially in situations like this one.

“Yeah,” Len agrees and doesn’t seem fazed by his speech impediment, which eases Barry’s nervousness a little.

At his hesitation to agree, the other man gives him a funny look. “You know how to play?”

“N-n-no.” Barry shakes his head and is bemused by how taken aback his host seems by this piece of news for a second. “N-not e-eveyb-body c-can.”

“No shit.” Len snorts and gets up to get the cards. It is then that Barry remembers that poker is usually played with money as a wager and his good mood drops instantly.

“I-d-don’t h-have a-a any m-money,” he explains as Len comes back and quickly adds after he realizes how pathetic this must sound. “F-for sp-sp-end-ding o-on g-gambling, I-I m-mean.”

The other man shrugs and nods toward the bag of pretzels while he starts to shuffle the cards. “That will do just fine.”

They end up dividing the amount of the still nearly full bag of snacks between them. Barry asks for
three bowls where they can stash and place their bets, as he doesn’t like the idea of simply putting
them on the couch that he doesn’t know what has happened on before. Len shoots him a somewhat
exasperated look at that request but humors him. “You have any idea of the rules?”

“N-no.”

Barry watches how the other man shuffles the deck of cards again. It is obvious that he is quite
familiar with this judging by how quick he is.

“It’s a rather easy game.” Len puts the cards down before he picks up a small stash and looks
through them. He picks five cards and shows them to him. “This hand’s called a no pair, or a Queen
High, because your highest card would be the Queen in this case. It’s the lowest ranking hand you
can get other than another no pair with a High Card below the Queen.”

Over the next five minutes, Len explains the different hands and rules to him.

Surprisingly enough, the game turns out to be really not all that difficult. The important thing is to
keep a good poker face and remember which cards have already been played.

Barry, who has never really been a fan of games you need to place wagers in, can’t help but feel
curious about it.

“I’ve t-to w-warn y-you, m-my p-p-poker f-face s-sucks,” he remarks as he picks up the cards Len
deals him and shoots the other man a slightly apologetic look.

“Everybody sucks at this game at first.” Len doesn’t seem bothered and instead organizes his own
cards. His face is already giving nothing away.

Barry holds his tongue and doesn’t inform him that he's never been any good at schooling his
features and instead turns his attention back to his own hand. He has gotten three Jacks, which
doesn’t seem so bad.

Six games later, Len agrees with him wholeheartedly, though.

“You really should never play for actual money,” he advises Barry with a way too amused smirk as
he grabs the pretzels from the bet bowl and puts them in the second one he got for himself after his
first one had been filled up. “You wanna play another round?”

Frowning, Barry shoots him a dark look and shakes his head. “N-no, th-thanks.”

Right now, he doesn’t think that he will ever try this stupid game again. It isn’t as if Len hasn’t been
helpful or anything, he’s even pretty sure that the other man went easy on him. He actually had a
couple of really good hands, but he still wasn't able to win a single hand.

His own bowl is holding no more than five meagre pretzels, and he really thinks they would do him
more good in his stomach than squandered in another game he will undoubtedly lose as well.

Len grabs the empty plastic bag in which the snack was stashed before and puts his wins back in.
Then he gets up, probably to grab himself another beer, and Barry can’t help but eye the bag of
pretzels he left on the couch. He wonders whether the other man would mind if he takes another
handful.

“Take the damn bag,” Len tells him from the kitchen, startling Barry by doing so. “I opened them so
that they’d finally be gone, I hate that dry salty stuff.”
A part of Barry wants to protest and point out that he doesn’t need charity, but he is well aware of how stupid that would be. “Th-thanks.”

The other man only grunts in reply and returns with another two bottles of cold beer a moment later.

Seeing how hungry he is, the pretzels are more than delicious, and he quickly eats half of the bag before he has to stop because he starts to feel sick.

“You missed dinner tonight?” Len asks after he retakes his spot on the couch.

“Y-yeah, I-I h-had t-to w-w-work b-bef-fore I-I c-came h-here,” Barry answers nervously and hopes that Len won’t inquire further. He is pretty sure that the other man knows that he hasn’t just missed dinner, he can see himself in the mirror every morning and is well aware of how gaunt and tired he looks.

Much to his relief, Len seems to pick up on how uncomfortable this question is for him and turns their conversation elsewhere.

“So, you’ve stuck to the job those wankers got you after your release?” It is rather palpable what he thinks of that.

“Y-yes, i-it’s b-bet-ter th-than n-noth-thing,” Barry points out.

“They don’t seem to pay you well.”

Barry grits his teeth and glares at the other man. “A-at l-least I-I’m e-earning m-my iinc-come.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, he regrets them instantly. He doesn’t want to start an argument or cause the other man to get angry. It has been a surprisingly pleasant evening so far, and he doesn’t want it to end with him being kicked out. Still, he sticks to his point as he is getting by with legal work, which is what counts, no matter how meagre his income may be.

Against his worry, Len simply snorts and gives him an incredulous look before he shakes his head.

“Fucking cape—”

“D-don’t c-call m-me th-that!” Barry hisses angrily. His body tenses up again, and he tries not to grimace as this causes a familiar pain in most of his joints to flare up.

For a brief moment, Len seems taken aback by how upset he actually got over this. Then, he frowns and shrugs. “Right, my bad.”

Barry turns his gaze back on to the cold can of beer he was handed just a moment ago and marvels over how quickly his good mood vanishes again. He starts to regret coming here after all.

It has been a stupid idea, no matter how lonely he is.

“I-I th-think I-I sh-should g-go, i-it’s a-a-lr-ready l-late.”

Seeing that he hasn’t a watch, he has no way to say what time it is exactly, but he is sure that he has already spent a couple of hours here.

“Yeah,” Len agrees in a gruff tone, sounding much less welcoming than before. Barry feels bad all of a sudden, like an ungrateful jackass, and tries to think of something to say as they get up.

“Th-thanks f-for th-the b-beer a-and th-the p-p-p.” A hot flush spreads over his face once more, and
he lowers his eyes to the still unopened can of beer in his hand.

“Th-the s-snack,” he finishes lamely.

“Sure.” Len grunts and sounds very much like he doesn’t really want to have him here anymore which is surprisingly disconcerting. Despite that, he hasn’t moved away from Barry nor tried to usher him toward the door.

“I-I…” Barry’s throat feels dry, and he coughs slightly, before he goes on. “I-I’ve r-really e-enj-joyed th-the e-even-ning.” He glances towards the other man who is still watching him with a rather cool expression. “Th-thanks f-for t-taking th-the t-time. I-I… th-thanks.”

His face has grown so uncomfortably hot by now that he is sure it is about to catch fire. He swiftly grabs his coat from the armrest of the couch, puts the can of beer on the edge of the coffee table and turns around to leave.

“Wait.” Barry stops close to the door and turns around in apprehension to see Len come up to him. To his surprise, he is offered the half empty bag of pretzels. “You forgot this.”

For a second Barry wants to decline because he doesn’t want to take anything else from the other man more than he already has since he really can’t offer him anything in return. It seems that his thoughts are plain on his face as Len huffs in annoyance before he pushes the bag against his chest so that he automatically takes hold of it.

“Just take it, I’m glad that I’m finally rid of it.”

“Th-thank y-you.” Barry gives him an uncertain but grateful smile, somewhat touched by this unexpected kindness.

“M-mayb-be w-we…” he starts but stops himself when he realizes that it probably wouldn’t be a good idea for them to meet again. The notion is a bit saddening nonetheless.

“Where did they put you?”

“Wh-what?”

“Where is your place?”

Barry isn’t really sure whether he really wants to give his address away and hesitates which causes Len to sigh in annoyance. “Look, if you don’t wanna tell me, that’s fine.”

“N-no.” Barry disagrees much to his own surprise and swallows before he goes on. “D-do y-you h-have a-a p-pap-per o-or s-someth-thing f-for m-me t-to w-write i-it d-down o-on?”

It becomes clear that Len didn’t really expect him to agree as he studies him quietly for a second with an odd look that Barry isn’t sure how to interpret.

Then, it is gone and the other man nods.

“Sure.”

Chapter End Notes
Hope you guys liked it, and I'm curious whether any of you actually knows about the Stanley cup. ;)

“Did you draw this?”

Barry pauses stocking the shelves with canned beans and looks over to the counter where Mrs. Ming is currently studying a sheet of paper. It takes him a second before he realizes that it is the sketch he made this morning after he’d opened the store and was waiting for the first set of customers to arrive.

His face immediately flushes in embarrassment, and he gets up from the spot where he has been crouching in front of one of shelves. He grimaces slightly when a familiar sharp pain flashes through his left knee, which has been acting up rather badly lately, most likely due to the still damp and cool weather outside.

“S-sorry, I-I w-won’t d-do it ag-gain wh-while at w-work,” he apologizes worriedly and berates himself silently for leaving the sketch lying around like this.

The old woman lifts her eyes from the sheet of paper and turns her attention back to him with a slight frown. Barry feels his face grow even warmer when she studies him for a moment, and the responding apprehension that he is going to get in trouble for dawdling around while at work nearly makes him sick. The notion that he could disappoint her doesn’t help much either as she has been nothing but kind to him so far.

Her features relax again though, and a familiar kind smile appears on her lips as she shakes her head and chuckles. “Don’t worry, Barry, I don’t mind you drawing when there is nothing else to do. You have picked yourself quite a nice hobby.”
She turns back to the drawing, studying it once more, and he suddenly feels the intense urge to snatch it out of her hands and hide it from her and anybody else’s gaze. He knows that it’s probably not possible to make out just whom he has tried to sketch, but it still makes him nervous.

“Have you been drawing for a long time?”

“S-somewhat,” he explains uneasily. “I u-used t-to w-when I-I w-was y-younger and s-started a-again a li-li-ittle w-while a-ago.”

Mrs. Ming hums in understanding and gives him an appreciative look.

“You’re quite talented,” she tells him, and he is surprised by how serious she seems. “A bit rough around the edges but still very good.”

Not sure how to take the compliment, he stays quiet. Despite her nice words he still wishes she would put the piece of paper away.

It seems that the older woman picks up on his discomfort as she does just that. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snoop.”

“N-no, i-it’s f-f-fine, I-I… I j-just… u-usually n-nob-body s-sees m-my d-drawings. I-I d-don’t th-think th-they a-are any g-good.”

“Well, this one definitely is,” Mrs. Ming disagrees and asks him what medium he usually works with.

Barry frowns and shrugs. “N-nothing s-special r-really, j-just a p-pen and s-some o-old p-papers.”

He has never bothered to buy any drawing materials, seeing that he doesn’t exactly have the money to spare nor does he think that it is an investment he can really justify.

Mrs. Ming hums again and turns her gaze back to the sketch with a rather thoughtful expression. “Is this a friend of yours?”

Barry had hoped she wouldn’t ask about the person he had so absentmindedly sketched and his cheeks grow hot in response as he averts his eyes. “A-an a-a-aquaintance.”

Again, she studies him briefly before she tells Barry that she would prepare them some tea.

He is glad when she is gone, and he is finally able to grab the paper and tuck it away in the back pocket of his pants.

Sketching is something he took up again because it helps him relax, but he regrets it at times like this when his mind starts to drift off and his hand seems to move more or less on its own accord. This usually causes him to go from drawing little doodles or places to people, especially those he hasn’t seen in years. It is like a bucket of cold water is emptied over his head every time his mind comes back to what he is currently drawing, and he realizes that he is looking at a familiar face from his past.

Barry swallows and turns to go back to the shelf he was restocking.

The folded paper feels heavy in his pocket, and he tries not to think of the fact that he has drawn a new face this morning, one that unsettles and confuses him a little. He thinks about getting rid of it, but knows that he most likely won’t do so in the end. It has turned out surprisingly well and while it is embarrassing, he will probably hold on to it.
The doorbell chimes and announces the arrival of a customer so that Barry is able to get his mind off the sketch.

The notion of Len still follows him around for the rest of the afternoon.

***

The sound of sharp knocking startles Barry from a light slumber and causes him to tense up with a twinge of panic, until he realizes where he is.

Groggily, he gets up and looks to the clock hanging over the doorway of his bedroom. He frowns when he sees that it is already half past ten. It seems that his catnap has lasted for nearly two hours.

Concerned, he turns toward the door and hisses slightly when a sharp pain flashes through his neck and back. Barry is reminded of why he usually prefers not to fall asleep on the old piece of junk that is his couch.

Another knock follows, a bit sharper than the one before, and he looks toward the door again as apprehension starts to settle in his gut. He never has visitors, especially not this late at night.

It isn’t uncommon for people to be robbed in their own homes here, and he wonders whether he could try to ignore it. This probably isn’t a wise idea though, as a burglar would undoubtedly see it as an invitation to try his luck. Then, he remembers that he still has the lights on and that whoever is there has undoubtedly picked up on this as well.

Barry grits his teeth as he gets up and tries to loosen the tense muscles in his back a bit by rolling his shoulders before making his way over to the door, just as another knock follows. By how harsh it sounds, it is obvious that his late-night visitor is getting impatient with him. He starts to get a bit irritated as well in response and wonders whether a burglar could really be stupid enough to make this much noise. Then again, the people living here prefer to ignore anything that doesn’t happen within their own four walls and the criminals are likely aware of this.

His insides grow hot and cold a second later as he looks through the peephole to see who is passing by this late.

“Just open the damn door already, I can see your shadow through the bottom crack.” Len’s gruff tone is low and a bit muffled through the wood between them, and Barry just stands there frozen for a long moment before he is able to shake off the stupor. He unlocks the door despite a small voice in his head reminding him that this is not a good idea for so many reasons, and that he has to work tomorrow and should go to bed instead of letting an infamous criminal in.

“Are you always this fucking slow?” the other man asks in lieu of an actual greeting.

“I-it’s a-a-alr-ready a-after t-ten,” Barry replies with a frown and crosses his arms in front of his chest, trying to look more annoyed than intimidated. “I-I’ve g-got t-to w-work t-tom-m-morrow.”

“So, you want me to leave again?”

They glare at each other for a couple of seconds before the noise of someone coming up the stairs reaches them, and Barry quickly steps aside to let the other man in.

“Y-you sh-shouldn’t r-run a-around l-like th-that,” he points out after he closes the door. “A-anyb-body c-could h-have s-seen you.”

He gets an unimpressed look in return. “I’m not wearing my getup, I’ll be fine.”
“People could still recognize you.”

“This is the Twins — two huge cities — people here have mastered the art of ignoring each other like nobody else.”

“That’s very careless,” Barry points out with a frown even though he knows that the other man does have a point.

“Maybe,” Len concedes but doesn’t seem particularly concerned despite it, which in turn rubs Barry the wrong way even though he knows the other man’s negligence shouldn’t really bother him this much.

“Stop worrying, I know how to stay under the radar.” Len ignores the exasperated huff he gets in response and instead gives him a crooked smirk.

“You planning on staying there all night?” he asks and nods to where Barry is still standing next to the door.

Barry’s frown deepens before he suddenly picks up on the delicious smell of food and his gaze inevitably lowers itself to the Len’s right hand, where he spots a white plastic bag.

From one second to the next, he realizes how hungry he is and, before he can press the ball of his hand into his stomach, a loud rumble reaches both of their ears. His face turns hot in embarrassment, and he shoots the other man a half-hearted glare as if daring him to make a stupid comment.

Len doesn’t. Instead he lifts the bag and nods toward the table that stands between the kitchenette and the couch.

“I grabbed some food,” he remarks unnecessarily. “Let’s eat before it gets cold.”

The urge to protest is strong, but Barry ignores it. He hasn’t eaten anything but a ham sandwich today since he won’t get his next paycheck until two days from now, and his fridge is pretty much empty as is usually the case this late in the month.

They move to the table and Len starts to take out the plastic boxes that hold the food. It smells spicy and seems to still be hot, which means that he probably picked it up from somewhere nearby.

“I got you the rice with chicken and vegetables.” The other man pushes the white box toward him. “You want the chopsticks or the plastic spoon?”

“Ch-ch-ops-sticks are f-f-fine.” His stomach grumbles again, and Barry tries not to show how painfully hard it is to ignore the hunger and not to simply wolf it down. Instead, he starts to eat slowly, careful so as not to waste any of the rice.

They don’t talk while they eat, which is fine with him — he can hardly concentrate on anything else but his delicious meal. The nausea that has been following him around for most of the day ceases, and he feels better than he has in a while as he picks the last couple grains of rice up with his chopsticks. It is then that he notices that the other man has hardly touched any of his own food so far and is instead watching him.

Barry tenses and halts. He frowns as he meets Len’s eyes. “Is there a reason you’re staring?”

He is surprised by how sharp it comes out and immediately feels bad for it. His current companion has brought him food after all and hasn’t done anything that would really earn his ire.
“S-sorry,” he apologizes quietly and turns his gaze back to the now empty plastic box, “a-and th-thank you f-for th-the f-food. I ap-preciate i-it… e-even th-though i-it wwasn’t n-necess-sary.”

Barry expects the other man to point out what an obvious lie this is or maybe make a snide remark, but Len lets the opportunity pass by once again. He doesn’t understand why the other man is being so kind, but he is grateful for it nonetheless.

“I-I’ll p-pay y-you b-back,” Barry assures him, and this does earn him a derisive snort. His cheeks grow uncomfortably hot again in response, partly in embarrassment and partly in anger.

“I-I w-will,” he grits out angrily and could kick himself for accepting the food in the first place. “Y-you’ll g-get th-the m-money f-for th-the f-food.”

His body has grown stiff with tension, and he can’t bring himself to look at Len.

“If it makes you feel better, then fine, pay me back,” Len tells him and while he sounds slightly irked, he still seems much calmer than Barry expected he would be.

“I-d-don’t n-need ch-charity,” he points out once more and fights the urge to retreat into his bedroom and hide away in there till the other man leaves. He swallows around the painful lump in his throat and shoots a glare at Len instead.

The other man frowns annoyed. “Stop making such a damn fuss over this.”

“I-I’m n-not—”

“Yes, you are.” Len scowls. “This is no pity-party for you, so stop acting so damn defensive. I was in the area and hadn’t eaten dinner yet, that is all. The fucking planet is not solely rotating around you, Allen.”

A tense silence follows and both hold the other’s gaze for a long minute before Barry folds and averts his eyes. The feeling of him being an ungrateful ass returns full force.

“I-I’m s-sorry, I… I r-really ap-preciate th-the f-food,” he speaks very softly and hates the intense urge that tries to get him to cross his arms in front of his chest again in this humiliating way that is so much like hugging himself.

Still, he insists again on paying the other man back as soon as he has the money, which costs Len a clearly exasperated sigh, but he doesn’t protest.

“I sh-shouldn’t h-have r-reacted l-like th-that,” Barry goes on slowly, trying to keep his stammer under control. He glances at Len uncertainly and adds. “I h-haven’t b-been sle-sleeping s-so w-well l-lately.”

“No shit,” Len remarks with a crooked but not mean smirk. “You look horrible.”

Len ignores the dark glare that is directed his way and turns to his food to start eating his noodles instead. They fall into a silence after that which, surprisingly enough, isn’t tense nor is it really uncomfortable, and Barry actually relaxes enough that he starts to grow drowsy as he waits for Len to finish.

“Is there a reason you’re staring at me?” Len’s voice startles Barry, and he realizes that he really has been watching him. He flushes once more and turns away while muttering an apology. Len’s answering smirk is palpable enough that Barry doesn’t need to see it to know that it is there.
“You look like you are going to fall asleep any moment now.”

“I-I’m f-fine.”

“… right.”

Barry frowns and decides to get up as he feels tired enough that he really fears he is going to nod off should he not start to move. It would probably be a better idea to ask Len to leave, it is already past eleven, and he has to get up again in less than five hours.

“Y-you want s-some t-tea?” he asks instead.

Len seems surprised at the offer before his look turns skeptical. “Is beer also an option?”

Seeing that he usually never drinks alcohol when he is alone, Barry shakes his head with an unhappy expression.

“Coffee?” Len tries again, and Barry feels once more as an embarrassed unease settles over him. Other than three slices of toast, two cans of tuna and a handful of teabags he doesn’t have anything else edible at home right now.

“N-no,” he mutters and doesn’t even want to consider how pathetic he must appear.

“Tea is fine.” His surprised look is met by Len’s calm expression, and Barry notices how the pressure inside his chest starts to ease away again as does the tension in his body.

He gives the other man a tentative smile. “G-good.”

***

Len starts to stop by once or twice a week. He usually brings food with him and while Barry knows that Len is mostly just humoring him by agreeing to let him pay him back, he is still very glad for the help.

More often than not, his finances are in a very dire state, and he has trouble getting the money he has left after paying his rent to last for the rest of the month without ending up hungry the last couple days of the month. He is quite grateful for Len’s help because of that, despite the fact that it makes him feel like a leech.

They usually don’t talk much, preferring to rather play poker or simply share a few beers in a surprisingly comfortable silence. It’s nice, having someone else around in his flat, and Barry starts to look forward to the other man’s visits, despite knowing how dangerous and reckless an affair this really is.

***

“I c-can’t ac-cept this.”

“Of course you can,” Mrs. Ming disagrees and doesn’t make any move to take the gifts he tries to hand back to her. “Your birthday is coming up next month, take it as my present to you.”

She’d asked Barry to stay after work shortly before he was done with closing, and he’d agreed, thinking that she invited him for tea again. He didn’t expect the set of acrylic paints and the sketchbook she handed him instead.

“B-but-“
“You would be doing me a great favour.” Mrs. Ming steps closer to him and meets his distraught look with a kind smile as she lightly cups his elbow. “Please, Barry, accept this little gift.”

It takes Barry a moment before he has the tumult of emotions under enough control that he wouldn’t embarrass himself.

“Th-thank y-you.” His voice is faint, and he coughs slightly as he averts his gaze. The gratitude he is currently experiencing is nearly smothering in its intensity. “Th-thank you, th-this... th-thank y-you.”

“You are welcome, my boy.” The old woman smiles, and Barry tries not to notice the sadness in her eyes.

He doesn’t understand why she shows him this kindness, but he will certainly never forget it.

***

“You’re getting better.” Len snorts when Barry’s only response is to glower at him. “You are.”

“I h-haven’t w-won once ag-against you s-so f-far,” Barry grumbles and looks sullenly at the cards the other man is shuffling again. By now he has given up any hope that he would ever be able to win a hand when it comes to this game.

“Doesn’t mean shit,” Len argues with a smirk. “I’ve been playing this since I was old enough to hold a hand, and it’s usually the game of choice with the others.”

Barry frowns but refrains from pointing out that he simply is no good at gambling, in general.

“It would help if you weren’t wearing your emotions on your sleeve all the time.”

“I’m t-trying n-not to.”

This had been one of the reasons why he wore a mask that hid most of his face other than for simply keeping his identity a secret back when he was still the Flash.

He takes a sip from his tea and frowns at the deck Len has now put down between them.

“You wanna take a break and lick your wounds?” The glare Barry gives Len in return is icy, and the other man chuckles in obvious amusement as he gets up. “I gotta take a piss, don’t mark the cards while I am gone.”

“F-funny.”

Instead of cheating, Barry gets himself another cup of tea. Contrary to Len’s usual habit, he has turned up on a Saturday night. This is a nice change, and it means that he doesn’t have to worry about losing any sleep because he doesn’t have to work tomorrow. It also makes it easier for him to relax and enjoy the company.

“You w-want a c-cup t-too?” he asks when the other man reenters the living room. Len grunts a nonverbal decline and instead sits back down on the couch. It doesn’t come as a surprise as he usually sticks to his beer or coffee, so Barry only fills up his own cup again.

They play another game, and he doesn’t do much better than the last one or the one before that. Still, it is nice to have the other man around, who is also surprisingly relaxed tonight and unusually inclined to chat a bit.

“I d-don’t g-get it, I-I’m k-keeping m-my f-face t-tot-tally v-vacant, and I’m s-staying r-relaxed. H-
“How are you able to tell what hand I’ve got?” Barry groans softly and lets his head drop onto the backrest of his couch. He pulls his legs up to his chest and curls his arm around them loosely, getting into a position he is more comfortable with.

“Keep on kidding yourself.” Len snorts.

“Wh-what?” He turns to the other man in confusion. “I did stay expressionless.”

Len lifts his eyebrows incredulously causing Barry’s mood to deteriorate some more. “No, you didn’t. You tried, but failed at it rather impressively.”

“I didn’t!”

“You are like an open book.” Len smirks while he collects the cards to put them away. “Some people can’t help it.”

Not sure whether he should bother to be insulted by this comment or not, Barry settles on wrinkling his nose and giving Len a half-hearted glare. It isn’t as if he hasn’t known from the beginning that he wouldn’t be any good because of this exact reason.

Feeling tired, Barry changes his position so that his side is resting against the backrest with his cheek resting on top of it. He watches the other man quietly as he puts the cards back into their box.

Len gets himself another beer and offers to grab him one as well, which he accepts.

“You have anything planned next Saturday?” It’s an odd question, seeing as Len knows quite well that Barry hardly ever leaves his flat for anything other than work. He shakes his head quietly and pulls his legs a bit closer.

“We’re having a poker night,” Len explains. “If you’re up for it, you can drop by.”

“Y-you and th-the oth-ther R-Rogues?” Barry hadn’t been sure what to expect, but it definitely wasn’t this.

“Yeah,” Len agrees and something changes in the way he watches him. He suddenly seems a bit hostile which causes Barry to tense up involuntarily. “You have a problem with that?”

“I-I… you r-really th-think th-that i-is a g-good idea?”

“Why not?” The aggression has mostly left his voice, and Len eyes him with a mixture of annoyance and exasperation instead.

“Th-they… w-we aren’t exact-tly…” Barry bites his bottom lip nervously and shrugs, not really willing to go into this.

“You liked them well enough before you were released,” Len reminds him and takes another swig of his beer.

“I-it’s n-not th-that.” His fingers have started to dig painfully in his shins, and he forces himself to relax a bit.

“Don’t worry your damn head off all the time about things that are long past.” Their eyes meet, and Len goes on. “They won’t cause you any trouble, but you don’t have to come. It’s just an offer.”

“No, I w-would l-like t-to c-come.” Despite not really being sure how to feel about the idea of mingling with the group of criminals again, Barry knows that they usually don’t invite other people
along, and the notion that Len actually wants him to come eases his concerns a bit. It is also nice to look forward to spending an evening outside of his own four walls.

“Good, Sam will pick you up around six.”

“W-we aren’t m-meeting at y-your p-lace?”

Len snorts and tells him that they did that once and that it’s not happening again. He doesn’t go into any details, and Barry somehow has the inkling that he probably doesn’t want to know anyway.

“We meet at our current bolt-hole.”

“Y-your h-hideout?” He frowns and eyes the other man doubtfully. “I d-don’t kn-know i-if th-that is s-such a g-good i-idea.”

“Why? I doubt you’ll go and tattle to the capes about it.” Len snorts but his face becomes somber when he notices Barry’s hurt expression. “Look—”

“I-I’ll c-come,” Barry cuts him off and tries to will away the itching of his eyes while he keeps his gaze on the small coffee table next to him. “C-could y-you l-leave n-now, p-please, I-I’m r-rather t-tired.”

A long uncomfortable moment passes before the other man does so without another word.

***

Barry meets a young woman who also lives in his apartment complex on the first floor. Her bag of groceries breaks, and its content spill all over the stairs. He gets her another bag from his flat, and they start to talk a bit as he helps her carry everything up to her apartment.

Her name turns out to be Mary, and she doesn’t seem at all fazed by his stammer, which is a nice change to how most people around here usually react to him. Despite his initial reluctance, he accepts when she invites him over for some coffee after they arrive at her doorstep.

They talk for a while, and Barry learns that she has already been living here for more than two years. It doesn’t really surprise him that they haven’t crossed paths with each other so far, seeing as most tenants prefer to stick to themselves, and he is hardly an exception.

Mary invites him over for dinner the following week and he accepts.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked the chapter!

I just quickly wanna touch upon something I haven’t really mentioned last time:

This story is very long and a slow burn. This is mainly because I’ve started it as a little pet-project for myself because there were about two or three Barry/Len stories around back then (today, you probably can hardly imagine such a time anymore ;) and I wrote it for myself initially.

I started out with a concept which has changed quite a bit over time, but I mostly wanted
and still want to explore and really go into the characters' minds, especially Barry's, and the relationship they have with each other. I want for the story to evolve in a more moderate pace and give it time to grow, so to speak.

Barry has a lot to deal with right now, you will learn more about it as the story goes on, and while he and the Rogues "know" each other in a way, it will still take a bit till they get on a more familiar basis and he starts to really spend time with them. This will start to in a couple of chapters but the real familiarity between them evolves over time.

The relationship between Barry and Len has been a complicated one from the beginning and it is unbelievable fun to write it but I want to give you a small heads-up, it will take some time till they get together. They both have to learn to get comfortable with the notion alone at first, each one for his one reasons, even tough there will be an attraction and they are aware of it.

I also decided to introduce a couple of OCs as it would be kind of impossible for Barry to live somewhere without any interaction with other people. I am usually not a fan of those but they seemed necessary for the story and for Barry to be able to find his footing again outside of prison. Over time they actually really grew on me and I hope they won't bother you too much.

Once again, I also want to thank all of you lovely people who have given me feedback, whether it be in form of Kudos or comments. I appreciate each and every single one of them very much. :)}
(Not) Everybody Loves Poker

Chapter Summary

Barry joins the Rogues for poker night.

Also, Sam is a flake and you should never trust him for transportation.

Chapter Notes

I decided to post this chapter earlier, I will probably not have time to do so again till sometime toward the end of next week due to work and I want to get it out before then.

Hope you'll enjoy it, it finally introduces the rest of the Rogues. :3

Update: The chapter is now edited by the amazing MeteoraWrites! (6th of January, 2019)

MARCH 1st year

“Bloody hell, mate, just put the damn fiver down already!”

“Don’t stress me!”

“Just put the fucking money down or fold, Trickster!”

“Let me think!”

“You have been thinking for the last three minutes, idiot.”

“And you have an ugly mug!”

Mick sneers and looks about ready to hurl his still nearly full bottle of beer across the table into James face in return.

“Just fold,” Sam advises while shuffling the cards in his hand in a very bored manner. “Your hand sucks anyway.”

“What the hell!? You’re cheating! You’ve been looking at my cards again!” James, who, like the other Rogues, isn’t wearing his costume but normal clothes, presses his hand protectively against his chest. “You damn cheat!”

“For fuck’s sake, Scudder.” Mick grunts in audible annoyance and glares at the other man opposite to him. “I’ll deck you if you’ve been peeping at my damn cards again.”

“I haven’t.” Sam replies with a shrug and still sounds as bored as before.
“Whose turn is it?” Len, who left the room to grab another beer, retakes his seat next to Barry and frowns when he realizes that the game doesn’t seem to have progressed at all.

“Still Trickster’s,” Marco grumbles and throws the man in question a dirty and annoyed look. “Por amor de Deus, just go on with it already!”

“Fine!” James huffs. “You’re all a bunch of mean and impatient idiots! I fold!”

A collective groan of relief fills the air while the blonde gets up and stomps out the room.

“Por fim,” Marco mutters and turns to Hartley, who gives him a rather impressively dark look that causes him to lift an eyebrow. “What? If he’s too stupid to play, he shouldn’t.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Just get on with it and play, Piper.” Mick grouses as he rubs his eyes in exasperation.

Hartley does. He throws another five dollars at the pot, but the scowl doesn’t leave his face.

“Bloody hell, that took forever.” Digger throws another bill at the growing heap of money in the center of the table before leaning back with a heavy sigh. Barry doesn’t miss how he tries to peer into his cards and quickly pulls them out of his sight.

“Don’t bother, mate, your poker face says more than enough.” The Australian smirks and ignores his glare.

“Just fold.” Len mutters next to him, and Barry flushes in embarrassment.

“F-f-fold.”

“You suck at this game,” Mick remarks with a chuckle while Len throws another five-dollar note on the pot. Barry refrains from commenting and reminds himself that he at least isn’t going to lose any more of his money this was.

Hopefully Len isn’t too mad about the forty-three dollars he has cost him so far. Barry could still kick himself for agreeing to this and accepting the other man’s offer to lend him money for the game in the first place. It would take him forever to pay him back.

“Maybe he just hasn’t the right motivation,” the blond woman opposite to him remarks, and Barry turns toward her with a sinking feeling. Lisa eyes him with a mixture of disdain and contemptuousness. “Like pictures of little-”

“Shut up, Lisa.” Len interrupts her in a sharp tone and both siblings proceed glaring at each other for a long moment before she gives him one last dirty look and backs down.

A moment of uncomfortable silence follows before the game proceeds again.

“I-I’m g-going t-to g-get s-some f-fresh a-air,” Barry murmurs and gets up before Len can say anything.

Seeing that he doesn’t have the slightest idea where he actually is and which way would lead out of the building, he makes do with just bringing some distance between himself and the others.

Sam picked him up shortly after six this evening and brought him to wherever this place is. That must have been a couple of hours ago by now, and he still has no idea where exactly he is or whether he is even still inside Central City.
From what Barry can tell, it seems to be a rather big and rundown building, maybe an abandoned office building or some kind of former factory. In any case, both the electricity and heating are still working, for which he is very grateful, as the winter has come back with a vengeance over the last couple of days, and being miserable is still better than being miserable and cold.

The corridor is empty and dark, and while he doubts that it was a good idea to leave the others like that due to him being completely unfamiliar with the building, he still welcomes the small break from all the ruckus that comes with being around the Rogues.

Aside from that, Barry is sure that Len would have told him beforehand if it was really dangerous for him to wander around alone. It doesn’t really look all that bad either, from what he can say in the little light there is.

From the look of the room he’d just been in with the others, he quickly picked up that they’re in a basement. He has expected that the Rogues’ hideout would be someplace like this, seeing as the underground is probably the safest place for criminals to hide, as it wouldn’t easily alert anybody around of their presence. Unfortunately, it also means that he would have to go upstairs should he really want to get some fresh air.

Eventually, Barry decides against it and picks one of the rooms that is close to the staircase instead. It is dark and dusty, and doesn’t seem like one that is currently occupied by any of the criminals, which means that his presence here would likely not bother anybody.

There is a smaller window close to the low ceiling, and he opens it to let some fresh air in. He keeps the lights off.

It is snowing again, which isn’t that uncommon for the beginning of March, but makes it rather uncomfortable for people like him whose landlords have already cut the heating or who have to use public transit to get to work.

Still, Barry likes it in moments like this, when he can watch the snow fall and glitter in the shine of a nearby streetlamp. It’s calming.

He looks around for something that could serve as a seat, and decides that one of the old boxes will do after he has examined it for its sturdiness. He wipes the thick layer of dust off with a tissue and sits down on it.

Wherever and whatever this place is, it does have thick and dense walls, as he can’t hear anything from the other men; which suits him just fine. The quietness is a nice change, and he is glad that he is able to take a little breather after having spent a couple of hours in such a crowded room.

Against his initial worries, the evening hasn’t been anything close to catastrophic so far. The other men have accepted his presence without a fuss, even though most of them preferred to stay clear of him and, so far, only Hartley and James really talked to him.

It is understandable, as his stammer has been really bad since his arrival, and the tension he feels is probably coming off him in waves. Still, nothing bad has happened save for the occasional digs from Lisa, who seems to have taken a dislike to him the moment she laid her eyes on him. It’s not hard to understand why, especially with her jabs about his alleged preference for young boys.

It still caught him off-guard at first, as he hasn’t expected to be confronted with this again, and it is unsettling to think that Len’s sister really believes this.

Barry knows that Len doesn’t, but he can’t say for sure whether this is also true for the other Rogues.
It’s disconcerting; he’s always just assumed that they don’t. They’re criminals, sure, but he was sure that even they wouldn’t want someone around who is accused of Hebephilia.

He sighs and tiredly rubs his forehead as the light headache that has been following him around since that morning starts to get worse.

The silence of the room is broken when the door is opened about five minutes later, and Barry freezes up in response.

“Hey.” Hartley greets him in his usually friendly manner, and the fear that has briefly grabbed Barry’s inside eases away again.

He turns towards the ginger and smiles slightly. “H-hey.”

“You’ve found yourself a cozy spot.” Hartley remarks from his spot at the door where he is mostly clad in shadows due to the lack of any actual light source in the room. Barry snorts softly in response to his words but stays quiet otherwise as he isn’t sure what to make of the other man’s presence. He hadn’t expected anybody to come looking for him, and while he wanted to get away from the others for a bit, the notion that Hartley did so is still oddly comforting.

After a brief silence, Barry can hear the other man move over to him. He offers Hartley a tissue to get rid of the dust on one of the boxes stored close-by, which the ginger accepts with a grateful nod.

“Y-you d-didn’t n-need t-t-o c-c-come l-look-king f-for m-me,” he points out quietly after the other man has taken a seat.

“It’s fine, I wanted to take a break form that bunch of morons anyway.” Hartley explains and frowns. “Sam won the last round. That jerk’s been cheating again, everybody knows it. But we can’t prove it, so there’s a little bit too much hostility in the air for my taste right now.”

“Th-there a-are n-no m-mirrors a-around.” Barry points out but is also pretty sure that the other man was somehow cheating quite spectacularly while he was present, which lead to him winning three of the four games they’ve had so far.

Hartley hums in agreement, but remarks that Sam doesn’t need his gadgets to cheat. Barry agrees with a soft hum.

“It’s pretty cold in here.” Hartley points out as he watches the falling snow through the open window.

Barry shoots him a concerned frown. “I w-wanted s-some f-fresh a-air, I-I h-hope i-it’s a-alr-right th-that I-I op-pened th-the w-w-window.”

“Sure.” The other man turns to him with a smile. “We’re in a pretty deserted area out here.”

A gush of wind blows into the room and with it some of the falling snow. The cool air is biting but refreshing, and Barry takes a deep breath.

They sit together quietly for the next few minutes, and he listens to the sound of the storm outside, which seems to be getting stronger. It’s a good thing that he wouldn’t have to use any public transit to get home tonight.

“You want to grab a snack?” Barry turns to Hartley. He knows that the other man means well, and he appreciates his kindness, but neither the notion of being babysat nor of being a bother sits well with him.
“Y-you r-really d-don’t h-have t-to l-look a-after m-me,” he tries to point out again. “Y-you p-probably h-have b-better th-things to do.”

“I don’t,” Hartley disagrees easily. “And I’m hungry, so let’s go to the kitchen.”

The ginger gives him an encouraging smile before he gets up to close the window. “I think we’ve still got some left-over pizza from lunch.”

Barry is about to protest, but the notion of keeping on sitting here all by himself isn’t that alluring all of the sudden. Thus, he agrees and follows the other man out of the room.

Like the rest of the hideout, the makeshift kitchen is also located in the basement. Barry wonders how big this place actually is, and considers that it could belong to one of the abandoned building at the outskirts of Keystone. This would at least mean that he has some kind of inkling of where he currently is.

“Here.” Hartley puts a plate with two slices of Pepperoni pizza in front of him. He heated it up in the microwave beforehand and the smell of it is delicious.

“Th-thanks.” Barry accepts the food gladly.

“You want a beer?” Hartley asks after he has made his way back to the fridge and grabbed one for himself.

“N-no, th-thanks. I’ve h-had en-nough for t-tonight.”

The amused look Barry receives in response makes it obvious that three bottles he had so far are not really an amount that usually classifies as enough in this circle.

“If you don’t like beer, you could have something else.” the younger man offers and adds quickly. “But don’t tell the others, they’re such a pain to keep from my personal stash.”

“I w-won’t,” Barry assures with a chuckle, “b-but n-no th-thanks, I d-don’t r-really l-like alc-cohol th-that m-much.”

Hartley accepts that and closes the fridge again. He takes the seat opposite to his on the small table and starts to eat his meal as well.

“It’s good to see you again.”

These words catch Barry off-guard, and he turns his look to the other man, once again unsure how to respond. He settles on an uncertain smile. “Y-yes, it i-is. It’s b-been a w-w-while.”

“Over half a year.” Hartley agrees. “Not that I’m not glad that you weren’t around during my last trip to the Heights.”

The mention of the prison causes Barry’s appetite to dwindle, and he sets the piece of pizza back on the plate with a reluctant nod.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring that place up. I’m an idiot.” It is obvious that Hartley feels bad about it, which causes Barry to push the feeling of dread away that overcame him at the mentioning of that place.

“I-it’s o-ok-kay, I-I’m f-fine.”

The doubtful look the other man gives him then, makes it clear that he doesn’t believe him, but
Hartley is nice enough to let it rest. He probably doesn’t really want to talk about the prison either.

“So, how’ve you liked your first poker night with us so far?” The ginger sounds cheerful again, and while it is a bit forced, it is still a nice effort that sets Barry a bit more at ease again.

“I-it w-was inter-resting,” he answers slowly, thinking back to the last hours and how it has been both fun and frightening at the same time. Being amid the Rogues had been quite intimidating at first. It didn’t exactly help that they’re very boisterous individuals, but it has still been a surprisingly not-awful experience so far. It has not even come close to what he initially feared that it would be like.

“A very diplomatic answer.” Hartley remarks with an amused smile and doesn’t seem the least bit offended.

“I l-liked it, excep-pt f-for a-all th-the y-yelling a-and c-c-cursing.”

“Well, that comes with the package.”

Barry chuckles and is about to get up to grab himself a glass of water when a familiar and very sullen sounding voice comes from the open door.

“Did they kick you out as well?”

“They didn’t kick you out, James,” Hartley reminds the other Rogue, who is still hovering at the doorway. It earns him a very dark glare.

“They made me quit!”

“You quit on your own.”

“They harassed me till I did.” the blonde insists and crosses his arms in front of his chest in a very stubborn manner. “I just needed another second.”

Hartley sighs but doesn’t seem in the mood for an argument, as he instead points out that there is still some pizza left if he wants some. This seems the right thing to say as it immediately lifts James’ mood.

“So, why are you two not playing with those morons anymore? Too much of… them?” The morose way in which the younger man is saying this causes Barry to laugh, and he notices how Hartley rolls his eyes over it, but still seems amused as well.

“N-no,” Barry disagrees. “I j-just n-needed s-some f-fresh air.”

“In the kitchen?” James asks incredulously as he waits for the microwave to finish heating his food up. He briefly looks around with a frown as if he was missing something before he focuses back on him with squinted eyes. “Did Lisa say something mean again?”

Taken aback by this question, Barry stays quiet and stares at the other man in surprise. It seems that this is enough of an answer for James, as he scowls slightly and leans back against the counter.

“Don’t mind her, she’s just pissy because Len and Roscoe had a huge fight the other day, and, as she is twirly-boy’s girlfriend, she takes this shit pretty personally.” The other blonde explains, which causes Hartley to gives him an annoyed look.

He is obviously not happy about James bringing this up. Still, he agrees after a moment. “Lisa usually isn’t like that. She’s just angry at her brother, so don’t take what she says personal.”
“Sh-she th-thinks I-I…” Barry stops himself and hates how ashamed he feels over something he hasn’t done.

“She probably doesn’t.” Hartley disagrees. “She knows that Len likes you, and you have the bad luck that she seems to have chosen you to get back at him.”

“Yeah,” James agrees and shrugs. “They’ve a pretty complicated sibling-relationship at times.”

They move their conversation to another topic afterwards, for which Barry is quite grateful as he isn’t really comfortable talking about any of this.

Like during his time in the Heights, it is easy for him to be around both of the younger men, and the three of them end up playing *Crazy Eights*, which is a game James is surprisingly good at.

“You really don’t have it with card games, do you?” Hartley asks after their third game, which Barry lost once again.

“Yeah, you suck.” James agrees and gasps when the criminal next to him digs his elbow in his ribs in return.

“I-I’m u-usually n-not m-much of a p-player,” Barry explains with a shrug and starts to shuffle the cards again. It is already late, after eleven, and he should probably go and get Sam to bring him back to his flat before the man gets too drunk to do so. He enjoys the company and not being alone at home for once, though, and the notion to end this already isn’t really all that appealing.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Barry can see someone appear at the entrance of the kitchen as he starts to deal out the cards for their fourth round. He turns toward them and is a bit surprised to see Len standing there, watching him.

“You decide to play a game you’re actually any good at?” the other man asks with a slight smirk as he makes his way over to them.

“Nah, he sucks at this too.” James throws Hartley a dark look when he gets another elbow in his ribs for this comments and mutters that he is just saying the truth.

“Mind if I join in?” Len has stopped next to Barry and nods at the empty chair. He seems more relaxed than before, calmer, and Barry wonders whether this is due to him being a bit buzzed. In any case, it is nice, having these unusually warm hazelnut brown eyes on him, and he smiles and is about to agree when the other blond cuts him off.

“You sure? You *hate* Crazy Eights.” James reminds Len with an arched eyebrow. “You lose at it, like, all the time.”

The annoyed glare Len shoots the other Rogue in return causes James to duck his head and shut up.

“Join away. The more the merrier or so they say.” Hartley gives his older colleague a slightly amused grin that Len answers with an irritated frown before he sits down.

Barry, who has watched the brief exchanges quietly, isn’t sure what to make of it. He is too tired and relaxed to really worry about this right now, though, so he goes on with dealing out the cards for the next round instead.

The game runs smoothly and while Len doesn’t talk much, it isn’t uncomfortable to have him close-by. Besides, both Hartley and James don’t pay the new addition to the group too much mind and keep Barry involved in their conversations.
It is close to two in the morning when Barry decides that he really has to call it a night and return home. He feels exhausted but unusually loose and happy for the first time in a very long while.

His good mood dims a bit, though, when he notices that Sam is no longer around when they get back to the others.

Neither are Lisa or Roscoe, which is a bit of a relief for Barry, and he picks up on how relaxed the mood is between Mick, Marco, and Digger, who also seem pleasantly buzzed and are currently playing another game of poker.

Much to his worry and Len’s annoyance, it turns out that Sam has left about an hour ago.

“Lisa wanted him to take her and Roscoe to the Saloon, and he probably got stuck there.” Marco explains as he studies his cards and adds with a misgiving grimace. “The bastardo has enough money to buy the fucking bar now, anyway.”

“Fucking great.” Len grunts before he turns to Barry and considers him for a second. “Can’t get you back the way you came, it seems.”

“That’s Scudder for you.” Hartley huffs in annoyance. He joined them on their way back to the living room while James went upstairs.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch, mate.” Digger takes a pull on his bottle and shrugs. “It’s not even snowing anymore.”

“Yeah, because you would want to go outside in this weather.” Mick scoffs with a smirk, which gets him flipped the bird from the Australian.

“You can stay here tonight if you want, we’ve more than enough room.” Barry, who has just half listened to the other men so far, turns to Len with an alarmed and clearly unhappy expression.

“Right,” Len remarks drily, obviously not missing how little Barry thinks of this idea, before he sighs in annoyance. “That means we will be taking the bus.”

“The next bus stop is nearly twenty minutes away.” Hartley doesn’t seem to like this idea, and gives Barry a concerned once over. “You didn’t even come with a coat, did you?”

“You’re such a fucking clucking hen, mate.” Digger snorts and returns the redheads irritated scowl with a grin that is all teeth.

“That would be Piper for you,” Marco mocks before he gets up and announces that he’s going to take a piss, obviously not all that concerned by Barry’s little predicament.

“You don’t know how to get to your flat from here, do you?” Len meets his glance and isn’t surprised when Barry answers that he doesn’t. “Alright, I’ll grab you something to put on and take you there.”

“Y-you d-don’t h-h-have t-to,” Barry protest feebly, but the other man doesn’t even bother to reply.

This is just perfect, Barry thinks bitterly, and while he doesn’t like any of this, he also knows that it would be a very stupid idea to try and get back to his apartment complex on his own; especially in a weather like this. He still doesn’t even really have any idea where he is right now, just that it is probably somewhere on the outskirts of one of the gems.

“You could stay here, it really wouldn’t be a problem,” Hartley points out once more but doesn’t
persist when he picks up on how uncomfortable the notion alone seems to make him.

Ten minutes later, Barry follows Len through a dark factory towards one of the side-streets which would lead them to a bus stop where a nightline is still passing by at this late of an hour and could take them back into Keystone City.

They walk in silence, which doesn’t really bother Barry as he doesn’t fell up to having a chat right now anyway. It is cold and the snow is high enough that it is bothersome to move forward. The black parka that he got from the other man is keeping the biting cold away at least, but it still can’t keep him from silently cursing Sam for simply taking off like that.

It takes them about thirty minutes to get to the bus stop, which is mostly due to Barry himself as he has growing difficulties to go on in the cold weather with how the pain in his joints is getting worse with every step he takes. They are in a more inhabited area again, and it eases the knot in his stomach a bit to have street lights around that make it possible to actually see where they are going.

They are still at the out-skirts of the city’ borders, though, and it is unusually calm, even for half past three in the morning. The bus picks them up just about ten minutes after their arrival at the stop, and Barry doesn’t doubt that the streets would start to fill up with cars, even this early, as soon as they come closer to the city center.

On their way to his flat, it is necessary for them to change the bus two times, and, as if they’ve been jinxed, they have to wait for each one at least fifteen minutes, so that it is already half past five when they finally arrive in front of his apartment building.

It starts snowing again, which doesn’t bother Barry very much now that he is nearly at home, but he doesn’t like the notion that Len would have to make it all the way back to the hideout with worsening weather conditions and a slowly awaking city around him. He may not wear his infamous light blue parka, but it still would be an unnecessary risk for him.

“Y-you w-want t-to st-stay t-till S-Sam c-can p-pick y-you up?” Barry asks a bit hesitantly after they’ve finally reached the steps that lead up to the entrance of the building. “Y-you c-can s-sleep o-on th-the c-couch.”

Len seems surprised about this offer but agrees readily enough. “Sure, as long as I get out of this shitty weather.”

“Y-you d-don’t l-like s-snow?”

The thought that the other man, who actually calls himself Captain Cold, wouldn’t like winter is both odd and funny, and the dark sullen look he receives in return makes it somehow even more so. Maybe it is because he is exhausted and tired, but he can’t stop himself from laughing.

“R-really? B-but th-the p-parka-”

“Shut up and just open the damn door.”

Barry does so, grinning slightly.

His flat is dark and cold without the heater working as they enter, and Barry goes and takes a quick shower after getting the spare bedding for Len from his bedroom. His skin is bright and prickles in a familiar sensation when he leaves the bathroom again. As usual, scrubbing himself down has helped him to feels much more relaxed. While the presence of the Rogues hasn’t exactly been bad, it had still been difficult to have that many men around him that close.
When he reenters the living room, Len is already resting on the couch. For a second, Barry thinks that he might have fallen asleep, but then he watches how the other man opens his eyes and looks over to him.

“You’re heading to bed?”

“Y-yeah.” Barry nods and licks his lips, suddenly nervous. Len keeps his gaze on him, seemingly feeling that he wants to say more.

“Th-thanks,” he starts but stops briefly to clear his throat before he goes on with a slight flush. “It w-was a-a r-really n-nice n-night, I-I… I ap-p-preciate i-it… v-v-very m-much.”

Not waiting to give his guest the option to answer, he swiftly turns around and hurries to his bedroom, closing the door firmly behind him.

“S-stupid,” he mutters to himself as he groggily lays down and buried his face into his pillow.

Despite his agitated state of mind, it doesn’t take him all that long to drift off.
Romanian Hot Chocolate Refuses To Be Made Of That Powdery Stuff

Chapter Summary

Barry meets up with Mary to cook.

Later, Len reminds Barry why it isn’t always comforting to be around him.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all that lovely people who gave me feedback! It really makes my day every single time! :D

Hope you’ll enjoy it!

Update: The chapter is now edited by the amazing MeteoraWrites! (14th of February, 2019)

“That smells amazing.”

Barry looks up from the paper he is currently reading and turns to Mary, who has crouched down in front of the oven to take a look of the baking lasagna.

He smiles. “Th-thanks, I h-hope y-you’ll l-like it.”

They are cooking dinner in Mary’s apartment, which has an actual small kitchen instead of just a kitchenette.

The young woman with the short curly black hairs gets up and assures him that she has no doubt.

“It doesn’t just smell amazing,” she says with a wink as she makes her way over to the table he is currently sitting at. “It looks delicious too.”

He doesn’t mind when she sits down next to him. Women usually don’t hold the same source of discomfort for him as men do, and Mary’s calm and friendly nature makes it especially easy to stay relaxed in her presence.

“Oh, is there anything interesting to read about?” She nods toward the paper in front of him and peeks at it curiously.

“Not really, b-but I c-can l-leave it h-here and y-you c-can r-read it l-later.”

“No, that’s alright,” Mary declines, and Barry picks up on the odd look she gives the paper and how she frowns slightly for a moment before she turns her attention back to him. “Do you mind if I put on some music?”

He doesn’t.
The lasagna turns out rather nicely, and Barry can’t help but feel a bit proud when the young woman keeps complimenting him on how it turned out.

“You should definitely be a cook, not a salesclerk,” Mary remarks with a smile as she takes her second helping. “You’re wasting your talent there.”

“I-if you l-like it s-so much y-you c-can k-keep the l-leftovers,” Barry offers, but he secretly hopes that she will be alright with sharing them, even though she bought most of the ingredients.

“Don’t be silly, we’ll share. We both prepared it, after all,” Mary points out with an amused glint in her eyes. “Well, you more so than I, but I helped, and it was our teamwork that made this amazing lasagna possible in the first place.”

Barry chuckles and agrees. “R-Right.”

The notion that he would have some of it left for tomorrow’s dinner is comforting and helps him to relax while Mary starts to tell him some more about a movie she saw the other day. Its genre was science fiction, which is Barry’s personal favorite, next to crime thrillers that is, and he listens attentively while she tells him about how the crew in the film explored a planet they had gotten stuck on due to a line of accidents.

Mary is obviously also quite fond of such adventurous stories, and when Barry asks her about it, she tells him that she loves movies in general, especially older ones like The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Metropolis, and Citizen Kane.

Barry has never really been a movie person, he likes them well enough that it never bothered him when he went to them with others, but he generally prefers books and always has. Still, it’s nice listening to her tell him about the different stories, and it turns out that she’s quite a talented narrator. She gets him to chuckle more than once, and her calm and soft voice is surprisingly relaxing.

The last couple of times they met up they mostly talked about their hobbies and other interests, not really going into detail about either of their lives. Mary obviously doesn’t really want to touch upon anything too private, and he can completely respect that, seeing as he feels similarly.

He told her that he is working as a salesclerk in a small grocery store in passing shortly after meeting her. Though Mary seems oddly secretive about her own occupation, not that it really matters anyway.

“Oh my god, I’m so stuffed! I won’t be able to fit into my jeans tomorrow,” she laughs after finishing her third helping and rubs her slightly bulged out belly as if to prove her point. She has a surprisingly big appetite for such a small person, and it’s nice to have his cooking appreciated.

After finishing dinner and taking care of the dishes, they move on to her couch, which is a bit smaller than Barry’s own, and covered by a thick dark purple blanket that is cozy enough that he starts to feel a bit drowsy after just a couple of minutes.

“It’s from a friend of mine,” she explains after he has commented on how nice it feels. He doesn’t miss the tentative smile on her lips as she goes on. “He got it for me as a farewell gift when I left home.”

“Y-you aren’t f-from ar-round here?”

Mary gives him an honestly surprised look before she laughs and shakes her head. Barry can’t help but feel a bit embarrassed, but when the young woman picks up on his uncomfortable expression she quickly apologizes and explains that it’s just always odd to her when people ask her that. “I’m from a
very small village in Romania.”

“R-really? Y-you d-don’t have an ac-cent.” Barry tries to think if he’s ever picked up on anything that would indicate that she isn’t a native English speaker by the way she talks, but he’s pretty sure she’s never sounded like someone who hadn’t been born and raised here.

“Yes, I get that a lot.” She nods and picks her glass of coke up to take a sip before she goes on. “I’m probably just good with languages.”

“Y-you l-learned it in s-school?” He asks, but again she laughs as if he has said something funny. The slight annoyance he feels in return quickly vanishes after what she says next.

“I never went to school. You see, I have eight siblings, and both of my parents are simple farmers with hardly any land to work on. We never had the money for it, not even for Alin. He’s my oldest brother and the brightest person I’ve ever met.”

Somehow this puts quite a damper to his good mood, and while Barry may not be up to date on what’s going on in the world at large, he is still aware of the fact that Romania is one of the poorest countries in Europe. Mary most likely hasn’t had an easy life.

“Don’t make such a long face,” Mary tells him with a warm smile. “I may not have been able to get the same education as people in this country, but I’m still very happy and thankful for the life I have now. I have a roof over my head, money to buy food, and even a bit extra to send to my family. I’m a very blessed person.”

Barry nods quietly, both impressed and somewhat humbled by the young woman. It has to be hard to live so far away from home, even if she is able to make a better living for herself here. “D-do you h-have any r-relat-tives here?”

“I had one, my uncle, but he died a year ago.”

“I-I’m s-s-sorry.”

“It’s okay, I’m alright now,” she assures him and again asks him to not look so sad. “You know, I may have been quite alone at first after I came here, but I’m not anymore. I’ve made friends, and I’m happy with my life as it is now.”

Mary gets up and tells him that hot chocolate is the best way to lift one’s mood. She also insists that Barry is definitely in need of some himself. He tries to refuse because he really doesn’t want to exploit her generosity, and also because he’s feeling quite full already. She doesn’t listen.

“I make an excellent cup of hot chocolate if I may say so myself,” Mary assures him with an amused twinkle in her eyes while he watches her from his spot on the couch. “It can cure the sick and make the sad happy again.”

Barry snorts softly at hearing this, but decides against pointing out that this is quite the farfetched claim. After all, the uneasy heaviness that usually follows him around and wears him down has already eased away a bit by just being here.

It doesn’t take long until the whole flat is filled with the warm and calming smell of freshly prepared hot chocolate, and while he still feels stuffed, he does accept the mug she offers him a couple of minutes later. The warmth alone is worth it, and he cradles it close to his chest.

“The secret is real chocolate, not that powdered nonsense they sell you in every supermarket,” Mary tells him after she has taken up the spot next to him once more and sips on the hot beverage. “And
real milk, no water or the watered-down fat free stuff. My nana made us hot chocolate every year for All Soul’s Day and Christmas, and it was the best. You won’t catch me dead with that bagged stuff you just pour hot water over.”

A rather dark frown appears on her face, and she mutters something in a language he can’t understand; which is most likely Romanian. Her clear indignation over something like instant hot chocolate is quite endearing, and Barry lets his hands drop to his lap and his head fall back so that it rests against the backrest of the couch. He feels drowsy and calm, and he listens to Mary quietly as she tells him a bit about her family after he has asked her about them.

Barry briefly thinks that it’s a pity that the serene and nice moments like this one can never last, but brushes that notion off and instead concentrates on enjoying it.

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Barry 40th birthday is on a cool and cloudy Sunday. He spends the majority of it in bed, sleeping the day away as he has felt a bit under the weather since the beginning of the week.

Mrs. Ming invited him to stay over for dinner yesterday after work, and she was kind enough to give him the leftovers of the very delicious longevity noodles she had prepared for him. He eats them for lunch after leaving his bed around two pm, and spends a bit of time sketching on his couch after that.

Nobody passes by, which doesn’t come as a surprise, as Len and the others are planning something and he hasn’t seen much of him since the end of last week. He’s rather glad for the peace and quiet, as it probably would just mean bad news for him should anybody else turn up at his door.

Around half past six, a knock cuts through the silence in his flat, but his initial apprehension quickly vanishes when it turns out to be Mary, who brings him some cake as well as a thermos full of hot tea.

They end up playing some Rummy and talking for the next couple of hours. Barry falls asleep sometime around ten, and Mary puts a blanket over him before letting herself out.

***

The chiming caused by the entrance door being opened catches Barry’s attention. He looks up from the list of things he has to re-order, which he is currently going over yet again, a bit curious to see who would pass by now. It’s nearly nine pm, and it’s been quiet for the last two hours; with only one customer passing by for some after work grocery shopping in that time.

Mrs. Ming went upstairs about an hour ago, and she leaves it to Barry to close the shop; which he usually does on his own these days. He doesn’t mind helping her in this way, but it causes him to feel a bit uneasy at times when there’s nobody else around in the evening, seeing as the store still lies within the Keys.

Thus, Barry can’t help but tense up a bit as he looks to his latest and probably last customer of the night. His eyes widen slightly when he recognizes the person who is briefly glancing through the store before his attention sets on Barry as well.

A familiar half smile appears on Len’s face, and he is obviously amused by how caught off-guard Barry seems by his appearance.

“Nice store,” Len says in lieu of a proper greeting as he makes his way over to the counter from behind which Barry is still staring at him in a mixture of disbelief and worry.
“Wh-what a-are y-you d-doing here?” he asks, and he can’t help but throw a nervous glance over his friend’s shoulder to the glass door he had entered from; even though the police aren’t exactly common visitors to these parts of the twins he worries they could pass by at any moment.

“Relax,” Len tells him with a slight frown. “I know this part of the city like the back of my hand, I’m not stupid enough to get caught by any cop who’s unlucky enough to end up in this area.”

“Y-you p-pulled a j-job j-just t-two d-days ago,” Barry reminds him with a frown, and he can’t help the slight anger that wells up in his chest at that knowledge. He pushes it away, though. It would be stupid to get angry over such a thing, he has known all along who the other man and the Rogues are, after all. This additional guilt is just something else he will have to deal with if he wants to stay in contact with them.

“Stop worrying your damn head off,” Len’s utter lack of concern about being here, in a public place, in plain sight, is both infuriating and slightly reassuring. He may be a lot of things, but Len is definitely not stupid, and, as his history shows, he generally is pretty good at evading being caught.

“The sign says you close at nine,” Len points out and nods toward the entrance door. “which means you’re already working overtime.”

Surprised, Barry turns to the clock on the wall behind him and realizes that it is indeed already shortly after nine.

Len waits while he locks the door and proceeds with the rest of the closing tasks. They don’t really talk much, and the other man busies himself reading one of the days papers at the counter while Barry swiftly sweeps the floor. The weather is still rather cold, and the rain hasn’t stopped for the majority of the week, so that it was inevitable that customers would drag dirt and mud off the streets inside to make a mess for him to clean up every night.

It doesn’t take long for Barry to finish, though, and about fifteen minutes later he leads Len out through the backdoor, behind which lies a small narrow back street where the trash containers are kept.

“Fucking weather,” his friend grumbles when they step out into the rain that seems to have picked up once again. By now, Barry has realized that Len doesn’t like bad weather in general, not rain and definitely not snow, which is still a bid of an odd realization, considering what the other man picked as his criminal alter ego.

With a soft click, the umbrella Barry had brought to work with him opens, and he steps a bit closer to Len so that it can cover both of them as he lifts it over their heads.

“I-it’s b-been l-like th-this s-since T-Tuesday,” Barry reminds him somewhat amused. “You c-could h-have b-brought one of th-these w-with you.”

“They’re inconvenient as hell.” Len replies with a shrug which causes Barry to lift an eyebrow in slight incredulity.

“Th-they k-keep you d-dry,” he points out.

Len wrinkles his nose in annoyance before he snorts. “Usually my parka does the job just fine-”

The sound of a car reaches them before its lights briefly illuminate the otherwise very dark back alley as it passes by. They’re back in the shadows just a second later, but Barry can’t help himself and tenses up even though the sound of the car is already growing faint in the distance.
Suddenly, the notion of being seen with a wanted criminal so close to his workplace causes him to feel extremely uneasy. So far, nobody from his former life has tried to contact him, and there are no signs that anybody is keeping tabs on him, but he isn’t stupid. He is a liability to his former colleagues as long as he lives, and he knows that. If one of them were to spot him with someone like one of the Rogues, it would give them the wrong idea and cause him a lot of problems he really doesn’t need.

“Wh-what a-are you d-doing h-here, L-Len?”

The other man, who has been watching the street with a slightly grim look, turns back to him. His frown is the only sign that he has picked up on the strained quality of Barry’s voice.

For a long moment, he doesn’t replay, and Barry grows more and more nervous while the patter of the rain hitting his umbrella and the other sounds of the world around them grow uncomfortably louder.

“I was in the area, and you’d told me a while ago that you’re working here.” Len shrugs and both fall briefly silent again.

“Y-you kn-know th-that it c-could m-mean a l-lot o-of t-trouble if th-the w-wrong p-people s-spot us,” Barry says quietly, and he hates how this has become his life. “F-for b-both of us.”

“Yeah, I know.” Len’s expression has turned grim, and Barry isn’t sure whether he’s angry at him for bringing this up, or at himself for coming here in the first place.

“The capes are all busy with something that’s going on in San Francisco, including the speedsters.”

“Wh-what?” Barry feels a familiar concern for his nephew and his former friends settle in the pit of his stomach. “Wh-what’s h-happened? Wh-what’s g-going o-on?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Len says and looks quite grim all of the sudden. “It’s been all over the news for the last three hours, but they know about as much of what is going on as the rest of us do.”

There is no television in Mrs. Ming’s store, and Barry turned the radio off shortly after noon as there hadn’t been anything but static to listen to due to the bad reception from the storm.

“I’m really starting to get sick of standing out here.” Len meets his worried gaze with a somewhat irritated one. “You wanna lay down roots while worrying about the guys who don’t give a damn about you? Be my guest, but I’m going to look for someplace dry.”

The urge to hit the other man with his umbrella is suddenly nearly overwhelmingly strong, and Barry feels a mixture of anger and shame overcome him, which in turn causes his throat to close up before he is able to respond. Frustrated and hurt, he shoves the umbrella toward Len, who is still glaring at him, and turns around to leave the alley.

If that bastard is so damn troubled by the weather, he can make much better use of it than Barry can.

The rain is cold and grows even colder now that it hits him freely, but he stubbornly ignores it along with the annoying itching of his eyes and the slightly sickening way his stomach has started to cramp up again.

Right now he really hates Len a bit for being such an asshole, and he hates himself even more for letting him into his life to begin with. The other man can go jump in a lake for all he cares!
As if to make this whole situation even worse, a bright flash crosses the sky before the nearly
deafening sound of cracking thunder rolls over the city.

…this is just plain perfect.

A hand grabs Barry’s left upper arm the next second and brings him to a sudden halt. This causes an
all too familiar panic to rise in him and he cries out in a mixture of surprise and fear before he can
stop himself.

Barry knows that he isn’t in any danger, that the person who has grabbed him is Len, but he can’t
help it as the sudden contact is still so very unsettling. He tries to break away, and it comes as an
extreme relief when he is let go.

Quickly, Barry brings some additional space between himself and Len, while his heart is still racing
in his chest like crazy and his skin suddenly itching for a shower.

There’s another flash of lightning followed by another rumble of thunder, but he hardly notices either
as he watches Len warily. A familiar unrest has settled into his limbs, and he shifts his weight
nervously from one foot to the other.

Len’s face is calm, and gives nothing away as usual as he studies him silently, which causes the
unease in Barry to only grow worse.

“Look, let’s just get out of this damn rain, okay?” This request catches Barry off-guard, and he isn’t
sure how to reply for a long moment. Len doesn’t urge him on, but waits as he tries to make his mind
up in the increasing downpour.

Barry starts to gnaw on his lower lip, unsure whether it would be a good idea for him to have
anybody else around right now. He still feels shaken and upset, and he doesn’t want to make a
complete fool of himself by accident once again.

He doesn’t want to be alone, either, though...

“Ok-kay.” His voice sounds hoarse, and Barry feels a heavy resignation settle into the pit of his
stomach when he realizes once more that he wants to have Len around, despite everything.

He is such an idiot.

Len nods and slowly steps closer to him again, as if trying not to frighten him away.

Barry mutters his thanks when the umbrella is lifted above their heads, and he quietly follows the
other man as he leads him to the bus stop through the heavy rain.
Late Night Small Talk On A Fire Escape

Chapter Summary

Barry gets to know his next door neighbour, meets someone again he would have rather not and has a movie night with friends.

Chapter Notes

Update: The chapter is now edited by the amazing MeteoraWrites! (14th of February, 2019)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Early April, 1st year

The night air feels pleasantly cool on Barry’s face, and it no longer holds the uncomfortable bite of the past months as he makes his way to his apartment building from where he has just exited his bus.

It’s a bit later than he usually arrives home, as Mrs. Ming invited him to stay for some tea and honey cake after work; which he had gladly accepted. Spending time with the older woman is always a very nice experience, and he wasn’t in a hurry anyway as it’s Saturday and Len would likely not bother to pass by tonight or in the next couple of days.

The Rogues are currently panning another heist, and he never sees or hears much from Len during those times. As usual, it’s also left Barry in a bit of sour mood, but he tries not to think about it, and instead concentrate on the fact that this also means that he could sleep in tomorrow.

At least, that’s what he is hoping, anyway.

His nightmares have been a real pain for the last couple of nights, and he usually isn’t able to go back to sleep after he’s woken up from one – not that he really wants to sleep after them anyway.

It would be nice to be able to catch a full night of sleep for once, even though experience has taught him that such a phase usually lasts for at most a week.

Still, he could stay in bed all of Sunday, and he hopes that this is enough to take care of this stupid, nagging bug that has been following him around for a few weeks now. Getting sick is just about the last thing he wants to do.

Barry’s steps slow down a bit when he notices a couple of boys in their late teens standing close to the entrance of his building. A flash of anger and frustration goes through him as he knows exactly what this means by now.

There would be another one of those damn parties tonight. He clenches his jaw in pure annoyance for a moment before he forces himself to relax again. Getting frustrated over this won’t help him, and he really is too exhausted to waste any of his energy on it.
His gaze moves up to the window above his own and he watches with a frown how people move around inside. It’s just his luck that he would get the apartment below such a complete and utter jerk who doesn’t give a damn about the other residents that live in the building. Barry knows that he can’t be the only one who’s bothered by him throwing parties that last until early morning just about every other week, but nobody that lives here wants to get the police involved; and that also includes him.

It’s frustrating, but they’re all worried about getting in trouble; either with the cops or with the man himself, who is well-known to be prone to violence. It would only lead to more problems than a possible full night of sleep is worth.

A small voice in the back of his mind reminds him that this is not how he is supposed to deal with these sorts of people. That looking away is never a solution, and that these kinds of situations will not simply go away on their own. People like this man thrive on the fear and inaction of others-

Barry shakes his head slightly, as if this would help him to shut the uneasy voice in his mind up. A familiar guilt attaches itself to him, and he tries to will it away as well, but with little success. Once, he would have done something about this, he would have stood up, but those days are long gone. He just can’t, not with where his life is right now, and isn’t that a daunting realization?

It’s similar to how it was after he had gone off to college, after he had left his last foster family behind him. The fear of others and of possible confrontation is just like it was back then. He is a coward, he knows that, and it fills him with shame, but it still isn’t enough to make him try and do the right thing.

These days, it’s very similar to back then, when he was young. Keeping his head low can spare him a lot of pain and trouble, just trying to make himself so small that the world itself would overlook him…

The group of young men notice him, and watch curiously as he makes his way past them. Barry keeps his gaze straight ahead of himself and tries to ignore them. They let him pass by without causing any trouble. They usually don’t bother him, other than calling him names and making fun of him, typical behavior for teenagers who just want to impress their friends.

In a way it’s funny how things never really change, and how similar one generation is to the next in this aspect.

When he opens the entrance to the old building that leads directly into the staircase, Barry is immediately able to pick up on the low bass of the music from a couple of floors above him.

There’s no doubt in his mind that this will be another sleepless night as he pauses at the foot of the stairs and looks up with an unhappy frown.

He doesn’t want to go up to his floor anymore. The thought of how he would lay awake for the next eight hours, being forced to listening to that damn music as well as the people talking and moving around above him, makes his whole body feel even heavier.

The laughter of the teens out front of the building sounds through the closed door behind him – they’re probably here for the party as well. Not wanting to run into them again, Barry slowly starts to make his way upstairs. The ache in his knees and hips suddenly feels much more distinctive than it did just a minute ago.

It’s about four hours later when he finally accepts that there is no way in hell that he will even get a minute of sleep with the ruckus that is going on upstairs. The dull buzz of the partying crowd as well as the ongoing music reach him even through the earplugs he usually uses when his neighbors are
Tiredly, he decides to get up and make himself some tea. His head has started to hurt rather badly, as has his throat, and he hopes that something warm to drink will help with both.

While his cup of tea is steeping, he opens the window over his sink and climbs out onto the fire escape that lays in front of his apartment. The hope that a bit of fresh air could possibly help him with his headache is quickly gone when he notices that the noise is even worse out here. His upstairs neighbor seems to have decided that opening the windows is a splendid idea as well, and he can hear people talk and laugh just as clearly as if they were right next to them. Barry lets out a tired and exasperated groan and leans heavily on the cool metal railing of the platform he is standing on.

The streets below him are mostly empty other than a couple of teenagers at the corner of the building. Most of the other buildings lay dark, with the exception of the occasional lit window, and he has no idea how anybody in the area is able to get any sleep at all with the noise that is coming from the apartment above his own. He can’t help but envy them for it.

“So, I’m not the only one who can’t sleep thank to those idiots?”

Barry freezes for a second before he slowly looks over to his left, where a man is sitting on the fire escape next to his own with his legs dangling over the edge. He’s hard to make out in the dim light, as the street lamp closest to them burned out a while ago and nobody has bothered to fix it yet.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” adds the stranger – apparently his neighbor – and sounds both slightly concerned and amused after Barry has failed to reply or moved at all for a very long moment.

“N-no, y-you d-didn’t, y-you j-just s-sup-prised m-me,” Barry tries to explain because he has to appear rather rude right now. His stammer is getting worse again, and he isn’t sure whether it’s due to how tired he is, or because of being surprised. Whatever the reason, it fills him with a familiar unease and embarrassment.

There is no doubt in his mind that he sounds ridiculous, and in a way, he is now glad that he hadn’t turned his kitchen lights on. This way, the other man wouldn’t see how very uncomfortable he is, at least.

The stranger doesn’t reply for a while and Barry knows that he is being studied. The poor fellow probably isn’t sure how to talk to him. It’s frustrating how off-putting his stammer is to most people, it’s a bit like he’s running around with a disease nobody wants to catch.

A familiar feeling of bitterness starts to settle in his stomach and he is just about to apologize and go back into his flat when the other man speaks again.

“You’re a very quiet neighbor, I should really thank you for that,” he says, and he sounds both amused and honest as he does so. “Seeing as I could have gotten a jackass like that guy instead.” He nods toward the source of the noise above them before he pushes himself back a bit and gets up.

Unconsciously, Barry takes a step back toward his window, but he stops before he can make himself look any weirder than he already does. The stranger briefly pauses, and Barry is pretty sure that he has picked up on the movement.

For a moment neither of them moves and the buzzing of the party just a few feet above them fills the night air around them like an uncomfortably thick blanket. Then, the other man, who seems to be just a bit taller and in much better physical shape than Barry, walks over to the side of the railing that is adjacent to his own.
“My name’s Edward,” he introduces himself and offers his hand over the gap between their respective fire escapes.

Barry hesitates briefly before he pushes himself to move so that he can accept the stranger’s, Edward’s, hand. The feeling of another person touching him, especially a man he doesn’t know, is so unsettling that he nearly immediately pulls his hand back.

“B-Barry,” he utters and is glad when Edward lets his hand go just a second later. “N-nice t-to m-m-meet you.”

“Likewise.” His neighbor nods, and even with so little light Barry can make out that he is smiling. “You’re the first neighbor I’ve actually talked to since I moved here three months ago. Usually people just glare at me suspiciously when I so much as look at them.”

That is not something Barry has any troubles believing. He had quickly learned that the people here aren’t very welcoming towards others, and that they mostly prefer to stick to themselves. Seeing how high the criminal rate of this place is, it’s understandable, and in his case it isn’t as if his stammering is making it any more appealing to others to try and have a conversation with him.

Barry guesses that he’s lucky that he has met Mary, who is an unusual friendly and outgoing person. His neighbor obviously hasn’t been fortunate enough to get to know anybody like that around here so far.

“D-don’t w-worry, n-not a-all o-of u-us are l-like th-that.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” agrees the other man, and Barry realizes that he doesn’t feel that apprehensive toward him anymore, which is quite surprising as it usually takes him much longer to get used to people like that, especially other men.

“I think I’ll go back inside and try to catch some sleep, despite those jackasses up there.”

“Y-yeah, th-that’s p-probably a g-good i-idea,” agrees Barry, who then watches how the other man vanishes back in his flat after wishing him a goodnight.

Despite his exhaustion and still ongoing headache, Barry doesn’t miss that this brief and unexpected meeting has lifted his mood a little bit, and he decides to go back inside as well after that.

A low curse slips over his lips when he realizes that his tea is still steeping.

***

Barry has started to spend more of his free time with Len, and consequently, the other Rogues over the past weeks.

He still feels like he’s sticking out like a sore thumb, but they’re welcoming enough, even though, other than Hartley and James, most of them prefer not to interact with him on their own if they can help it. Barry knows not to take it personal.

It’s always been like that between them, ever since they picked up on what had been done to him back in prison.

The rape of another man is a very uncomfortable topic for most guys, and the Rogues are certainly no exception. Barry even gets the impression sometimes that they feel more uneasy about being left in a room alone with him than he is about being alone with them, which is a bit funny in a sad way.
He doesn’t hold it against them, though. In all honestly, he’s even somewhat glad that most of them keep their distance whenever Len isn’t around.

***

Barry has just returned behind the counter after finishing his lunch break when Izzy, the prostitute he met at Len’s place months ago, turns up at the Mrs. Ming’s small store. He immediately gets a bad feeling and a familiar dread settles in his stomach.

The woman is wearing rather short and revealing clothes for the weather, but she doesn’t look sleazy, which is mostly due to her wearing hardly any make-up at all, giving her a more natural look overall.

Once again it hits him how pretty she is, especially now, without any dark eye shadow or bright lipstick on. It causes her to look quite a bit younger, and while she isn’t the type he would call beautiful, she is still very good looking. Barry doesn’t want to, but he can’t help but consider that Len is probably thinking the same thing when he is looking at her, which is a thought that fills him with a surprisingly intense unease.

Their gazes meet and she eyes him briefly before a slight sneer appears on her face that is quickly replaced by a smirk. It’s uncomfortable enough that he’s relieved when she finally turns away and starts to look through the store instead. A small part of him hopes that she won’t find anything and will just leave again, but he knows his rotten luck and how unlikely that possibility is.

A couple of other customers are around, and he doesn’t have the time to keep an eye on her. Thus, when he’s finally able to turn his attention back to her, he feels his stomach drop when he spots her as she is making her way over to him with a bottle of cheap red wine and two bags of potato chips.

She puts the items on the counter and gives him an unpleasant smile.

“Well, well, well, look who we have here,” she says in a low and somewhat sultry voice that causes Barry to tense up with growing discomfort. “Lenny’s little pity project.”

A familiar heat rises to Barry’s face, and he glares at her for a second before wordlessly turning his attention towards the things she’s intending to buy. He starts to feed their prices into the register.

“It really is a small world,” she goes on, obviously not concerned by his lack of a reply. “Just the other day I was thinking of you after Lenny and I needed a little break. Funny, hm?”

The words actually hurt to hear, and he isn’t sure whether he is angrier over her intent to make him feel uneasy, or his own reaction to them.

“Th-this m-m-makes f-four d-d-”

“Four dollars and seventy-five cents,” Izzy cuts him off with a smirk. “I can add, and you really should stick to not talking, otherwise people will think you’re a bit slow.”

Barry’s jaw joints flare up in pain as he clenches his teeth, humiliated by the insult and angry over how smugly she is watching him now. He returns her gaze stubbornly, but is unable to say a word.

“Shee.” She lays a five dollar bill down on the counter and picks her purchases up. “Keep the change.”

Izzy gives him a slow once over before she frowns in mock concern.
“You should eat more, sissy-boy, Len doesn’t like the scrawny type.”

The little bell above the entrance chimes again when she finally leaves, and Barry watches her go through the glass door while he tries not to choke on the feelings of shame and fury that are flooding him right now.

***

“Do you have any popcorn?”

James, who is currently trying to get the program that will let them watch the DVD on the laptop he has borrowed from Lisa to run, shoots him a hopeful glance that quickly turns disappointed when Barry shakes his head.

“We just ordered food,” Hartley reminds him from his spot at the table. He’s currently looking through the collection of DVDs James also picked up during his quick visit to the blonde woman’s room before they came over.

“I don’t like Greek food.” grumbles James, and curses slightly when the portable computer once again doesn’t do what he wants it to. Barry flinches slightly as he watches him hit the poor thing, and he knows that it would be just his luck that Lisa pins it one on him if James breaks it.

He still isn’t sure whether it wouldn’t have been a better idea to just not answer the door when they showed up fifteen minutes ago. It seems that it isn’t an annoying trait exclusive to just Len to simply pass by without a warning, or to only do so after nine pm on a weeknight.

“You said it was fine twenty minutes ago,” huffs Hartley, who sounds slightly irked but doesn’t take his eyes off the DVD he is currently studying. “We could have ordered something else as well if you had said so then.”

“But you wanted Greek, and you always get annoyed when I want to order somewhere else in addition to your food,” mutters James, and Barry, who is currently standing at the small counter of his kitchenette to prepare a mug of coffee for his guests and some tea for himself, feels a familiar fondness overcome him as he listens to the two younger men quarrel. It helps to ease his worry a bit about Len’s younger sister’s wrath.

For a couple of days now he’s been in a rather bad mood, and it’s a nice change to have them around; even if this would cost him some additional hours of sleep. Len hasn’t shown himself the whole week so far, and while Barry knows that the other man probably isn’t thinking anything of it, he can’t help but miss his company.

He doesn’t want to appear clingy, though, and he tries to tell himself that it’s simply because he is lonely most of the time. But after more than eight months out of prison, this isn’t entirely true anymore. He has actually found a small number of people again who make it easier for him to get up every morning. And even if it’s still somewhat hard for him to admit it, two of them are currently sitting in his living room.

“Hey, Barry!” James’ voice startles him out of these thoughts, and he immediately tenses up in response.

“James, keep it down,” chides Hartley, and he shoots the other man an annoyed look before he turns back to Barry. “Sorry, we just want to know whether you’re fine with Mr. Magorium’s Wonder Emporium?”

Barry has no idea what kind of movie it is, but he doesn’t miss how James enthusiastically nods in
support from his seat on the couch. He shrugs and agrees.

To his surprise and relief, it turns out to be a harmless children’s movie.

“Why can’t we have a toy store like that?” laments James as they watch how the kids on the screen are clearly enjoying their trip to the so-called Wonder Emporium. It isn’t lost on Barry how Hartley briefly glances at the other criminal with a concerned expression, and his good mood starts to dim.

The food is delivered about ten minutes into the movie, and it turns out to be as good as Hartley had told him it would be.

“I love Barberis’, they make the best Dolmades,” the ginger tells him, and Barry learns that Hartley had been to Greece a couple of times during his childhood, and that he has a soft spot for their cuisine.

“It i-is g-good,” agrees Barry after he has tried one of the grape leaf-wrapped rice parcels, which is a dish he himself has eaten a couple of times before, but of which he never really took a particularly liking to. All of the food is very tasty, though, not that he would have complained even if it weren’t, seeing as Hartley had paid for it.

“Shhh!”

James, whose attention is back on the screen, glares at them in obvious annoyance, and both of them fall quiet to let the younger man enjoy the movie in peace.

Toward the beginning of the third act, Barry starts to grow drowsy, and while he tells himself that he just wants to rest his eyes for a moment, he drifts off within seconds.

Hartley wakes him sometime later.

“We’re going to leave now, Barry. Thank you for taking the time.”

Groggily, Barry nods his head and mutters something unintelligible while his eyes start to close again.

The ginger chuckles and tells him that they will leave through the bathroom mirror before he wishes him goodnight.

“Nighty night, Barry-bear!” adds James in a much too enthusiastic voice that causes him to flinch.

“Not so loud,” Hartley glares at his friend, which causes the younger man to duck his head and shoot Barry an apologizing look.

“… sorry.”

Barry watches them for a second longer before he nods off again.

His alarm clock wakes him four hours later, and he could kick himself for being stupid enough to spend a night on his couch. He feels like an old man as he limps toward his bathroom to get ready for work, but despite the discomfort he can’t help but realize that he is in a much better mood than he has been in days.
So, here is chapter number five, hope you've enjoyed it.

Just to prevent any misunderstandings, this Edward has nothing to do with the Eddie of the current TV show. I've picked the name quite a while before I knew anything about their Eboard's ancestor Eddie Thawne.

Also, dear Len will be back in the next chapter.

I really want to thank those amazing people who left me kudos and comments. I really enjoy reading what you think of my chapters. It is increadibly rewarding to do so and see that someone has actually gotten invested enough that they really take the time to share their opinion. It always makes my day.
Past Regrets

Chapter Summary

Barry sees Wally again and has no idea how to deal with it. Len listens. It doesn't end too well.

Chapter Notes

Update: The chapter is now edited by the amazing MeteoraWrites! (14th of February, 2019)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

May 1st Year

It’s on his way to the Keystone City Hall that Barry sees Wally again for the first time in years.

It’s a warm early Thursday afternoon. Spring has fully taken over the weather by now, and he is enjoying the sun even though he has to hurry to get back to work within the hour. Mrs. Ming had been nice enough to let him take two hours off because he lost his ID sometime over the last couple of days and needs to get a new one before he could get into trouble for not having it.

Barry still isn’t sure how or where he lost it. He usually keeps it in his wallet, but it seemed to have slipped out one way or another, which is quite a problem because he is legally required to carry it around with him everywhere he goes.

“Don’t worry, my dear,” Mrs. Ming consoled him after she had picked up on how worried he was about it. “You just need to get a new one. These things happen. My grandson lost his passport just a couple of months ago while he was in Germany, and it was hardly any trouble at all to get a new one.”

The old woman means well, and Barry didn’t point out that it’s quite a different story for someone like him to lose their ID.

Barry already went to the police station not too far from the store to make a notice of loss, and, much to his surprise and immense relief, it went smoothly. The officer who took in his information didn’t seem particularly interested in him. He handed him the paper with which he has to go to the KC DOC office and that was that.

It was nearly surreal. Barry had been worrying himself sick since the day before when he accepted that he had indeed lost his ID for sure. He had been certain the visit to the police station would be another horrible and demeaning experience.

It’s as if a weight has been lifted from his shoulders, and while he still feels nervous about the whole affair, he’s no longer really afraid because of it.
There’s still over an hour left before he has to be back at the store, and he hopes that his business at the DOC office will be dealt with just as quickly.

Barry tries to steer clear of the other pedestrians on the sidewalk, which is no easy task with how crowded they are due to the nice weather, which seems to bring people outside in droves. It causes a familiar unease to overcome him while he makes his way toward his destination, but he tries to ignore it. Despite how the day has started out, he’s in a pretty good mood, and he would like for it to stay that way.

Thus, Barry tries to shut the people around him out as he usually does when he is surrounded by too many of them in too little a space. He keeps his gaze mostly down, and concentrates on the cacophony of sounds around him while trying not to actually pick up any actual words being said.

It works out surprisingly well, as being surrounded by so many strangers isn’t that bad of an experience these days. Not like it was the first couple of months after his release, anyway. He still doesn’t like it, but it’s bearable, which is elating in its own way.

It also helps to occupy his mind, and Barry uses the time he has right now to go over the list of things he has to order tomorrow in his head once again. Thus, he is just trying to remember whether they are out of pickles or not when something catches him completely off-guard.

Wally’s voice is like a beacon through the clatter of sounds around him, and it causes him to stop so abruptly that a woman, who has been walking right behind him, collides with him.

“Watch it, idiot!” the brunette hisses, annoyed, and gives him a glare before she moves on. Barry hardly pays any attention to her as his eyes try to search out the man he has just heard. His instincts tell him to scram before his little trip could end in a disaster, but he can’t bring himself to move just yet. He has to look for him.

The familiar voice reaches him again, and as his gaze shifts toward it, he immediately notices the red hair, which has lost some of its brightness over the years. The once vivid red has turned into more of a medium coppery auburn shade, but he still has no problem picking the younger man out of the crowd around him.

His stomach makes a sickening lurch a second later when he realizes just how close he actually is to him, only about ten feet away. He knows with a painful certainty that it would be disastrous should Wally notice him now. It’s sheer luck that he hasn’t picked up on him yet, and before Barry even can come to the decision whether he should stick around for just a moment longer or not, his feet start to move again on their own.

A part of him wants to stop so very badly and apologize for how much he has failed him. Barry ignores it as he is all too aware of how Wally would react to suddenly being confronted by him. Instead, he glances back over his shoulder before he is far enough away that the other man will be swallowed by the crowed, and he notices how somber his expression is. It’s horrible to think that he is the reason for this, that he could not protect him.

The notion causes a familiar guilt to rise in Barry’s guts.

Then, Wally chuckles and a small but soft smile appears on his lips as he turns to the dark-haired Asian woman who is standing next to him, whom Barry hadn’t noticed before. He watches how she turns toward his nephew and lowers her head so that her forehead is resting on his shoulder. She is smiling as well, and just as Wally cups the back of her head they both vanish out of sight.

Barry is left feeling oddly detached from everything for the rest of the day. All the brightness is
“Has something happened?”

Barry startles slightly and lifts his eyes from the noodles he has been listlessly moving around in the little plastic container before him for the past five minutes. It seems that he’s been lost in his own thoughts once again, which causes him to frown in annoyance over his inability to prevent his mind from going back to the events of yesterday afternoon.

“S-sorry,” he mutters to Len, who is watching him in a rather uncomfortably intense way from the other side of the table. “Th-there’s j-just s-someth-thing on m-my m-mind.”

Len stays quiet and both drop back into a not so comfortable silence.

Barry feels bad about it, he hasn’t seen his friend in more than two weeks, and he should at least try to keep his attention on him. It’s just so damn difficult to get Wally out of his head. After all these years, he’s finally seen him again, and he could just as well have been a stranger. Iris comes briefly to his mind, and the memory is like a stab to his guts.

“We’re having another poker night tomorrow.”

Glad to have something to focus on other than his troubling thoughts, Barry turns his attention back to Len and smiles, even if it is a bit uncertain.

“A-are y-you inv-viting m-me over?”

The other man snorts and asks him what he thinks.

“I l-l-lost y-you n-nearly f-fifty d-dollars l-last t-time.”

Len just shrugs. “That’s part of the game.”

“Other p-people l-losing y-your m-money?” asks Barry in disbelief, but he’s a bit amused by his friend’s nonchalance. He envies him for it at times.

“I’ve won that money back by now.” Len points out, and Barry feels the unexpected urge to retort that he probably wouldn’t behave that recklessly with his money if it actually was his to begin with. He doesn’t, though.

Len is clearly trying to lift his mood, and while he hates to be reminded time and time again of who his friend actually is, he doesn’t feel up to starting a fight over it right now. Not that it would be fair or make any difference anyway.

“I-I s-saw m-my n-nephew t-t-today.” It takes Barry a moment before he realizes that he has said this out loud. He tenses and can’t help but feel angry at himself for letting that slip.

Why the hell would he bring that up just now?!

He can feel Len’s gaze on him, but he can’t bring himself to meet it. A familiar shame starts to latch on to him again, and it leaves him with the urge to hide. He doesn’t want to have to deal with this, any of it, he’s just so tired…

“I take it that he didn’t see you.”
These words get Barry to look up in confusion.

“You probably wouldn’t be in one piece if he had,” explains Len with a grim smirk, but he doesn’t actually seem to find this particularly funny.

Barry clenches his jaw and glares at him. There’s a lot he would love to say to the other man right now, like for example where he can stick those stupid comments of his, but his throat has already closed up on him again, and thus there is no real outlet left for his frustration and embarrassment.

Stiffly, he gets up – completely ignoring Len as he does so – and walks over to the kitchen counter to make himself some tea. While he doesn’t think that he could stomach anything right now, he needs to busy himself with something.

A couple of minutes go by and his anger over what Len has said slowly fades again, partly due to the other man actually giving him the time he needs to collect himself and calm down.

After preparing himself a cup of mint tea, Barry slowly walks back over to the table and takes up his former seat. He keeps his eyes on the white mug in his hands.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” Len doesn’t seem like he’s particularly sorry, but Barry knows that he hardly ever shows it, no matter whether he actually regrets something he has done or not. His words sound honest enough, though.

“Wh-what d-did you th-think? Th-that I-I w-w-would f-find it f-funny?” His bitterness is so strong that he is sure he can actually taste it on his tongue as he speaks. “M-my n-neph-phew h-hates m-me, h-hil-larious, i-isn’t i-i-it?”

The itching in his eyes grows really bad, and he ducks his head a bit. A familiar painful throbbing starts behind his temples and he presses his fingers against it as he tries to take a couple of calming breathes.

Again, Len gives him the time he needs to get a hold of his emotions. It takes a while before the pressure behind his sternum starts to ease to something more tolerable.

Barry swallows and takes a sip of his tea when he is certain that he is no longer in danger to make a fool of himself. He tries to ignore how weak his hand feels as he picks up the cup, and how it’s slightly shaking.

“How did you see him?” asks Len when Barry finally is able to look at him again. “Didn’t you have work today?”

“Y-yes, b-but…” Barry’s voice breaks off and he coughs lightly, a familiar flush of embarrassment coloring his cheeks, which is so damn frustrating. He hates how ridiculous and weak he has to sound right now. “I h-had t-to g-go t-to the D-DOC-C b-because I l-lost m-my I-ID s-someh-how.”

“You met him there?”

“N-no.” Barry closes his eyes and leans heavily against the backrest of the chair. “It w-w-was on m-my w-way th-th-there.”

Wally had looked so different, so grown up. The couple of times he saw him in costume during his time in prison made it difficult to make out any real changes other than his maturing voice and stature. It’s so damn strange to have seen him like this, no longer a teenager but a man. He missed all of it.
“H-he l-looks so d-different,” Barry goes on without knowing why he does so in the first place, seeing as it hurts to even think about it. “H-he’s s-so m-much older, a g-grown m-man and… h-he… h-his hair’s a b-bit d-darker a-a-and h-he l-look-ked s-so g-grim… he… he w-was n-never a h-happy k-kid b-but he… I w-wanted h-him t-to b-be h-happy…”

With a soft hiss he breaks off and presses the balls of his hands against his once more teared up eyes. His throat hurts, and while he tries to keep it together, he can feel how his control slowly but surely slips from him.

This is all his fault.

The sound of a chair being shoved back causes him to jump slightly and a couple of tears run down his cheeks as he looks over to Len. This has to be extremely uncomfortable for his friend, Barry realizes, and he feels how a familiar and nearly stinging heat spreads through his cheeks at the thought that he has just been about to break down in front of someone who doesn’t like to touch anything more emotional than a smirk or a scowl with a ten-foot pole.

To his surprise, the other man doesn’t do as he had assumed he would and leave, but he instead walks over to his fridge and grabs two beers.

Barry watches him warily as he comes back and offers one of the bottles to him.

“Here, you can definitely use on.” Len sounds grim, and while Barry doesn’t feel like he could stomach anything right now, he accepts it with a small nod.

The beer tastes bitter, and cold, and the sickness ebbs away after just a couple of seconds.

They don’t talk while they drink their first beers, and Barry tries to just concentrate on the taste and nothing else, which works for the most part. He doesn’t notice that he gulps the liquid down unusually quickly, nearly faster than Len, and when he is offered another one, he accepts it without hesitation.

After that, Len grabs the poker cards he keeps around at Barry’s place and they play a game.

“You did well.” the other man comments after their first round.

“I-I l-lost,” remarks Barry quietly, and he hates how feeble his voice still sounds. Right now, he couldn’t care less if he is the worst player on the planet.

“It was still harder for me to read you this time.”

Len gets each of them a third beer and they start another game.

This repeats one more time before Barry is drunk enough that he has a problem holding his cards.

“’m-m th-the w-wors-st p-playr e-every…”

“Hardly.” Len sounds openly amused, which causes Barry to glare at him in turn. It’s so damn unfair that his friend isn’t even buzzed yet.

“I-I h-hat-te p-p-pok-ker…”

“You agree to play it an awful lot, though.”

Another glare and the other man actually chuckles as he starts to pick the cards up from the table. Barry gets up, as he wants to move over to the couch, and quickly find himself on the floor. The
change of position startles him so badly that he doesn’t notice the pain that sears through his knees and head at first.

He cries out when a hand grabs his upper arm, but he quickly calms down again when he realizes he isn’t in any danger.

“It’s just me,” Len tells him in a low and calm voice before he chuckles. “Shit, you’re really a lightweight, aren’t you?”

“D-don’ m-make f-f-fun of m-me,” complains Barry, who feels rather miserable all of a sudden. “I-I d-don’t l-like d-drunken p-people…”

Len hums nonverbally and helps him up again before assisting him to find his way over to the couch in one piece.

“Y-you… y-you s-said I-I w-was d-doin’ b-bet-ter t-ton-night…”

“You were,” agrees his friend as he walks back to the kitchen table while Barry lets himself drop to his side so that he can rest his head on the arm of the couch and pull his legs up onto the cushions. “Till you got to your third beer.”

A rather dark scowl appears on Barry’s face, but he feels too groggy to sit up and show it to Len.

“B-beer i-isn’ h-health-thy,” he mutters sullenly.

He nearly nods off over the next couple of minutes till he feels the cushions next to him move and he startles slightly. When he throws a worried glance to his side, he sees Len, and wonders whom else he could have expected it to be. He realizes again how stupid he has to look, reacting so frightened to everything around him all the time.

“Come on, sit up. I got you some water.”

“I-I’m n-not th-thirsty.”

“You’ll regret it in the morning if you fall asleep with nothing but beer in your system.”

“I-I’m t-tired.”

Len chuckles and Barry feels a bit affronted by it.

“S-stop m-making f-f-fun of m-me!”

“You are definitely not a happy drunk.”

The remark is meant as nothing more than a jest, but it causes a memory – no, a bunch of them – to come to Barry’s mind and suddenly he feels furious.

“I-I’m n-no d-drunk!” Barry hisses upset, and briefly he really wants to kick Len for causing him to remember any of those horrible things. He knows how stupid that would be, though, and even dangerous if Len should take it the wrong way. Therefore, he scrambles up into a sitting position and glares at the other man instead.

His reaction seems to have caught Len off-guard, as he just watches him for a long moment.

“I know.” He sounds calm; like he is stating a fact, and the anger is gone from Barry just as quickly as it appeared.
“G-good,” nods Barry, who is a bit uncertain of what to do now. After a moment he adds quietly.
“S-sorry f-for y-yelling at you.”

Len snorts and gives him a crooked smile. “It’s fine.”

“Th-thanks…”

“Sure.” The other man shrugs and remarks that he is use to taking a lot worse from his sister.

“N-no,” Barry disagrees with a frown. “I m-mean f-for… f-for b-being m-my f-friend… f-for b-being s-so n-nice t-to m-me and… and f-for b-b-being h-here.”

This time, it seems that Len isn’t sure how to respond.

He doesn’t reply in the end, and Barry feels too tired to worry about the sudden change in his mood, so he instead just accepts the water Len had gotten for him.

When Barry wakes up with a hell of a hangover a couple of hours later, Len is no longer around.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

So, slowly but sure we start to get to the more meatier parts of the story and you will learn a bit more about what has actually taken place that lead to Barry being locked away. Also, more Rogues are coming up and things with Len... well, there would be a lot to say about that.

Thank you sweeties so much for your kudos and, seriously, don't feel shy to leave me comment - you would not believe how curious I am to hear from you what you think about my story and how nice it is to read them.
June 1st year

A knock at his door causes Barry to halt his movements, which leaves the onion he intends to add to the eggs for his omelette only half chopped. He looks at his living room clock, which shows that it’s just shortly after noon. He frowns slightly as he knows Mary wouldn’t be around till later this afternoon, and Len or the others are also unlikely to pass by as they usually won’t pay him a visit until well after it’s gotten dark, and they generally prefer to use Sam’s help if the man can be bothered.

Not that he has seen much of them over the last month…

Barry grimaces unhappily and pushes that thought aside.

He turns his attention back to the door and a slight unease starts to settle over him. Another knock follows and he hesitates a moment longer before he puts the knife away and somewhat reluctantly makes his way over to the entrance of his flat.

It’s early June, and warm enough that he has the window over his kitchen sink open so that the sound of the streets below follow him through his apartment. This low cacophony of life outside his four walls usually has a somewhat lulling quality to it, but it isn’t able to do much to settle his nerves now.

His stomach starts to feel queasy, like something heavy has settled in it, and it seems that he will have to save his lunch to have for dinner later on instead.

The slight sense of foreboding grows worse as he leans forward to take a look through his door spy and see who his unexpected visitor is.

When he spots the person on the other side, it’s as if a bucket of ice water is emptied over his head, and for a second his legs seem to grow weak. He nearly feels sick with confusion and apprehension as he tries to come up with a plausible explanation as to why Jay Garrick is currently standing in
front of his door that doesn’t involve any sort of trouble for him.

It’s been years since he has seen the older man last, and, like with everybody else of his former life, he hadn’t expected to do so again anytime soon.

Well, at least not if either of them could help it…

What is he doing here?

Barry swallows nervously and he suddenly wonders whether anybody could have picked up on his connection to Len and the other Rogues.

*My former connection to them*, he thinks bitterly, as it seems like that part of his life has resolved itself on its own once again.

Still, he knows that there doesn’t actually need to be a reason for him to get in trouble, and that notion alone causes the sickness he feels to worsen.

He actually jumps when another knock sounds in front of him, a bit louder this time and he remembers that the other man is still waiting for him to answer the door.

Barry nervously gnaws his lower lip for a moment and isn’t sure what to do. The notion to not open the door crosses his thoughts, but he knows that this would most likely just lead to trouble should Jay find out that he had simply been ignoring him. He doesn’t like it, but the best thing is probably to just deal with whatever caused the other man to pass by. There aren’t really that many options for him to choose from, anyway.

After taking a deep and slow breath to calm his nerves, Barry reaches for the knob and opens the door.

Jay looks hardly any different than he had the last time Barry had seen him. Well, he probably doesn’t even look that different from when they met the first time. Not bad for a man who was going toward the end of his eighties by now.

There is a moment of surprised silence, and it becomes quickly obvious that his unexpected guest hadn’t expected to get an answer anymore. They watch each other in an uncomfortable silence, unsure what to say.

“Hello, Barry.” Jay is the first one to break it, and actually gives him a weak smile. “I hope I’m not interrupting you with anything?”

Like usual in such situations, Barry’s voice has abandoned him once again, so that he can just mutely shakes his head. There are a lot of questions on his mind, most of which about whether he is in trouble, but right now he can’t even get a single word out.

Jay frowns slightly and Barry knows that it only makes him look suspicious, but he can’t help but start to fidget nervously.

“Can I come in?”

The request isn’t unexpected, Barry assumed that the other man isn’t just passing by to exchange greetings at his doorstep. Still, he really doesn’t like the idea of Jay in his flat and the problems that are likely following along with him.

Barry doesn’t think that he would be able to deal with anything else on top of his current situation.
There is a small part of him, though, which is excited to see the man in front of him again. A part that has been missing his former friend and colleague, and Barry knows how stupid this is, how potentially dangerous.

It had been, and still is, a horrible experience to be shunned by everybody, especially people like the Garricks, whom he really considered *family* once. Not a single person from his past has come to him since his release, and while he knows that he should most likely be grateful for it, it still *hurts*.

Again, he answers wordlessly with a nod and steps aside to give the older man space to enter.

Jay eyes him with slight concern before he does so.

Barry closes the door behind him and watches how his guest briefly looks around his small flat. It’s then that it hits him just how poor his current living conditions have to seem to others, and an embarrassed and angry flush crosses his cheeks before he forces himself to avert his gaze from Jay. Instead he walks back over to his kitchenette to put the bowl with the already whisked eggs and the cutting board with the onions into his fridge for later.

His former friend is watching him when Barry turns back around, which is uncomfortable and embarrassing. He tries to tell him to take a seat, but, once again, his throat doesn’t let a single word pass his lips. His flush deepens and he gestures toward the kitchen table instead, his lips now firmly closed.

Jay doesn’t move for a couple of seconds and Barry realizes with a sinking feeling that this is going to become a very awkward experience for both of them if he isn’t able to get it together.

To his immense relief, Jay starts to move over to the offered seat just a moment later.

After showing him the box of coffee he has in his cupboard and Jay agreeing to it with a nod, he busies himself with preparing the beverage for the next couple of minutes, during which time neither of them speaks and an uneasy silence starts to fill the space between them.

Barry keeps his back to the other man, even though he can feel his gaze on him, making him feel about as uncomfortable as is possible for him in this situation. He is mostly embarrassed, though, which in turn makes him angry at himself, seeing as he should not feel this way, he shouldn’t have to…

“Thanks.” Jay accepts the cup of steaming coffee a couple of minutes later and Barry isn’t sure what to make of the fact that the older man is watching him with a concerned expression.

“Y-yy-… y-you’re w-w-welc-come,” he forces out, and hates how ridiculous he sounds even to himself.

His stomach feels queasy, and it’s most likely not a good idea for him to drink a cup as well, but he makes one for himself nonetheless, just so that he has something in his hands.

Another uneasy silence follows and Barry keeps his eyes on the dark liquid in front of him while he listens to the sounds from the streets that reach him them through the still opened window.

“Are you feeling alright?” Jas sounds concerned, which again is both confusing and irksome, and Barry’s grip tightens around the cup.

“Y-yes.”

Jay doesn’t say anything else for another moment, during which Barry can feel his scrutinizing gaze
on him, and he hates that the other man doesn’t simply say why he is here.

“Barry.” Jay’s tone causes him to finally look up despite the reluctance he feels. Their eyes meet and his former friend’s frown deepens. “You don’t look like you’re alright.”

Somehow, these words are like a slap, or maybe not the words themselves but the way they are said, like he is actually truly concerned about him.

What the hell had he been expecting? Was Jay really surprised?

“I-I’m f-f-f-fine,” he grits out and stubbornly returns Jay’s gaze, even though it nearly hurts to look at him.

“I think we both know that is not true,” the older man replies calmly, but there is a slight tension to his expression that lets Barry know that he doesn’t like the tone he is using with him.

This makes Barry feel both angrier, and like a petulant little boy. He looks back to the cup of coffee in front of him and stares at it quietly.

“I’m not here to cause you any trouble,” Jay goes on after a couple of seconds have passed. “I was just in the area and wanted to check-in on you.”

Check on him. These words are extremely disconcerting. What is he thinking? That he’s dragging little boys home after work in the dead of the night?

Barry lowers his head a bit and squeezes his eyes shut. He really regrets having invited him in, even though there hadn’t really been a choice to begin with. Sending Jay away would have just made him look suspicious.

“You look exhausted,” states his former friend in that damn concerned tone of voice that causes Barry’s chest to hurt. “Have you been getting enough sleep lately?”

“I-I’m f-f-f-fine,” he repeats tiredly and turns his head so that he faces the open window. “R-really.”

Another silence follows, and he tries to ignore how his eyes have started to itch again, and how all of the sudden the exhaustion that keeps following him around these days is suddenly weighing him down like a ton of bricks.

“You’ve been doing really well so far,” Jay states out of the blue, and Barry closes his eyes and resigns himself to the fact that he can’t do anything but let the other man talk; no matter how much he wants him gone.

“I’m glad,” Jay tells him and his honesty just hurts.

It’s still so hard to stomach that he really believes him to be such a twisted kind of person, a child abuser and a murderer.

Why can’t he just leave him be, then? If he really thinks Barry is capable of doing such horrible things, why did he have to come here? This is just cruel…

“I’m just passing by to see how you are doing,” Jay explains once more, obviously picking up on his discomfort. “Getting used to a normal life after prison can be hard, especially with all the changes that entails.”

For a second, Barry nearly hates him for bringing this up, because he knows exactly what he is
talking about. Not about his lost wife or Wally or anything else.

No, he is talking about the Speed Force.

Barry grits his teeth and stays quiet.

“I know that you are angry,” says Jay in a quieter tone, and the regret he is feeling is palpable as he speaks, “and while what you have done is inexcusable, I know that it was partly our fault as well. We should have noticed and helped before… before everything was able to escalate the way it did.”

The other man falls quiet and Barry hopes that this is it. That he has spoken his mind and will just leave now. He just wants him gone.

But Jay isn’t finished just yet.

Hesitantly, like the older man isn’t certain whether he should really touch upon this or not, he goes on. “What happened afterwards should also have been handled differently.”

Something changes in the air between them, and Barry feels nearly smothered by the horror that comes with the realization of what Jay is talking about. The ugly emotion is quickly replaced by a feeling of icy numbness, and he shivers slightly as he keeps his gaze firmly on the table in front of him.

"It was careless to put you in a place like Iron Heights and not keep an eye on how you were doing. I am truly sorry-“

Barry cuts him off mid-sentences because… because there is no way that he would be able to deal with where this is going. He can’t think about it, he wouldn’t! This is behind him!

“C-c-… c-coul-ld y-you p-p-p… p-pleas-se l-l-leav-ve?” he grits out while he stumbles back on his feet. His eyes are still not looking at the other man and he doesn’t think that he could bring himself to do so anytime soon. He is so damn angry at Jay, for believing these horrible lies, for bringing what happened to him in prison up.

… for knowing anything about it in the first place…

Mostly of all, Barry just feels ashamed.

The sound of Jay getting up follows a moment later and a thick silence hangs between them for a long moment before the other man speaks again.

“Of course, I’m sorry for passing by unannounced.”

Barry doesn’t replay, he knows that he wouldn’t be able to hold it together any longer if he tried to.

“Barry,” starts Jay again, more quietly this time. “I know that all of this is hard on you, and you probably think that you are alone after everything that has happened, but if you need help you can call me, okay?”

The pressure behind his sternum is so strong that Barry fears it is going to cause his chest to burst open any moment now as he forces himself to nod wordlessly.

Right now, he would have agreed to anything just to be left alone.

Jay hesitates briefly, probably thinking about saying something else, before he seems to decide against it and finally leaves.
It feels like Barry is moving through molasses as he goes to lock the door. His head hurts and he hardly picks up on how his feet lead him to his bedroom afterwards, where he buries himself under his covers and tries not to fall apart.

Barry doesn’t leave the bed again that day.

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“It’s a really nice store,” remarks Mary as she lets her gaze wander through Mrs. Ming’s shop once more. It’s her first visit, and Barry is really happy about the little surprise.

She came back from a trip to Wisconsin sometime last night, but he hadn’t had the opportunity to see her so far, as he had to leave for work quite early again.

“Well,” she goes on and winks at him. “of course it is, seeing as you are working here.”

He chuckles and returns her smile gladly. Over the last two weeks he has really missed her. It didn’t really become apparent to him before, but she has very much grown on him, seeing as she is one of the few people he can actually talk to and confide in, especially now that the Rogues seem to have had enough of him.

“I’ve m-missed you,” he tells her, and feels himself blush slightly as soon as the words are out, as he just now realized that she could take them the wrong way.

Mary gives him a soft look and reaches for his hand, which is resting on the counter. She squeezes it lightly and smiles warmly.

“I have missed you too, Barry,” she assures him before she grins. “You and your dorkiness never fail to brighten my day.”

“D-dork-kiness?” he asks, a bit affronted, as he doesn’t think of himself as particularly dorky.

His friend smiles kindly and squeezes his hand once again before she lets go of it.

“You know how to speak three different elf languages,” she points out, and he feels how his face heats up to his ears in response.

“I d-don’t, I- j-just c-can s-say a f-few phrases.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, it sounds amazing.”

He ducks his head and mutters some feeble protest, but can’t help but feel secretly a little bit proud. In his youth he has been a gigantic JRR Tolkien fan, and he read the Hobbit and the Lord of the Ring books enough times that the librarian gave him the copies when the bookbinding’s started to fall apart.

“And you’re a big fan of Charlie Brown,” she goes on and puts her index finger on her chin as she makes a thoughtful face. “You also like Doctor Who, and you can recite all of the elements on the periodic table by their Latin names, and groups, and you know all kind of odd stuff about them like electrogravity.”

“Electron-n-negativity,” he corrects her under his breath and smiles when Mary chuckles in response.

“Exactly.”
Mrs. Ming joins them a few minutes later and she takes an immediate liking to the young woman. She invites both of them to dinner that night, and Marry is all too happy to accept. This ends in a nice and entertaining evening for Barry, as well as some left-overs he can take home.

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**July 1st, year**

It seems that the last remaining light bulb over the staircase between the first and third floor has finally stopped working, and Barry, who is soaked to the bone from the surprise summer shower, and tired enough to fall asleep on his feet, mutters to himself that nothing of this place is worth the $550 rent as he starts to climb the stairs in darkness.

The building is surprisingly quiet tonight, for which he is grateful to no end. Right now he just wants to get out of his drenched clothes and into his bed. It’s been a long day.

Barry doesn’t bother to turn on the light of his floor’s landing, and just slowly makes his way over to his door. His hips have been hurting like hell the whole day, and he hopes that a long hot shower will help with the pain, at least enough that it won’t make it difficult for him to fall asleep.

The strip of light that falls through the gap under his door catches his attention just as he has unlocked it. He immediately freezes.

There is the sound of footsteps and his heart nearly jumps into his throat as he realizes that whoever is in there is making their way toward the door, and thus toward him. The notion to turn around and bolt crosses his mind just as he feels the knob turn under his hand.

Bright light blinds him for a second and a small distressed whimper passes his lips as he stumbles back a step.

“It’s just me.” The fear leaves him just as quickly as it has taken hold at the sound of a low and very familiar voice, and Barry feels a mixture of surprise, disbelief and relief overcome him. The last one is quickly replaced by anger, though.

“Would you move it already,” urges Len when he just keeps staring at him.

“Wh-what are y-you d-doing h-here?”

“Waiting for you to finally enter your damn flat.”

Annoyed, Barry frowns, but follows along as it really would do neither of them any good if one of his neighbors picks up on who his late-night visitor is.

“Wh-what are y-you d-doing h-here, L-Len?” he repeats the question after the other man shut the door behind him. He hasn’t seen or heard from him for nearly two months now, not a single peep. Nothing from neither him nor the Rogues, and he had been certain that this had been it for their… *whatever* there had been between them.

The other man shrugs and walks back over to the couch. “I haven’t been by in a while and I needed someplace quiet to go.”

There are blueprints covering the small table in front of his couch, along with three empty beer bottles and a white take out box, and Barry wonders with growing disbelief how long he had been making himself at home in his flat already without even bothering to ask at first.
“S-so y-you th-thought y-you c-c-could j-just p-pass b-by?”

Len, who is standing next to the couch by now, picks up his beer and takes a pull before he turns back to him with a grim look.

“Why not? It’s never bothered you before.”

Barry isn’t blind, he is certain that Len is just playing dumb and knows exactly why he is so angered by this.

“Y-you’ve j-just v-vanished f-from o-one d-day t-to th-the n-next!”

“I’ve been busy.”

Again, that damn shrug, as if this doesn’t mean anything.

“Wh-why d-did y-you s-suddenly d-decide t-to s-s-scram?” asks Barry, and angrily walks over to the other man.” D-did I-I s-scare y-you off s-s-someh-how?”

Len barks a laugh before he gives him a rather nasty smirk. “You couldn’t scare off a fucking fly, Allen, don’t make yourself sound stupid.”

“Y-you w-would kn-know a-all a-ab-bout th-that, w-wouldn’t y-you?”

“This from the guy who isn’t able to get a single word out straight,” scoffs Len, and Barry decides here and now that he wouldn’t deal with this tonight. He is cold, and tired, and he really doesn’t have the patience for any of this.

Without another word, he passes his unwanted visitor and walks into his bedroom to grab some dry clothes before he vanishes into his small bathroom.

About fifteen minutes later, once again dry and warm, he re-enters the living room. Len is still sitting on the couch, seemingly working on some ideas to upgrade his cold gun; but he doesn’t look over to make sure. Instead, he grabs himself a glass from his cupboard and watches it as it fills with water.

He more feels than hears the other man come up behind him, and can’t help but tense up in response. It’s so annoying how quiet Len can be if he puts his mind to it.

“You up for a game of poker?”

There is an unusually uncertain quality to the question, and Barry grits his teeth as a surge of frustration flashes through him, before it’s replaced once more by a bone-deep tiredness.

“Y-you inv-vited m-me o-over t-to a-anoth-ther p-poker n-night,” he reminds him quietly, and immediately feels stupid for bringing this up. Over the last two months he had told himself more than once that it had been foolish of him to expect anything from those people, and that it’s even more ridiculous to feel hurt by their sudden disappearance.

Len doesn’t answer, and Barry quietly makes his way back to his bedroom.

He closes the door firmly behind himself.

***

*It hurts so much, every thrust feels like it’s going to split him in half and he can do nothing, not even scream as his face is pressed down into his pillow. The hand in his hairs tighten and he isn’t*
sure whether he should fight against it and try to move his head so that he could finally get some air down in lungs again, or simply let go and pass out. Maybe this would be the last time, then.

The thrusts become quicker, shorter and harder and he cries into his pillow as the pain shoots up his spine and nearly causes him to throw up.

Then, he hears him grunt and hiss and there is another awful thrust into him and he knows that it’s over for tonight. The hand holds him down for another long moment and he feels lightheaded enough that he hardly notices how the man pulls out of him.

“Good boy,” the mid-forty electrician named David, who is his latest foster father he has been stuck with for now, says. He misses the Perkins, they may have been violent and awful people but neither of them ever sexually abused any of their foster kids.

“Good boy,” repeats David, and pats his head as if he was some kind of dog. “You did really great, Barry.”

His hand moves down his naked back and he caresses him in this twisted tender way that causes Barry to nearly lose it.

“I’m really proud of you, you’re such a good little boy.”

Tears are running down his cheeks and wetting the pillow below him, and he wishes the man would finally leave and he would be able to get Mister Bunny from his hiding place. He just wants to be left alone.

“Such a good little boy.”

Warm lips touch his shaking right shoulder and he sobs quietly. The hand on his hip gives him a small squeeze and he tries to remember one of the Limericks they have been reading in school the other day.

There was an old man on a boat,

Who said “I am afloat, I am afloat!”

When they said “No you ain’t!”

He was ready to faint,

That unhappy old man on a boat.

It helps a bit, reciting them silently to himself while the man keeps patting him in this horribly affectionate way.

“Such a good little boy,” he repeats and his breath is hot against his ear.

Barry wakes up with a start. His heart is racing and he feels so sick for a second that he’s certain he would have to change his bedding before he could try to catch anymore sleep tonight. Thankfully though, it just takes his stomach a few seconds to settle down again.

Laying there in the darkness isn’t an option, he can feel that bastard’s hands on him still, as well as the phantom pain in his lower body. With a small groan, he rolls onto his side and gets up. His knee buckle, but he is able to get his footing and slowly make his way over to the door.
The small hallway and his living area are dark, and he clumsily searches for the light switch on the wall next to him. A moment later everything is flooded by brightness and he squints his eyes as a sharp pain shoots through his head in return.

A cup of warm tea would be exactly the right thing to settle his nerves a bit.

Barry has hardly entered his living room when someone makes a protesting noise from his couch and sits up with a low swear. It startles him so badly that he actually screams and stumble back.

Len is on his feet in an impressive display of speed. His face showing both anger and confusion as he searches for any potential danger. As soon as his eyes land on him, though, he relaxes somewhat again.

“What the hell?” he asks annoyed, his voice is still a bit harsh from sleep. “Are you nuts? I could have shot you, you damn idiot!”

It’s then that Barry notices the familiar gun in the other man’s right hand, and he realizes that he has been lucky enough to not end up at least partly frozen.

“What-what a-are y-you s-still d-d-doing here?” His voice sounds feeble and trembles a bit, but Barry doesn’t really care right now. He feels a strange numbness overcome his mind, and he can’t bring himself to be angry to find the other man still around; he’s mostly just curious.

He knows from experience that his couch is an awful substitute for a bed.

“What does it look like?” grunts Len, who puts the gun down on the coffee table. “Getting some rest, or at least I was trying to.”

Barry just looks at him for a couple of seconds, but can’t bring himself to point out that he really had no right to be pissed off by his sudden appearance, as he hadn’t been invited to stay over in the first place.

Instead, he nods quietly and continues on his way to the kitchen.

His head is still hurting, and he still feels so disgustingly dirty.

“Are you alright?”

When he throws a brief glance over his shoulder, he sees that Len still hasn’t moved from his spot by the couch, and that he is watching him with a thoughtful look.

It’s then that Barry picks up that his own hands are actually shaking.

“Y-yeah.”

Memories can’t hurt him, he is alright.

Len stays quiet after that, and Barry goes about preparing himself some tea. He ends up filling two cups, and while he knows that the other man would most likely not want it, the notion of sharing it with someone is nice and calming.

To Barry’s surprise, the other accepts the offered cup.

“Thanks.” Len watches him expectantly when he keeps standing next to him, and doesn’t move to take a seat on the couch.
“Could we sit at the kitchen table?” Barry still sounds obviously shaken and averts his eyes in embarrassment.

“Sure,” the other man agrees, still considering him thoughtfully, but he doesn’t inquire about his strange behavior again before getting up.

Barry doesn’t feel like talking, so they end up sitting in silence, which doesn’t bother him, seeing as the other man’s presence alone is soothing. Len understands, and doesn’t seem to mind.

“Why…” Barry stops himself and lowers his head a bit while keeping his eyes on the amber liquid in the cup in front of him. He knows that Len is watching him again, his intense gaze is nearly as palpable as an actual touch, and Barry can’t help but shiver slightly.

A moment goes by before he forces himself to speak again.

“Why did you… vanish?” he reluctantly asks in a small voice, and hates himself for the need to do so at all.

It’s obvious why the other man has stayed away. He’d had enough of him and his oddities, and probably realized that there is something severely wrong with him; like everybody else does at some point or another.

“Was it because of… of something I did?”

Slowly, he looks up to meet the other man’s eyes with an uncertain expression.

“Did I do or say something while I was drunk?”

Len frowns and there is a grimness to the way he studies him now that causes Barry’s stomach to sink.

“No, you didn’t, and it wasn’t because of you.”

That answer is a bit of a surprise, mostly because Barry had expected him to simply tell him off. Still, he knows that the other man isn’t telling the truth, at least not completely.

“I can be… odd at times,” Barry states quietly. “I know that… I’m…”

He chews on his bottom lip for a moment as he glances down to his tea cup before he looks up again.

“I can’t help it.”

Len returns his gaze and he seems unsure what to make of what Barry has just said.

“You’re no odder than most people I know,” his friend finally says before he huffs slightly and rubs his temple. “Look, I’ve been busy. The last few weeks have been crazy and I just didn’t have the time to pass by. It wasn’t anything personal.”

Barry watches him for a long moment before he slowly nods.

“Ok-kay, g-good.”

It’s a lie, at least partly, but Barry doesn’t want to touch upon it; not now anyway.

Not being alone after one of those damn nightmares is soothing, and reassuring, and he doesn’t want
to chase Len away again.

“I’m glad that you came over,” he tells him honestly. “Despite my reaction from before.”

Like usual, Len doesn’t seem particularly fond of this kind of talk and he looks rather ill at ease as he responds with a short nod of his own.

After that Barry takes pity on himself and decides to go take a shower. The feeling of hands on his skin hasn’t left yet, and he just wants to get rid of it already.

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“Thank you, my dear,” Mrs. Ming says, giving him a faint smile after Barry brought her some freshly made chicken soup.

The old woman has caught the flue, and thus is currently bedridden. Barry, who has ignored her attempts to assure him that she is fine on her own, has been checking up on her once an hour during work to see whether she is doing alright and whether she needs anything.

“James will be here in an hour, then you won’t have to worry about me anymore,” she tells him with an apologetic smile after he has refilled her cup of tea.

“It’s really no trouble,” he assures her again. “You can’t help it, and you are one of the nicest patients anybody could wish for, so don’t worry.”

The day is a rather slow one, anyway. There’s a storm raging over Keystone City, and most people seem to be avoiding going outside. This is quite alright with Barry, seeing as he doesn’t have to worry about locking potential customers out every time he comes upstairs to look after Mrs. Ming. It also gives him the opportunity to count the stores stock.

The radio is static again as he re-enters the store a few minutes later, but he decides to leave it on at a low volume as it gives him at least some kind of background noise while he works.

It’s close to six pm when an Asian man in his mid to late thirties enters the store, and Barry immediately knows that he is the grandson his employer is always talking of so fondly.

He is about Barry’s height, and very smartly dressed. Mrs. Ming told him that he is working for a big company as a financial consultant, and thus has to travel a lot. For the last ten month he has been in China, but returned home today from his stay. A lucky coincident, seeing as it’s certainly going to help Mrs. Ming to have her grandson around right now.

Barry wonders whether the man has come directly from the airport or not, but seeing that he doesn’t have any luggage with him, it’s more likely that he made a quick trip to his apartment first before coming here.

He looks rather tired as he glances swiftly around the store. His eyes land on Barry and he frowns slightly before he starts to walk over to him.

“Hello, I’m James Lai,” he introduces himself and offers Barry his hand with a small smile. “I’m the grandson of Bo Ming, the owner of this store. I take it that you must be Barry?”

Surprised, he nods and stammers an affirmative and it must be obvious that Barry hadn’t expected him to know his name as the other man seems a bit amused by it.
“She really likes you,” he explains with a kinder smile. “She’s told me quite a lot about you during our calls.”

The warmth in his eyes lessens again and he studies him quietly for a moment. Barry is pretty sure that he is going to tell him that he would be watching him, and that he should think twice before trying something stupid just because he is working for an older woman, or something along these lines. He doesn’t doubt that the man knows that he is an ex-convict. Mrs. Ming never mentions it to Barry, but she and her grandson seem to have a very close relationship and it’s unlikely that she would have left that piece of information out.

James doesn’t say anything of the kind to him, though. The slight frown vanishes again and instead turns to the door that leads to the stairs.

“I’ll go up and look in on her. She’s upstairs, isn’t she?”

“Y-y-yes.” Barry nods and, with that, James is gone again.

Closing the store doesn’t take a lot of time after that, as he had enough time to clean everything over the last hour with no people passing by due to the steadily increasing rain. While this isn’t good for business, Barry can’t find it in himself to complain, seeing as the humid weather causes his joints to act up. He’s glad that he could takes his time with everything this way.

He’s just counting the money they’ve taken in that day when James joins him in the small back room where they keep the little vault where their daily receipts and deposits are placed.

It’s ridiculous, but Barry can’t help but feel uncomfortable and a bit worried by the other man seeing him with the cash. Nervously, he puts the money down and turns to him.

“Hey,” James greets him, and Barry picks up that his voice sound less reserved than before and quite a bit warmer. “I just wanted to see whether I can lend you a hand with closing, but it seems that you’ve nearly finished already.”

“Y-yes i-it w-was a-a s-slow a-aftern-noon, I w-was able t-to d-do m-most o-of th-the c-cleaning b-bef-forehand,” he explains and smiles uncertainly. “B-but th-thank y-you anyw-way.”

“No problem, I think lending you a hand is the least I can do after you’ve taken such great care of my grandmother today.”

“Th-that’s n-not n-neces-sary, r-really. I-I’m g-glad I-I c-could h-help a b-bit.”

James watches him again for a moment. It causes Barry to grow nervous and he fidgets a bit before he turns back to the cash.

“I-I w-will b-be f-finished i-in j-just a-a c-couple o-of m-minutes,” he explains to fill the silence between them then offers a bit more hesitant. “Y-you c-can r-rec-count i-it.”

The other man frowns at that.

“I’m sorry if I came off somewhat hostile before, I had a long day and I was worried about lao lao. I didn’t mean to imply anything.”

James smiles a bit sheepish at that and asks him whether he would like to join him upstairs in the kitchen for some hot chocolate. Barry hesitates as he doesn’t really like the idea of being alone with another man he knows next to nothing of any longer than he has to be.
Then again, this is Mrs. Ming’s grandson, and he immediately feels bad for assuming the worst of this seemingly nice guy just because he is so damn screwed up.

“S-sure,” Barry agrees with a rather forced smile and is a bit surprised about how pleased the other man actually seems about it.

“Great, you go on and finish with the money and I’ll go upstairs and prepare the drinks, alright?”

“Ok-kay.”

James grins at that and Barry is left alone once again.

Confused, he watches the spot where the other man had stood just a moment before, and while the notion of spending some time with him makes him nervous, it’s also nice to think that he had been invited in the first place.

He turns back to his work, feeling much more relaxed than he had been before.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has turned out longer than expected. I wasn't sure when to do the cut for the next one but decided to make it rather longer in the end.

I hope you've enjoyed it, feedback from you guy is always welcome and very much appreciated.

Next update will be around this time next week.
Shards of Broken Smiles

Chapter Summary

Barry is reminded that you shouldn’t trust things that seem too nice to be true because they mostly aren’t.

Another small talk on the fire escape takes place which causes him to feel even less save in the rundown area he lives.

…and Hartley and James are pretty much just awesome friends.

Chapter Notes

For some additional background information regarding Len and general information read the notes at the end.

Also, thank all of you lovely people who have taken the time to give me feedback! I cannot express how happy it makes me that you are interested in this story. :)

Update: Update: The chapter is now edited by the amazing MeteoraWrites! (14th of February, 2019)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

August 1st year

Barry glances at the white plastic bag in his right hand, still unsure of whether this is a good idea or not, before his gaze returns to the door in front of him. The smell of the Chinese take-out is artificial and strong, and it causes his stomach to rumble slightly and his mouth to water.

It’s already half past ten, and on a usual Thursday evening he would have already been home, eating dinner or sketching a bit before going to bed. Instead, he finds himself on the old, but not that shabby, floor of Len’s apartment complex.

Sometime during work today he had decided to visit his friend after he finished closing. There isn’t any actual reason for it, he just thought it could be a nice surprise. Len had made himself rather scarce after his sort-of-but-not-really-apologize. He’s come over a couple of times over the last month, every time just briefly, and he always seemed to be in an unusually reserved mood.

Barry isn’t sure what to make of this. After their talk in the beginning of July, he had thought that things would go back to normal, but…

Maybe he’s just imagining things, he worries too easily and it could just as well be that Len and the others are busy again. Len hasn’t been anything close to hostile, or even unfriendly during his handful of visits, just rather... *aloof.*
This is the main reason Barry is standing in front of the other man’s apartment now. He knows that it had been kind of a rash decision to pass by, he doesn’t even know whether Len would be home, but the idea stuck and didn’t let go of him until he went to the Chinese restaurant just three blocks from Mrs. Ming’s store. Not the fanciest place by far, but they sell well sized portions and the food actually tastes good.

A part of him hopes that Len will be home, will talk with him about what is bothering him. Despite what he may say, Barry knows that something has been on his friends mind, even though he believes that the Rogues have simply been busy during the weeks of absence on their part. He also is certain that he’s somehow the cause for it, which is a rather daunting notion.

Barry huffs quietly and tries to shake the worries off that have started to gnaw at him again. Instead, he lets his eyes briefly wander around, and he is reminded that it has been only a couple of times that he has actually been here so far. Len usually passes by his place or Sam picks him up to take him over to whatever bolt-hole they’re using at the time. It’s more convenient for both of them that way.

He turns back to the door, feeling nervous enough that his palms have actually become sweaty.

“J-just d-do it alr-ready.” he mutters to himself. He has probably been standing here for a good five minutes already, and he isn’t really sure why he feels so apprehensive right now. What is the worst thing that could happen?

On a second thought, he doesn’t really want to try and answer that…

A noise behind the door, someone moving around in the apartment, causes him to tense up momentarily and a nearly smothering panic overcomes him and urges him to turn and leave. Barry quickly pushes the ridiculous notion away. This is silly, he is behaving silly, really.

At least Len seems to be at home, and he doubts that the other man would really react too unkindly to his unannounced visit. Not that he really would have any right to get annoyed, seeing as he usually stops by his flat whenever he feels like it.

Barry takes another deep breath and knocks.

He listens for any sign of someone moving to answer him. When the footsteps start to come closer a couple of seconds later, he feels relief, which is then quickly replaced by surprise and a slight dread as he notices that they are much too light to belong to the other man.

His stomach sinks when the door is opened and an all too familiar face appears instead of Len’s.

Izzy briefly seems just as surprised about seeing him before it’s replaces by an amused and rather catty look. Barry immediately notices her state, how the very short dark purple dress she wears is visibly askew in places, how red and slightly swollen her lips seem, and how her slightly ruffled hair frames her still flushed face in a way that most men would probably find incredibly sexy.

Barry doesn’t, he feels like nothing but a monumental idiot and he’s so damn embarrassed that he wishes the ground would open up under his feet and swallow him whole.

“Well, well, well,” smirks the woman as she leans herself against the doorframe as if this were actually her place. “Sissy-boy, it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Barry feels his body tense up and his face flush in a mixture of shame and anger. He’s such a fool for not having thought that this could also be a possibility.

“I have to say, I am surprised,” she goes on, and her smile becomes all teeth. “I wouldn’t have
thought that you were someone who’s a fan of the three-way deal.”

Her eyes slowly travel down his body and the urge to hide behind something overrides him as she makes no heed of the fact that she is checking him out. A mockingly pitying expression appearing on her features as she meets his gaze again.

“Then again, I’m sure there aren’t too many who would be interested in you joining them, are there?”

He doesn’t reply, but returns her taunting gaze with a glare. His throat has closed up once more, and he wouldn’t be able to get a word out if he tried. It is so damn frustrating.

“What? Cat got your tongue, Sissy-“

Izzy breaks off when Len turns up behind her a moment later and she shoots him a fake innocent look. The other man is wearing jeans and nothing else, and judging by how his upper body is still slightly flushed and the disarray his hair is in, Barry would be able to say what he had just been doing even without Izzy being the one to answer the door.

“Lenny, it seems you little friend decided to join us,” she tells him in a sultry voice and Barry turns to her in alarm, which earns him an amused chuckle in return. Izzy stops her taunting, though, when she notices how Len is glaring at her warningly now, and she steps closer to him so that she can put her hands on his hips.

“I’m sorry, baby, I know he’s your friend, but you have to admit,” she says and glances over her shoulder at Barry with another nasty little smirk. “he has the worst timing.”

“Go back inside.” Len tells her curtly.

“Of course.” she makes sure that Barry sees the obviously indecent smile she gives him and how she lets her fingers briefly slip into the front of his jeans before she is finally gone.

“What are you doing here?” Len sound unusually gruff, and the way he is looking at him makes it quite clear what he thinks of his little surprise visit.

Barry tries to replay but his voice is still not working, not that he really would have an answer anyway. This had been a stupid idea from the beginning, and while he tried to tell himself otherwise, he had thought so the whole time.

“Fuck, Allen,” hisses the other man, and for a split-second Barry fears that he is going to hit him. He doesn’t understand why Len is so angry all of a sudden, and while he knows that he should react in kind, he just feels embarrassed and somewhat flabbergasted by this unexpected hostility.

“Not everybody is a damn recluse like you, some of us have an actual life. Don’t just turn up here like this again!”

The door is slammed in his face.

He listens to the other man walking away and the silence that follows is nearly deafening. Barry just keeps standing there for a long moment, confused and hurt, but not really angry.

He slowly turns around and leaves.

***
“Rough day?”

Barry, who is sitting on the fire escape in front of his window, tenses up involuntarily due to the unexpected voice. He looks to his left, and in the darkness he can make out his neighbor, Edward, watching him from his own window.

He doesn’t answer other than shaking his head before he turns back to let his forehead rest against the cool bars of the handrail.

It’s silent for a couple of seconds before he can hear the other man climb out onto his own fire escape. He takes a seat on the edge of the platform, mimicking Barry’s position, and he can see out of the corner of his eyes how the other man takes something from his pocket.

Briefly, the glow of a lighter flickers to life before it dies down again just as quickly. Barry turns his face a bit towards him to see that he has lit himself a cigarette.

“You want one?” Edward holds up the little cigarette pack, which brand Barry can’t make out in the dark.

“No, thanks, I don’t smoke.”

“Clever of you.” His neighbor chuckles as he puts the packet away again and takes a deep drag. He exhales with a small satisfied sigh and Barry shoots him an amused glance.

They fall into a surprisingly companionable silence and watch the nearly empty street below them.

Barry’s thoughts are still mostly circling around what happened a couple of hours ago, and while he tries to keep them away from it, he isn’t able to do so. He knows that he is just robbing himself of any chance of falling asleep this way, but he can’t help it. Izzy’s taunts and Len’s anger stay with him like his own shadow.

The pain in his stomach has lessened a bit by now at least, and it should count as a good thing that he now has some food for tomorrow’s dinner. He nearly spent fifteen dollars on it, quite a bit of his actual food budget, and he still can’t believe that he had been idiotic enough to actually waste it like this.

The small voice in the back of his mind reminds him that he had thought that it would be worth it, a thank you for all the times the other man bought over something to eat. It causes his eyes to start itching again and he squeezes them shut.

“The fine young man in the flat above yours,” starts Edward, which startles him a bit. “the one who liked to party till eight in the morning, was shot today.”

Barry is so caught off-guard by this piece of news that he just stares at the other man for a long moment.

“Poor asshole,” continues his neighbor, and he actually sounds honestly sorry. “Seems he rubbed the wrong way with the wrong people.”

“H-how did it happen?”

“Don’t know, there was quite the ruckus when I came home this afternoon. The cops where here as well. They asked a lot of questions, you know, like, “where were you around this time”, “did you see anything”, and such. Like anybody who lives here would be stupid enough to tell them anything even if they had recorded it on their phones.” he scoffs and flickers the burned butt of his cigarette
onto the street below them before grabbing a new one.

“H-he w-was k-killed here?”

The notion is quite unsettling, and Barry briefly shoots a glance over his shoulder to his living room, and he reminds himself that he has already locked his door as he always does at night.

“Yeah,” nods Edward, and he looks over to him with a grim expression. “Allegedly, at least. Because nobody heard Jack Schitt and the door to his flat hadn’t been broken open. They probably used the fire escape to get in and out without anyone noticing.”

Barry frowns and looks down to the street below him.

“Th-that’s h-horrible,” he states quietly. The young man in the flat above his may have been a jackass, but he certainly didn’t deserve that fate. He could hardly have been older than 23, still nearly just a dumb kid.

“He seems to have pulled some small jobs for the Candyman in the past.”

Again, he turns to Edward and studies him in surprise. There aren’t many people who know of Jack Monteleone outside of the police, the twins’ protectors, or other the criminals in the cities.

“I’m not deaf, there’s a lot you can pick up on the streets if you listen carefully enough,” the other man explains with a smirk when he notices the slightly wary way Barry is watching him now.

“I’m not a criminal, relax.” His neighbor takes another drag of his cigarette and exhales the smoke slowly. “Enough of that shit went on in my family growing up, I’m not interested.”

“Y-you’re f-from ar-round here?”

Edward turns towards him with a small smile and shrugs. “In a way, I’ve come around a lot.”

“Y-you l-like t-to t-travel?”

Barry is watching the other man, and he can’t help but think that there is something odd about him. Not really in a bad way, but just… strange.

Like during their last meeting, Barry can’t really make out a lot of Edward other than that he seems to be in rather good shape and also has blond hair, but in a darker shade than his own.

“Not really, I just had to do so a lot.”

“F-family?”

“No… well, maybe in a way,” he explains with a grim chuckle and shrugs. “Yeah, probably because of family. In the end everything goes back to them, doesn’t it?”

Yes, Barry can understand that sentiment.

“What about you? You like to travel?”

“At t-times,” he answers and rests his forehead against the cool metal of the railing again. He spots a man walking his dogs on the other side of the street.

“Where would you like to go?”
Barry smiles and shrugs. It is an unusual question for the other man to ask, but a harmless one at that, and he doesn’t mind it.

“D-don’t know, m-maybe s-somew-where qu-quiet a-and isol-lated. Icel-land w-would b-be n-nice.”

The other man snorts and remarks that he really has to like it secluded in that case.

“Why not Canada? They have much more space than they have any use for.”

“M-maybe,” Barry agrees with a smile, and he decides that he has wasted enough of his sleep time out here, even though it has been quite nice to talk to his neighbor.

“Sleep tight,” Edward, who intends to stay out here a bit longer, tells him.

Barry wishes him a goodnight as well and returns inside.

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“I c-can’t ac-cept th-this, H-Hartley,” Barry tells the younger man again, and he feels a spike in his frustration when he notices that James has actually started to put some of the groceries away.

“You offered to cook for us. It’s only fair if we actually provide the things you need to do so,” replies Hartley, who seems to blatantly ignore the fact that they have brought much more food than Barry would need to prepare dinner for the three of them.

“Listen to him. You totally deserve a fully stocked fridge for this,” agrees James while he juggles three apples and two cans of tunas in a quite impressive display of skills. “Smoked chicken enchiladas, here we come!”

“James, put the food down before you break something.”

“I won’t, I am an acrobat after all!” argues the other man, and he shoots his friend a slightly miffed glare. “We don’t break stuff.”

The unimpressed look Hartley gives him in return makes it obvious what he thinks of this claim, but instead of arguing with the blond criminal, he turns back to Barry.

“You can cook us something the next time we’re over as well,” he suggests. “And you could give me some tips, I like to cook, but I’m not really that good at it.”

“If you mean by not really that good, that you’re god-awful, then yes, I can totally attest to that.” James easily doges the can of peaches that is aimed at his head and catches it before it can smash the window behind him.

“You just don’t like it because I like to cook healthy,” grumbles the ginger.

“Pipes, I don’t like it because it tastes bad,” disagrees James with a shrug. “There’s healthy food I like, even from that vegetarian stuff you’re all crazy about, but it’s usually prepared by people who have at least an ounce of talent when it comes to cooking.”

While Hartley seems to try and glare holes in the other man’s head, Barry once again picks up on how different James is behaving today, much calmer and more level-headed than usual. He knows from Hartley that the younger man has had a surprisingly good week so far, and it also shows by how relaxed Hartley himself currently is.
“L-look, I w-will p-pay you b-back f-for th-this, ok-kay?”

Both Rogues turn to him at that and neither seems to like this suggestion all that much. Barry briefly fears that they are going to decline and try to convince him to just accept it instead.

“Alright, that’s fine, but it doesn’t have to be right now. When you have the money together, just tell me. There’s no real hurry,” Hartley assures him, and there’s that sad smile again that causes Barry to avert his eyes because it’s so damn humiliating how everybody is just too aware of how he is seemingly unable to provide himself with something as fundamental as food.

“No more talking about money, guys,” interrupts James, who has now started to dig through Barry cupboards in what seems to be in search of a pan. “Let’s concentrate on preparing this awesome meal.”

“You’re so annoying,” sighs Hartley, and he rubs his forehead as he turns to Barry. “Come on, let’s do as he says before he makes total chaos of your kitchen.”

An hour later the dish has turned out to everybody’s liking, and while Barry tries to tell them that it’s really not as great as they make it out to be, he is secretly quite pleased with himself and how those two really seem to have enjoyed his food. Having the opportunity to cook for others is always nice, doubly so when those people like what he’s made.

“Barry, you’re nuts if you don’t think that this is the most delicious thing ever.” James is currently on his third helping. “This is like ambrosia to the gods.”

Hartley laughs at that and calls his friend an oaf but doesn’t disagree.

Barry’s cheeks grow warm again and he feels an intense fondness for both men. It’s still strange to think about how they’ve started to become friends over the last couple of months, maybe even before that.

This notion causes a number of familiar conflicting feelings inside him to rise, which put a bit of a damper on his mood. To get his mind off them, he asks whether they would mind if he quickly prepares a small dessert.

They don’t, and Hartley lends him a hand with it while James is apparently too full to really move from his seat.

Later, while James is dozing on his couch, tired out from all the food, Barry and Hartley sit together in a companionable silence over some ginger tea at the kitchen table.

Having both of them over again is nice, as is usually the case when they pass by, which has started to happen rather regularly since the Rouges have suddenly reappeared in his life. Contrary to today, Barry had been quite angry with Hartley when he passed by Mrs. Ming’s store out of the blue one late afternoon after not hearing even a word from him for two months.

Hartley took it with patience, and while Barry was a bit cold towards him at first, he didn’t ask him to leave. This led to the ginger staying around long enough to help him with the closing and his initial anger and hurt finally gave way to feeling glad that he had seen him again and that he was alright.

Barry has asked neither Hartley nor James so far why they had made themselves scarce for so long without any explanation, and he will probably leave it that way. If Len’s excuse about his own absence had been at least partly true, it means that they probably had been busy with another heist or something connected to one, and he really doesn’t want to get too involved in any of that.
He just finds it a bit odd that he hasn’t read anything connecting to the Rogues in any of the newspapers so far when skimming the ones offered at work.

“Is the book about meditation to help you with your sleeping issues?”

Hartley nods to the book he has been looking through for the past few minutes.

“Yes, a friend g-got it f-for m-me.”

“Has it helped so far?” asks the younger man curiously.

“S-somew-what. It of-fers m-mostly b-breath-thing t-techn-niques a-and they help m-me r-relax, b-but n-not r-really w-with f-falling asleep o-or g-going b-back t-to it.”

“That sucks.”

Barry agrees, but he knows that this is one of the things he can’t really change, so that he doesn’t try to let himself get pulled down by it. Problems with his sleep have followed him around since childhood, and while they are especially bad right now once more, nothing of this is anything new to him.

Hartley and James decide to leave around half past twelve, when Sam comes to pick them up from Barry’s bathroom mirror.

“Seriously, the next thing we’re getting you is a damn standing mirror,” grunts the acrobat as he climbs into the mirror-verse with some apparent difficulty.

“You’re just getting fat and lazy in your old age, Tricks,” remarks Sam from his spot behind the glass, and it’s hard to miss how much he enjoys his friend’s hassle. “It’s most likely because of all the sweets you’re constantly stuff your face with.”

“Screw you, Scudder, you’re getting older too, and uglier by the minute.”

Sam only snorts with a smirk and steps aside when James finally enters.

“Thanks again for the wonderful meal, Barry,” thanks Hartley, who is next to enter the mirror, and gives him a warm smile.

“And don’t forget that we’re passing by again next Saturday!” adds James, which causes the ginger to shoot him an annoyed look.

“Only if it’s alright with you, and you have time for us,” Hartley points out and ignores his friend’s protests.

Barry agrees and watches them go.

His flat appears very quiet after they leave, and he decides to go to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked the chapter!

I want to briefly touch upon the version of Len in my story and how (jackass-ish) he
probably comes over right now.

I tend to write some things out rather plainly while others are kept more subtle and for the characters and story to explain over time, which is the point with Len's current behaviour that may confuse some of you - or not and if not, then don't bother reading on as it is really not that necessary for the story and just some extra information.

In this chapter especially, Len comes over like a total bastard for how he has treated Barry in this and the last chapter… and he kind of is, tbh, but before you grab your torches and pitchforks, I wanna remarks that he isn't behaving like a dick because he actually wants to hurt Barry or because he doesn’t care for him but because has some isses regarding his feeling for him and trouble how to deal with them.

Len is about five-ish years older than Barry in this story (not as big of an age gap between them as there is on the current TV show and while they’ve never really put an actual age to about anybody in the comics, I've still always considered him a couple of years older than Barry). This makes him around 47 years right now and, so far, he's had nothing but heterosexual relationships in his life (well, he deviated once slightly but you will learn about it later in the story).

He grew up in a time and in an environment where men just weren’t gay and those who were, weren’t considered real men and while Len doesn’t have problem with gay people per se (he couldn't care less about Hartley’s sexual orientation as long as it doesn't interfere with their business), he has very much a problem with the notion that he could be one of them - like one of those people his father sneered at (and so did his grandfather, his actual male rolemodel during his earlier childhood).

To keep this from getting too long, Len likes Barry, very much so - so much so that he can't ignore that he feels more for him than he should as a heterosexual man and while he is good at dealing with problems in general, when it comes to this he is pretty much at a loss what to do about it.

Thus, he may make some questionable decisions and choices and may try to reassure himself of being a 'real' man by sleeping with Izzy or any other whore or by keeping some distance to Barry and trying to convince himself that he doesn't see him as anything else but a very good friend.

... and unintentionally hurts Barry by doing so.

So, enough of my rambling, next chapter will be up on next Sunday. I am a bit busy with university and work and June will be an utter horror when it comes to exams… but I still hope that I can keep my schedule of once a week.

I hope you guys have enjoyed the chapter and thank you so much for your amazing feedback. It really makes me always happy to hear from you.
Chapter Summary

Barry is reminded that you can try to forget your past but it will still stick with you, no matter what. He also learns that he probably won't have the possibility to talk to Len for a while longer.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Deals briefly with traumatic past events, so please be cautious when reading on.

This is more a in-between chapter. I wasn't sure whether I should post this alone or together with the next one but I think it stands well enough on its own. It is a bit of a breather before things pick up with the Rogues and the rest once more.

Also, thanks so much to all of you amazing people who took the time to give me feedback. It makes me really happy to see that you enjoy this story! :)

And I want to thank my wonderful new beta, the amazing palpablenotion, for being kind enough to edit this chapter and doing a really magnificent job at it.

Update: The chapter is now edited by the amazing MeteoraWrites! (14th of February, 2019)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A loud rapping against his door startles Barry from his nap, and he feels so disorientated and confused for a moment that he is too afraid to move.

The knocking sounds again, louder than before, and he finally realizes that he’s in his own flat, on his couch, safe. Well, mostly safe, because whoever is in front of his door doesn’t sound like they have anything too good in mind for him. A soft curse passes his lips as he tries to sit up, which causes a sharp pain to flash through his body, so much so that breathing briefly becomes difficult.

With a groan, he rolls onto his side and is able to push himself over the edge of the couch in a way that has him landing on his knees. Another sharp pain flashes through his head and he wonders what caused him to be so damn dumb as to actually fall asleep on that cursed thing.

Whoever is in front of his door starts to bang on it again, and with such force that Barry is sure that the wood won’t last much longer if this should persist. Starting to get scared, he forces himself to his feet and watches his entrance indecisively for a couple of seconds. He hasn’t forgotten that the former tenant from the flat above his has died about a month ago in his own four walls, and he wouldn’t be able to do anything should there really be someone out there intending to harm him.

“Open the fucking door, Allen!” hisses a familiar voice, which causes him to momentarily relax.
before he realizes that it probably shouldn’t calm him down given that an obviously furious Len is in front of his door.

He jumps slightly when there is another bang against his door, and he’s certain that he saw it shaking on its hinges this time. Reluctantly, he makes a couple of steps towards his entrance and asks loud enough for the other man to hear him.

“Wh-what a-are y-you d-doing h-here, L-Len?”

“Open this fucking door or I’ll kick it in!”

“I-it is n-nearly m-m-midn-night! St-stop m-making s-such a-a r-ruk-kus and c-calm d-down!”

Another forceful hit against the wood and Barry really starts to get scared. He has no idea what has the other man so agitated.

Then Len speaks again, but this time he doesn’t sound like himself at all and Barry is suddenly frozen in fear.

“Open this fucking door, you little bitch, or you can be sure that your next lesson won’t just end with you bleeding from your ass!”

It’s Michael, and then he hears the laughter of some of the other guards through his door as well, just as familiar and just as horrifying. Barry loses the control over his bladder and wakes up.

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It’s become something of a habit for Barry to read the newspaper when it gets slow during the work day. Usually this happens in the early afternoon, from around one pm till four, when most people are at work and the pensioners and young mothers have already done their grocery shopping for the day.

He enjoys this opportunity to read up on what’s going on in the twins, or in the world at large, and Mrs. Ming doesn’t mind. They sometimes even talk about any interesting news there’s been when she invites him up for a cup of tea after he’s finished closing at times.

Barry puts down the last can of beans that will fit on the shelves near the counter, and decides that now would be a good time to grab a paper and busy himself a little. He carries the box with the rest of the cans back to the small storeroom before walking towards the newspaper rack that is close to the entrance.

Mrs. Ming is usually the one who takes care of the magazines, and he always likes the little surprise of seeing what’s new there other than the daily papers. Thus, he is slightly disappointed that there are no new science or cooking themed magazines yet. He decides to pick the “Daily Bits”; one of the smaller news magazines, which isn’t too heavy on gossip. There’s also the “Central City Citizen” available, but he can hardly look at it without getting goose bumps, so he always forgoes it.

The black and white title of the magazine is easy to spot, and he’s already looking forward to the couple of crossword and Sudoku puzzles they always offer their readers. His good mood vanishes as soon as his eyes land on the front page, along with its head line, and he feels his stomach start to sink.

“Flash saves the day again! The Twins’ most notorious criminals are back in Iron Heights – how long will they decide to stay there this time before pestering the cities again?”
Under the bold words, there is a picture of the Central City’s National History Museum with a couple of police cars in front of it. Barry scans it swiftly, but can’t make Len or any of the others out. It was probably taken after everything was already over.

The story is on pages four and five, and there are actually a couple of pictures of the Rogues; but only mug-shots, which means that they had most likely already been taken into custody before the first reporters were able to get there. There are also pictures of the damage that was done to the museum during their fight with the Flash, but it doesn’t look too bad, mostly just crashed vitrines.

Barry makes his way back to the counter while he’s reading the article, and he learns that Wally hadn’t been able to catch all of the Rogues; which usually is the case with them. They are good at causing distractions, and more often than not there are at least one or two who are able to get away. This is also one of the reasons why they never stay in prison for long; they always haul each other out as soon as the opportunity to do so offers itself.

This time the unlucky ones were Captain Cold, the Top, Piper, and Captain Boomerang, and – should you trust Wolfe’s statement – it would be the last anybody has seen of them outside the walls of his prison. Barry doubts this very much, but quickly proceeds on because he really doesn’t need to be reminded of this man and the merciless way he’s handling that horrible place.

He skips the next part of the story, which is mostly about Iron Heights and the question of how safe this place really is, and goes on to where the author is talking about the recent series of gallery and museum robberies that had kept the twins’ police on their toes.

Barry usually tries to ignore it when any report about Len and the others is on the radio or in the papers, which is why he is quite surprised by the sheer number of heists they have been pulling over the last couple of months. Suddenly, Len’s claim that he has been busy doesn’t seem so far-fetched anymore.

Frowning, he reads the list of places they have supposedly robbed, and he wonders how they’ve been able to get away with that many jobs, especially so close to each other, as the police and both Wally and Jay had to be very much on alert due to the frequency of them.

Then, he notices that one of the robberies had taken place on a Thursday about three weeks ago, and he knows that this is more than unlikely, seeing as that was the rather disastrous night he wanted to visit Len at his home, and the Rogues hardly ever do a job without Cold.

Somehow, this seems fishy to him, but there isn’t really much he can do about it. It seems like he wouldn’t see again Len for a long while, not that the man hadn’t been avoiding him anyway, and he isn’t sure whether he would really touch on the subject to begin with. He likes Len, even though he can be such a damn jackass at times, and he also likes the other Rogues, but he still feels very uneasy every time he is reminded of what they do for a living and who they once were to each other.

The article goes on with some speculations about where the rest of the Rogues could be hiding out right now, and some quips against the CCPD and KCPD as well as against both of the cities speedsters for letting this happen, and their seeming inability to make sure they don’t cause any more chaos for the cities.

Barry feels quite unsettled after finishing it, and he can’t help but worry about the men who are now most likely already in their cells in the Heights.

He doesn’t feel like solving any puzzles anymore, and instead puts the paper back to the rack before starting to clean the store, even though it isn’t necessary at this time.
Mrs. Ming, who comes to check up on everything a bit after three, pick up that something is worrying him, and brings him some tea and crackers. Barry doesn’t feel like talking, and she doesn’t try to urge him to. He’s still very grateful for her company.

***

Mary picks up on the fact that something is bothering him as well, and convinces Barry to join her on a trip to Jones Park, which is about an hour away by bus. It’s a rather big park at the southern border of Keystone, not too far away from the Missouri River, with wooden picnic tables, a playground, and even a small pond.

Due to the nice weather it’s quite crowded when they arrive, and Barry mostly feels tense and uneasy for a bit. His younger friend seems to have expected it though, as she leads him to an area that isn’t as full of people where it is much easier for him to breath.

They pull out a picnic blanket Mary brought and have a late lunch consisting of tuna salad and a fresh baguette they had bought on their way here.

Barry starts to relax, and while a part of him probably would have preferred to stay indoors and hidden away from the world, he can’t deny that it is nice to be out here with his friend.

Mary clearly enjoys their small endeavor, and her good mood is quite infectious, after all.

***

September 1st year

The next stop is his, and Barry, who has been watching the city move by outside the bus window, gets up to get to the exit in time.

It’s hot in here, partly due to how packed it is, and partly due to the unusual heatwave they are currently having this late into summer. It causes Barry to look forward to finally getting out of here.

The bus is clearly lacking air conditioning, which makes it even worse for him compared to the other passengers, as he is wearing long sleeves and pants. This has also caused him to get a couple of funny looks so far, but he’s use to them by now and just ignores it.

A young woman, who has been sitting next to him, gives him an annoyed look as she moves to let him pass, and he is once again reminded how this unusual high temperature for this late in September causes everybody to grow increasingly irritable and impatient. He stammers a thanks, but she only huffs in return and swiftly moves over to the seat at the window he had occupied before.

As soon as the bus comes to a creaking halt and the door opens a gush of fresh air greets him, which isn’t much cooler but much less stuffy.

The streets are mostly empty, as the majority of people are trying to escape from the 100 plus °F heat and hide in their homes or someplace else to cool off. Though there are a couple of teenage boys out, most likely around 17, who are listening to music on one of their mobile phones at the street corner before his apartment building. They make a couple of stupid comments about his choice of clothing, but let him pass without any trouble when Barry doesn’t show any reaction to their goading.

It’s Saturday evening, close to nine, and while it isn’t completely dark yet, he already feels exhausted enough to look forward to his bed. Thanks to the new people who moved into the apartment above his, he usually doesn’t have to worry about being kept up by loud techno music till dawn anymore. They’re still very noisy, but no more so than the other people around him, and he is usually able to
ignore them with the help of his earplugs.

As soon as he enters his apartment building he’s greeted by much cooler air, and he stops for a second at the bottom of the staircase to enjoy the comfortable change of temperature. The building has no air conditioning, as it’s rather old, and its outer walls are made of bricks, which makes it possible for the air inside to not overheat during the day.

After another moment he starts to climb the stairs up to his floor. The entrance door opens behind him just as he has reaches the first landing, and he briefly glances over his shoulder to see who it is.

“Hey neighbor, what a nice surprise to finally meet you somewhere other than the fire escape.”

Edward grins up at him from the foot of the stairs before he jogs up to him. Barry, who is quite surprised by this unexpected meeting, tries to take a step back from the other man as unobtrusively as possible as soon as the other man reaches him and stops in a much too close proximity for his liking.

The other man doesn’t seem to notice.

“We’ve been neighbors for over six months now, it’s about time I finally meet you without bars between us,” he goes on and Barry notices that he seems to be in a very good mood today.

The last time they had spoken was about a week back. It had been late at night again, as he usually climbs out onto his fire escape when he can’t sleep these days. The current weather makes it nearly unbearably hot, even during the nights, and it hardly makes a difference whether he’s inside or outside, but he still prefers it to the cold. It’s just nice to get some fresh air without freezing. It helps him to think and relax.

Edward isn’t always there, and he doesn’t always join him even when he notices him outside, which is an oddly calming observation on Barry’s part. They still usually meet about once a week out there, never on arrangement, although it’s kind of a predictable possibility, seeing as neither of them has the healthiest sleep pattern. It’s a nice coincidence though, and some nights Barry even hopes for Edward to join him out there for a bit.

Having the other man standing directly in front of him is an entirely different experience than having some safe distance and two metal railings between them. It’s also the first time that he sees him in proper lighting, without shadows concealing any of his features. He notices that he has to be a bit younger than he initially guessed, maybe not in the end of his thirties but more towards the middle or even the beginning.

His hair is about the shade he had initially guessed, a darker strawberry blond. Now, in the light, he’s also able to make out that his eyes are a very dark blue, and he notices the bout of pale freckles across his nose and cheeks. Like most people right now, he is wearing a T-shirt and shorts, in his case, simple grey Bermuda's.

“Are you just coming from work?” asks Edward, and Barry feels rather awkward when he realizes that he has been eyeing the other man rather openly for what must have been at least a couple of seconds.

“Y-yeah, th-the s-store closes a-at s-seven o-on S-Saturd-days.”

“You’re working from Monday to Saturday?”

“U-usually.”

His neighbor nods quietly and it’s then that Barry notices he’s studying him rather unabashedly now
as well. He quickly grows uncomfortable under his scrutinizing, because he knows how odd he has to look in his long sleeve shirt and pants during this heatwave, but Edward picks up on it and turns his gaze back to face him.

“You want to join me for a beer? Or a glass of cold lemonade? I went a little bit overboard and made a whole jug of it just this morning. It turned out pretty amazing, not to toot my own horn,” offers Edward with a slight smirk.

The thought of accepting the offer and spending some time with the other man alone in his flat doesn’t sit too well with Barry. Edward seems to be a rather nice guy, who is surprisingly friendly towards him, but he knows from experience that this doesn’t necessarily mean anything.

“S-sorry, b-but I-I am r-rather t-tired.”

“I see,” says his neighbor, and he watches him with a slight frown before he remarks somewhat hesitantly. “You look rather pale. Maybe you should wear something shorter in this heat?”

Barry flushes and averts his eyes.

“I-I… I d-don’t…”

“Sorry, look, it’s none of my business to tell you what to wear. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Edward interrupts him when he notices how self-consciously he is reacting to his remark.

“N-no, i-it’s f-fine. I kn-know th-that it i-is s-stupid t-to r-run ar-round l-like th-this i-in th-this h-heat b-but… b-but I-I… i-it m-makes… I-I h-have t-to.”

Barry doesn’t need to look to the other man to know that he’s studying him with a mixture of curiosity and concern now. It’s rather predictable how people react to an explanation like this, and he feels like such a fool again for even attempting to.

An uncomfortable silence follows, and Barry asks himself if this was the last time he would be invited over to his neighbors flat. He isn’t really sure whether he would be glad about it or not.

“Well, if you feel better tomorrow you can pass by anytime. I probably won’t leave my flat if I don’t have to. I’m not the biggest fan of this weather, and I think we’ll get up to 104 tomorrow, which is fucking insane.”

Barry meets the other man’s eyes in surprise and notices that he isn’t watching him like he is cuckoo, which is quite unexpected.

“So, just pass by whenever you feel like it, I really don’t mind.”

“Ok-kay,” he answers hesitantly, still a bit caught off-guard that he hasn’t put him off with his odd behavior.

“Great,” smiles Edward, and he turns to proceed up the stairs to their floor, but shoots him an amused glance before he does so. “Well, I will be spending the next hour either in my fridge or under an ice-cold shower, so just come back a bit later should I not immediately answer, in case you change your mind about the lemonade.”

Barry just nods quietly, not sure how else to response to that, and watches how the man swiftly proceeds up the stairs while he follows at a much more moderate pace.
The conversation with Edward keeps his mind occupied for a while afterwards.

Chapter End Notes

Edward is going to be a regular in this story as you have probably already guessed. As I've stated before, I started this story a while before the TV show was even announced and I don't want people to get confused with a character that shares his name. This Edward has nothing to do with the TV show one, I initially intended to call him Eddie but because I fear that this could lead to confusion, I will change it to Eddy instead. Yes, not that huge of a difference but, well...

Anyway, credits for the change go to palpablenotion, who suggested it to me.

Next week's chapter will have more Rogues and also some Jay in it.

Feel free to let me know what you think, I always enjoy hearing from you!
Someone is in his flat.

This realization causes Barry’s mind to snap to attention even in its half-asleep state. His stomach cramps up painfully at that notion, but he forces himself to stay completely still and quiet. He listens, and tries to decide if he hadn’t just spooked himself for no reason.

There’s the noise again, footsteps. Someone’s in his living room.

The fear is nearly smothering, as his mind hasn’t completely caught up with where he is right now, and he’s certain that one of the guards is out there. Maybe even Michael. This notion causes him to groan quietly when his stomach makes a painful and sickening jolt.

Then, there is a knock against his bedroom door and Barry freezes again.

Before he has the opportunity to realize that it’s quite unlikely that any intruder to his home who wants to cause harm him would be considerate enough to knock before entering, a familiar voice sounds through his closed bedroom door.

“Barry?”

It’s James. He frowns and tries to come up with an explanation as to why the younger man would be in his home right now, in the middle of the night no less.

“Hey, Barry?” asks the criminal again, a bit louder this time. “Are you awake?”

Someone snorts at that on the other side of the door and it isn’t James. Barry feels the apprehension return at the notion that the other man isn’t the only one here.

“For fuck’s sake, Tricks, why are you even pretending to care? Just open the damn door already and wake him up.”

“N-no!”

The word has passed his lips before Barry even realizes it.

“You are awake!”
James sounds oddly delighted by this, and the door handle starts to move a second later much to Barry’s horror. It stops suddenly again, though.

“You’ve heard the man, he doesn’t want you noisy twerps in his bedroom.”

“Hey! I am no twerp, and I am not noisy! You’re the twerp!”

“Whatever, just let him get up in peace,” retorts Sam before he directs his next words toward Barry. “Sorry about the very early wake up call, Allen, but this annoying fellow here wouldn’t stop pestering me about getting him over to your place. Just take your time, I’ll make us some coffee in the meantime.”

“I am not annoying!!!”

Barry, who is still in his bed, listens to them move away from his door. He turns towards his small analogue clock with the glowing hands, and sees that it’s already past five in the morning. For a split-second he panics because he thinks he’s overslept for work, till he remembers that today is Sunday.

The thought of leaving his bedroom isn’t a very appealing one right now. He’s still tired, and had hoped to be able to sleep in today, but he also doesn’t want to leave those two unsupervised while they’re in his living room. It isn’t as if there is a lot they could take, or that he thinks that they would do so to begin with, at least not James, but the notion itself doesn’t sit well with him.

With a low sigh, he gets up and slowly makes his way over to the door. His right hip has been causing him some trouble for a couple of days now, due to the cool and wet weather, and he tries to ease the pain by taking smaller steps, mostly shuffling his feet on his way to the door.

The light in his living area is on and he has to squint, as the brightness makes it difficult to see for a second. He’s still able to make James out, who is scurrying over to him.

“Barry! Can you make us pancakes?!”

From the direction of the kitchenette, he can hear Sam snort before he picks up on the sound of water running. It seems Sam is making good on his promise to make coffee. This doesn’t lift his mood at all.

“Please, with chocolate and strawberries and everything you always see in the commercials!”

“C-could y-you s-step b-back a-a b-bit, p-please?”

James frowns for a moment before he realizes that he is quite close, and quickly does as asked. A slightly embarrassed expression crosses his face.

“Sorry, didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“I-it’s f-f-fine,” smiles Barry tiredly, and he feels already a bit better with some additional space between them. He rubs his eyes before meeting James’ gaze once more. “I-I d-don’t h-have th-th-ing-gredients t-to m-make p-pan-cakes, J-James.”

The other man makes a face as if someone has just kicked his puppy, and Barry knows that it’s ridiculous but he actually starts to feel bad because of it.

“But you make the best food.” argues James, as if this would make a difference.

“I-I a-am s-sorry b-b-but-“
“Yeah, your fridge looks like one of the saddest places I’ve ever seen,” interrupts Sam, which causes Barry to frown in annoyance. He carefully steps around James to see what the other man is doing. As he had expected, his fridge is currently wide open with Sam studying its contents, much to his displeasure and embarrassment.

“C-could y-you c-close i-it, p-please?” he asks sharply and the criminal’s amused glance towards him causes him to bristle. “Th-this i-isn’t y-your p-place. D-don’t o-open a-anyth-thing w-without a-asking f-first.”

“Calm down, I was just looking for milk,” Sam tells him with a frown, and audibly closes the fridge again. “Not that there is any, for that matter.”

Barry scowls slightly and makes his way over to the other man. He tries not to show how much his hip is bothering him right now.

“I-I h-haven’t had th-the t-time t-to g-go sh-shopping y-yet,” he explains, and silently berates himself for feeling the damn need to do so in the first place. “I-it i-isn’t a-as i-if I-I w-was exp-pecting a- anyb-body.”

He notices how Sam studies him quietly for a second. His expression doesn’t give much away, and he doesn’t know why but his embarrassment suddenly grows worse.

“I-is th-there a-a-anyth-thing o-on y-your m-mind y-you w-would l-like t-to sh-share?” he bites out and he feels the urge to hit his unwanted guest, as his considering expression changes to one of open amusement.

“Nah, I am fine,” replies Sam with a shrug, and he shoots him a smile that shows too many teeth. He then turns to James. “Well, it looks as if you dragged my ass over here for nothing, Tricks. Why am I not surprised?”

“Hey! I didn’t!” argues the other Rogue, but he seems rather half-hearted about it. His disappointment about the whole thing is hard to miss, and Barry starts to feel slightly worried about the way he’s behaving right now.

James has been doing so much better for a while, and seeing him like this again is quite disconcerting. Maybe it’s because Hartley is still in Iron Heights. The two are usually always together, and it would be plausible that he is reacting to his friend’s sudden absence rather strongly.

“Let’s just go,” says Sam, who turns towards the bathroom, and Barry considers covering the damn mirror above his sink with something as soon as they’re gone, seeing as he isn’t keen on any more of this unannounced early morning visits.

“But, Sam,” whines James, and he throws Barry a helpless look before his expression suddenly brightens and a wide grin spreads over his lips. “Wait a minute, you don’t have the ingredients? Well, no trouble there! Sam and I can go and pick all that stuff up, you just have to tell us what you need.”

Both Barry and Sam protest this suggestion at the same time.

“What the hell, I’m no damn delivery service, James!” argues the other Rogue, clearly irked by his friends idea.

“I d-don’t h-have th-the m-money t-to b-buy a-all th-the ing-gredients y-you n-need f-for p-panc-cakes,” explains Barry, and he firmly adds when he sees that James wants to object. “And I d-don’t w-want y-you t-to s-steal th-them.”
His friend actually looks a bit disappointed at that statement, while Sam scoffs quietly but lifts both of his hands in a placating manner when Barry glares at him in response.

“We wouldn’t steal them, we would buy them, fair and square, really!” tries James again, and he throws a look to the other criminal as if to ask him to confirm his words. Sam stays quiet and only returns his colleague’s gaze with a rather annoyed one. He obviously doesn’t think all that much of the suggestion to actually go shopping.

Ignoring the lack of support, James turns back to Barry again with a pleading look.

“You can pay us back later, like with the stuff Hartley and I bring over,” he goes on. “As soon as you have the money, you can give it to us. This is no different, Barry.”

Barry expects Sam to comment on this, as it’s obvious that it wouldn’t happen any time soon that he gets the amount money together that they would have to spend. The other man doesn’t, though. Instead, he rubs his forehead and sighs rather loudly.

“You are such a fucking pest, Tricks, I have no idea how Piper can stand having you around all the time.”

James only grins, well too aware that the other Rogue has given in and will get him to a place where they can buy the ingredients they need for breakfast.

“Come on, Barry, please?” asks the younger blond, and he gives him his best puppy eyes, which cause Barry to actually chuckle despite the situation he’s in right now.

“Y-you are n-not g-going t-to st-steal t-the f-food,” he reminds them and is mostly looking at Sam while he says so, which causes the other man to huff but nod his agreement nonetheless. “G-good, and I w-will p-pay y-you b-back.”

James just nods dutifully before he turns around and is about to hurry back to the still open bathroom door, before Barry stops him once more.

“D-do y-you n-need th-the l-list o-of ing-gредients or d-do y-you kn-know wh-what t-to p-put i-into a-a p-panc-cake b-batter?” he asks, but he’s quite certain that he already knows the answer.

Five minutes later, he is alone in his flat again, and is still not sure what exactly has just happened. His mind feels too groggy to really worry about it for now though, and he decides to take a quick shower before his two guests return. He’s careful about covering the mirror for the duration of it.

It doesn’t take long for James and Sam to get the needed ingredients, and they’re back about twenty minutes later.

“And they call us criminals,” mutters Sam rather irritably as he puts the paper shopping bag on the kitchen table. “Four bucks for a carton of stupid eggs, really?”

“Wh-why d-did y-you b-buy s-such exp-pensive o-ones?”

“What do you mean? They just had these one. How the hell should I know what’s expensive when it comes to this stuff?”

“Y-you d-don-n’t go sh-shopping v-very often, d-do you?”

The incredulous look he gives Barry in return is answer enough, and he decides to let the topic rest and instead ask him if he still wants to have some coffee. Sam agrees readily.
It doesn’t take long for the pancakes to be done, and the sweet smell of them soon fills his small flat. It’s a bit amusing when Barry notices that they even bought strawberries on their shopping trip, and it turns out to be quite a nice addition to the sweet taste of the rest of their food.

“I understand now what the twerp was going on about.” Sam tells him after he eats the first few bites of the dish and shoots Barry an appreciative look while he ignores James to make the exclamation of “This is fucking brilliant. I don’t think that I’ve ever eaten such tasty pancakes in my life.”

Barry frowns slightly and shoots him a wary look, as he isn’t sure if he means it or he’s just making fun of him. He knows that he cooks well enough, he always had a knack for it. He usually likes it when Mary praises his meals, but it’s different when it comes from someone like Sam, whom he wouldn’t have expected to hand a compliment out like that. Contrary to James and Hartley, he hasn’t spent much time with him so far, and, like with the rest of the Rogues, he usually has the feeling that he prefers it that way, which is fine with him.

“You aren’t really good with compliments, are you?” asks Sam with a smirk, and it’s then that Barry realizes that he has been watching him with a rather dark expression so far.

“S-sorry,” he mutters and turns back to his plate while he tries to will the heat in his face away.

“I told you he’s an amazing cook,” interjects James and he huffs. “You guys never believe me about anything.”

“Come on, Trickster, that isn’t true,” Sam assures him, audibly amused by his friend’s sulking. “I wouldn’t have agreed to come here if I hadn’t taken your word for it, would I now?”

James squints at the other man for a second before he smiles again, and Barry notices once more how easily his mood seems to change these days.

There’s nothing left of the food after they’re finished eating, which is quite an impressive feat, seeing as there had been quite a big stack of pancakes to begin with. Still, while he had hoped to have some left overs for later today, it’s nice to feel full and have his cooking appreciated like this.

It’s honestly surprising to him when both James and Sam help him with the dishes.

“Don’t look so shocked,” grins Sam as he brings over his plate and mug to the kitchen sink, and he shrugs slightly. “Despite what most of our bolt-holes look like, most of us prefer having it clean as opposed to living in filth.”

“Th-then wh-why are you n-not t-taking b-better c-care of y-your p-places?”

“Honestly? Because the others don’t, and you can be sure as soon as I touch something those jackasses will expect me to clean up after them as if I were their damn mother,” explains Sam, and he thinks for a second before he adds. “I think it’s the same excuse for the others as well. Well, expect for Digger. That slob just couldn’t care less.”

Barry watches the other man in disbelief before he snorts and shakes his head.

“You are th-the l-laziest b-bunch of p-people I-I kn-know.”

James helps him with drying the dishes while Sam returns to his seat at the table with another mug of coffee.

“So, now that we’re all sated and everything is clean again, what do you think of a game of poker?”
While James is immediately all for it, Barry hesitates. Partly because he had expected them to leave now and, partly because he has no money to bet with.

“We can play for the crackers.” suggests Sam, and he holds up the bright bag of said food which they had brought back from their small shopping trip. Barry doesn’t like that the other man seems to have immediately grasped what his reason for hesitation is.

“Yeah, crackers!” agrees James readily and he makes his way over to the table to take his seat again.

Barry follows at a more moderate pace, but decides to play along. He doesn’t have anything else to do today, and it’s nice to have them around despite his initial reservations.

This morning has turned out to be surprisingly nice after all, and he decides to go with it for a bit longer.

A small voice in his head urges him to ask about Len and the others, but he shoves it aside. He feels relaxed right now, and he doesn’t want to bring an end to his good mood so soon. Still, the worry stays despite his effort to ignore it.

***

Jay passes by one evening a couple of days later. Barry has just come home from work, and was preparing himself some soup when a knocking on the door catches his attention.

Like last time, he is quite taken aback by the unexpected visit, and his throat closes up on him before he is even able to utter a single word. Not that he would have really known what to say anyway, seeing as he thought the other man’s last visit would be a onetime occurrence.

“Hello.” Jay greets him with a somewhat uncertain smile, and apologizes for passing by unannounced once again. He doesn’t mention that it is likely due to the lack of a phone on Barry’s part.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

Barry eyes Jay somewhat warily but seeing as he hasn’t been doing much other than preparing his dinner, he shakes his head and steps aside to let him in. It’s rather obvious that he hasn’t come by to just exchange a couple of words on his doorsteps.

The older man thanks him with an oddly relieved expression on his face, which Barry isn’t sure what to make of. Had he expected him to send him away? As if he really had that choice.

With a slight frown, he closes the door and motions Jay to take a seat at his kitchen table like last time.

Again, he shows him the package of coffee and, again, the other man accepts.

They don’t talk as he prepares the drinks, and he tries to concentrate only on the little task, and not on the presence behind him.

“Thanks,” nods Jay as he accepts the mug about five minutes later.

Barry nods and takes the seat opposite to him. His throat still hasn’t really relaxed enough for him to not sound like a complete idiot should he attempt to speak right now, so he prefers to stay quiet instead.
Jay has most likely come here for a reason, and he could just tell him so without some forced niceties beforehand. It’s a bit rude, but Barry hasn’t been sleeping well again, and he feels tired and uncomfortable enough in his own skin as it is. So, he doesn’t really care. The other man doesn’t comment on nor seems bothered by it, though, and instead takes a sip of his coffee.

It’s then that Barry picks up on the paper bag that is standing on the table next to him, and he frowns again as he realizes that he really hadn’t noticed it before. The notion that he could be so unsettled by his former colleague’s visit worries him, but he forces it away.

The paper bag is suddenly slid towards him, and Barry freezes in response. He can’t stop himself from blushing in embarrassment as he realizes that he must have been staring at it.

“It’s just some of the meatloaf Joan made yesterday,” explains Jay at his wary look, which he counters with a faint smile. “She really wanted me to bring some along. She also packed some mashed potatoes and gravy.”

Barry has to look away at that. A hot pain shoots through his chest, and for a few seconds he is sure that his face would crumble under the misery he feels just now.

“P-please g-give h-her m-my th-thank-ks.”

“Of course.”

Jay sounds tired, really tired, and Barry wonders why he even bothers to pass by, or why he would bring him food. It wouldn’t do either of them any good.

“Your first year of parole passed yesterday,” remarks the older man, and with that all of this makes a lot more sense. A surge of sadness nearly causes Barry to tear up before he is able to fight it off, and he nods quietly in reply.

The thought that this could be something akin to a little celebration for just that occasion is sickening. Mary wanted to do so as well, but quickly let go of that idea as soon as she realized how uneasy and depressed this idea made him.

“I can understand that you probably don’t feel like it, but this is really a good thing, Barry. Something you can be proud of.”

It’s odd, hearing Jay say this with such honesty, as if any of this means anything…

And maybe it does, at least for the old man.

“Y-yes,” agrees Barry quietly as an icy coldness take hold of his inside. This is his life now, it doesn’t matter whether it’s a lie or not. The shards are already surrounding him and the only thing he can do is pick them up and try to make the best of it. It’s just so tiring, though.

“Barry,” says Jay, and suddenly he sounds grave enough for him to actually look towards him again. “I really don’t want to upset you, I know that your life is hard enough as it is right now without someone else adding an additional burden to it, and I will leave again if you want me to.”

They hold each other’s gaze as the older man goes on in a more tentative voice.

“You probably don’t believe it when I tell you that I am sorry for what has happened, and that I am still worried about you, but I am. I never wanted any of this to happen, none of us did, and I know that you didn’t either.”
Barry isn’t sure how to respond, or how to feel. His eyes are itching again, and he averts them while he presses his lips together and he tries to concentrate on his breathing and only on his breathing.

A rather tense silence follows, and he’s grateful that Jay doesn’t try to talk to him while he tries to keep a hold of his composure.

The pain in his chest spreads to his stomach, and he starts to feel slightly sick, but he’s able to calm down enough to not make a fool of himself in front of the other man.

Barry swallows a couple of times and coughs slightly before he reluctantly turns his gaze back to his guest.

“Y-you w-want t-to s-stay f-for d-dinner?”

As soon as the words are out he could kick himself, because he’s pretty sure that Joan has most likely already prepared something, and what does he really have to offer other than instant soup and the meatloaf Jay himself has brought along.

Against his worries, the older man seems pleasantly surprised by this offer and agrees readily.

The mood between them stays somewhat stiff, and Jay is doing most of the talking, sticking to very general and safe topics. Still, when the other man leaves about an hour later, Barry feels oddly relieved and slightly hopeful.

***

“Something’s worrying you.”

Mary’s voice pulls him out of his thoughts and he looks over to her. They are currently in her flat, watching some old black and white movie she’s a huge fan of, and he realizes then that he must have drifted off into his own thoughts once again. He feels a bit bad about it, as she had been looking forward to showing him this film.

“S-sorry, it’s n-nothing,” he apologizes. “I’m just a-a b-bit t-tired.”

Her worried expression causes him to regret his words immediately.

“Are you having trouble sleeping again?”

She doesn’t ask if it’s the nightmares, she doesn’t have to, it’s obvious that she means them. Barry turns away from her and back to the television, where a young couple is dancing in a 40’s setting.

“You don’t have to tell me, Barry,” she adds quietly when he hasn’t answered after another long moment. “I don’t mean to snoop.”

He frowns and shoots her a brief apologetic glance.

“Y-you aren’t, M-Mary, I’m… j-just n-not f-feeling s-so g-great r-right n-now and th-there is r-really n-no r-reason f-for m-me t-to b-bother y-you w-w-with i-it.”

His younger friend gives him a sympathetic look before suddenly getting up.

At his confession, she explains that she’s going to make them some tea, and despite her insistence for him to stay put, he follows her along to her small kitchen.

“Y-you d-don’t h-have t-to, M-Mary, I d-don’t w-want t-to b-bring y-you d-d-down w-with o-one of
m-my st-stupid n-nightm-mares again.”

A couple of weeks ago, she had asked him for the first time about his obvious trouble sleeping, and Barry, who has been exhausted and in an especially sad mood, had actually confided in her, at least partly, about what his dreams are about. He didn’t go into anything specific, and he left all the gruesome and ugly details about what had been done to him out, but Mary still seems to have gotten the gist of it.

“Barry,” starts the young woman, and she turns away from the stove where she had just put the really outdated kettle she usually uses to heat water on one of the hot plates. Her expression is a serious one.

“This is no trouble, really. You’re having nightmares, which is a serious issue, one that isn’t your fault or something you can do anything about. I’m not angry or annoyed by it, or if you confide in me about what is bothering you.”

She nods toward the entrance behind which lays her living room and where the movie is currently still playing.

“We can watch the movie any time. I’ve seen it so many times that I know it by heart, and I want you to enjoy it as well.”

“I am,” Barry protests rather feebly, but he’s stopped from any further arguing by the clearly incredulous look his friend is giving him. Feeling like such a damn burden again, he averts his eyes to the ground and frowns unhappily. When he came over about an hour ago, he had really hoped that this would be able to lift his spirits, but instead he is bringing Mary down with him because of how damn stubborn his mind is about antagonizing him with those damn memories.

A soft touch to his right upper arm causes him to flinch back, and he’s surprised and slightly worried that he hadn’t picked up on it at all that Mary has made her way over to him. She pulls her hand back, but meets his gaze with a tentative smile.

“You are really no bother, Barry. We all end up in rough spots at one time or another and those experiences always leave scars. It’s better to have someone to confide in,” she tells him quietly and holds his worried gaze calmly. “It makes the healing easier. You don’t have to, though, I don’t mean to force you, but just know that you can talk to me. I’m a good listener.”

The lump in his throat makes it hard to swallow, and he turns away from her. The embarrassing itching in his eyes is back and he really doesn’t want to cause her any more worries.

“Th-thank y-you.”

“Oh course.”

While Mary finishes preparing their tea, he goes back to the living room. He still isn’t able to concentrate on the movie, but even so he keeps his eyes mostly on the television screen in front of him. His friend joins him about five minutes later with two big mugs of herbal tea, and he accepts his with a grateful nod.

The movie ends just a moment later anyway, and Mary turns the television off before she takes her seat next to him. She keeps quiet and waits for him collect his thoughts.

Barry really doesn’t want to talk about what’s troubling him so much. Not just because he doesn’t want to burden his friend, but because he is mulling it over all the damn time when he’s alone with his thoughts. He had been hoping he would get a little break from it during his visit here.
“S-someo-one I-I-,” his voice gives out on him and his face turns uncomfortably warm again while he keeps his eyes stubbornly on the carpet in front of them. Mary doesn’t say anything, and after a long moment, he is able to start anew.

“S-someo-one… s-someo-one I kn-know h-has b-been… h-he… th-they a-are i-in a-a r-rath-ther r-rough a-and d-d-danger-rous p-place r-right n-now a-and… i-it i-i-isn’t a-as i-if i-i-t w-w-wasn’t th-their o-own f-fault a-and th-they kn-knew th-th-the c-c-cons-s-sequences o-of th-their ac-ctions b-but…”

Barry breaks off and clenches his teeth. The familiar anger towards Len and the others for doing this, for being who they are, rises up in his chest again. He’s also upset with himself for being stupid enough to actually care, to care enough that it keeps him up at nights and causes those damn memories to haunt him again even while he is awake.

The Rogues are not like him, hardly any other prisoner was like him when it came to his role at that place. There had been a lot of abuse going on, physical and mental, with other inmates as well, which resulted in a stay for more than one unlucky bastard in the infirmary ward every other day. What happened to him was different, though, and Barry doesn’t even want to consider what that says about him.

Still, despite his certainty that neither Len nor one of the other currently imprisoned Rogues would have to face something like that, he is well aware of what a brutal and disgusting hole that place is.

While the guards usually don’t try their luck with any of them, they would certainly make clear who the ones in charge are if anybody is stupid enough to provoke them. And if the Rogues are good at anything, it’s at picking a fight with any person they don’t like.

“Th-they a-are s-so s-s-stupid, s-so d-damn… a-and I-I a-am e-e-even w-w-worse b-bec-cause I-I sh-shouldn’t c-c-care…”

Barry rubs his eyes angrily and tries to will the urge to cry away, which has been bubbling in him for quite a while now. From experience, he knows that giving in to this will only make him feel worse, and he really doesn’t want to break down in front of Mary.

Briefly, he thinks back to the dream about Len he had weeks ago. The memory of it still makes his shudder, and afterwards had been the first time in months that he wasn’t able to keep it together.

The saying may be that letting it all out makes the pain more bearable, but he knows that this isn’t true. He felt horribly lethargic for days afterwards, and he really doesn’t want to repeat that again so soon, or at all if he can help it.

“Barry,” Mary’s quiet voice nearly startles him, as he has been so deep in his own head. Swiftly, he brushes over his eyes again, just to make sure, and glances over to her. She meets his gaze with a sad but calm expression.

“I am really sorry to hear that something like this has happened. I don’t really understand what is going on, or what those people did to cause themselves such trouble, but I know from experience that it can be a rather dangerous thing to get mixed up with those kinds of folks.”

One of her hands reaches for his upper arm, and he lets her. His body tenses up of its own accord, but he hardly pays any mind to it and neither does she.

“I-I d-didn’t w-want-t t-t-o…,” he croaks and swallows around the lump in his throat before he goes on. “I-I… b-but th-they h-helped m-me wh-while I-I w-was… th-there.”

He breaks their eye-contact to look towards the now turned off TV again.
“They helped me while they are not good people they are still much better than many I have met so far.”

A slight throbbing starts in his right temple, and he reaches up to rub the spot slightly. He usually gets headaches when he’s in a mood like this.

“I don’t know whether I want them in my life and… everything is so damn complicated…”

It used to be so much simpler, not easy, but not as messed up as it is now, not since before he went off to college.

A bitter sounding laugh passes his lips before he quietly goes on.

“I’m so ridiculous, I don’t even know whether they want to have me around for much longer anyway…”

Len had made it rather clear in keeping his distance, and by how he reacted to him the last time they had seen each other, that he had reached his limit towards him. It probably shouldn’t have been as surprising as it was back then, Barry realizes in hindsight. There had been no reason for the other man to want him around, and he is well aware of what a mess he and his life actually are.

“Damn…”

It’s difficult to keep the sadness at bay, and he jumps slightly when Mary’s hand, which is still resting on his arm, squeezes it lightly. For a split second he wants to look over to her again, but he catches himself before he does so. He knows that he wouldn’t be able to keep it together should he see pity or anything similarly disheartening on her face.

She doesn’t speak, though, and instead moves her hand slowly around his back, as if to give him time to adjust to it. His muscles grow taut enough that they actually start to hurt as he feels her move a bit closer, and while there’s nothing threatening about her, he still can’t help himself but to whimper very, very softly.

Mary makes a low shushing noise before pressing slightly against his back, and it takes him a moment to realize that she is urging him closer.

“It’s alright,” she says in a quiet and comforting tone. “You are not alone, Barry, and you are not ridiculous for caring about others.”

Something flares up painfully in his chest and he squeezes his eyes shut tightly while giving into the light pressure between his shoulders.

Her hair smells of pineapple, and he doesn’t know why but he keeps concentrating on that while he tries to keep his breathing slow and even and the cutting emotions at bay. Mary just holds him and rubs his back tentatively while he fights for his composure.

It is much later, when he is alone in his flat again, in his bed and unsuccessfully trying not to think about what occurred that evening, that he realizes that he hadn’t felt threatened by her at all. Not even with how close they had been, and despite how bone-tired and psychically spent he feels, he still is able to be somewhat reassured by this.

Chapter End Notes
Hope you liked the new chapter (with a higher percentage of Rogues in it).

Your feedback is always very much appreciated.

The next chapter will be up next Sunday and it will finally have some Barry/Len interaction again.
“Is this actually any good?”

Barry looks up from his spot at the kitchen table, where he is currently playing a game of UNO with James, to see Sam, who had been napping on his couch so far, waving something at him. His face grows uncomfortably hot when he recognizes the item, but he forces himself to still meet the other man’s slightly curious gaze despite his embarrassment.

“Is what any good?”

James, who has just collected another card from the stack, is now also looking at his colleague, clearly curious about what he’s referring to. A slightly disappointed frown appears on his face when he sees that the other man is actually just holding a book in his hand.

They came over a couple hours ago, once again unannounced, and while the hour wasn’t that ungodly early this time around, it still cost Barry a couple of hours of sleep he could have used. Thus, he had been rather curt at first, but despite his initial plan to get rid of them as quickly as possible, he somehow ended up making them breakfast once again instead, much to his exasperation.

And this time, at least, they had already brought the ingredients he needed. It also helped that James was enthusiastic enough about assisting him in preparing everything that his initially sullen mood soon lightened a bit. Sam offered to make coffee, and spent the rest of the time at the table reading a paper he had brought along.

“D-don’t l-look th-through m-my st-stuff,” Barry tells the other man rather sharply, and he tries to will the humiliation away that is currently welling up inside him.

“I didn’t look through your stuff,” scoffs Sam, and he nods in the direction of the small coffee table next to the couch. “It was just lying there, I didn’t know that it was off limits, seeing as it was in plain sight.”

“I-I d-didn’t exp-pect you t-to c-come o-over,” Barry reminds him, and can’t help but feel rather irked by the other man’s behavior. “I-I d-didn’t kn-know I-I’d h-had t-to p-p-put m-my s-stuff a-away.”
“You don’t, I’m not going to make off with it. Sheesh. I was just asking, get your head out of your ass, Allen.”

Sam rolls his eyes but before he can lay back again and vanish out of their line of sight, James stops him.

“How is it porn?”

While Barry feels like his face is close to going up in flames, this question seems to amuse Sam quite a lot.

“N-no, i-it isn’t,” he answers rather tersely and shoots the still chuckling Rogue a dark glare.

“Then what’s the big deal?”

“You d-don’t t-touch o-other p-peop-ple’s s-stuff w-without ask-king f-f-first.”

“For Pete’s sake, I am so damn sorry I picked up a book that was laying on your coffee table,” huffs Sam while James asks once more what it actually is about.

“B-breath-thing t-techniques.”

“Huh?”

“‘Calm Your Breath – Breathing exercises to reduce anxiety’,” recites the other man from the cover of the book, and Barry really wants to kick him for it.

“Breathing exercises?”

James pulls a face and gives him a rather odd look.

“Like with pregnant women?”

Sam snorts at that while Barry bites down on an annoyed groan and rubs his forehead in frustration.

“N-no, it’s s-supposed t-to h-help w-with c-calming d-d-down a-and g-getting r-relaxed.”

“Seeing how high strung you are all the damn time, this has probably been quite a useful investment,” mutters Sam loud enough for him to catch.

“You have problems with getting angry?”

“N-no, I-I h-have t-troubles f-falling a-asleep.”

Which isn’t really the only reason Mary got it for him, he’s sure, but he certainly isn’t getting into the rest of the baggage he carries around with these two.

“Oh… well, warm milk works for me rather well, maybe you should try that?” remarks James, and he watches Barry with a thoughtful expression.

“Genius, I’m pretty sure he’s tried that one already.”

“C-could y-you p-pleas-se p-put th-that away alr-ready?”

Barry shoots the other man a rather dark look after he notices that he is still holding the book.

“It’s just a damn book about meditation mumbo jumbo, no need to freak out.”
They glare briefly at each other before Sam finally puts it back onto the table.

“Th—that i—is n-one o-of y-your b-business.”

“As if I care.”

A rather tense mood settles over the three of them afterwards and, for a while, Barry and James proceed to play their game in silence.

“You know, Sam has trouble sleeping at times too, maybe he can give you some tips?”

The younger blond glances over to the couch, where his friend is already out of sight again other than his feet. A rather incredulous snort is the only response he gets from him.

At Barry’s surprised look, James goes on.

“Warm milk doesn’t work for him either.”

“Yes, which is because I usually can’t fall asleep due to you jackasses making enough of a racket to wake the dead,” grouses the other Rogue from behind the backrest of the couch. “Not everybody wants to drink themselves unconscious every fucking night just to drone you twerps out.”

“Hey! I am not a twerp!”

“No, you are just an annoying bugger, Tricks.”

“Hey!”

Sam sits up with a huff again and shoots his colleague a rather dark look before he nods to Barry.

“I’m pretty sure that his troubles sleeping has nothing to do with noisy pals, so don’t blather on about something that is none of his business.”

As if on cue, there is a rather loud thump against the wall separating him from to his right-door neighbors, before a man starts to scream furiously in a language Barry has discern by now as probably being Italian. A woman quickly joins in soon after, and it seems that the couple next door is having one of their usual quarrels.

All three of them turn towards the source of the noise for a moment before James looks back to Sam with a lifted eyebrow, which causes the other man to huff in annoyance once more.

“Try earplugs,” he grumbles towards Barry before vanishing out of sight again.

About half an hour later, while James is using the bathroom and Barry is preparing himself another cup of tea, he hesitantly turns towards Sam, who had joined them for their last round of UNO.

“S-sorry f-for g-get-ting s-so w-wrought-u-up b-before.”

Sam, who is shuffling the UNO cards, turns to him with a slightly surprised expression that quickly turns into one of amusement.

“No worries, I’m used to being surrounded by stingy people.”

His slight scowl causes the criminal to laugh and grin.

“Allen, forget it, you’re obviously sleep-deprived, and I do actually know what that feels like. So, no
hard feelings.”

Barry frowns, a bit doubtful, but nods.

After a brief moment of silence, Sam repeats his question from earlier.

“So, is it any good? The book, I mean.”

The other man’s curiosity still seems a bit strange to him, but he decides to answer nonetheless. He shrugs a bit and leans back against the kitchen counter.

“It h-helps m-me t-to r-relax somewh-what, b-but n-not r-really w-with s-sleeping.”

“And the anxiety part?”

This causes him to bristle visibly, but Sam quickly raises both of his hands in a placating manner and adds that he is just asking and not making fun of him.

“It i-is n-none of y-your b-business,” Barry grits out, and against his initial expectation of these words rubbing the other man the wrong way again, he just nods and shrugs.

“Fair enough.”

James comes back afterwards and they proceed with their next game.

Having them around isn’t really all that bad, but Barry still asks whether they don’t have anything else planned for today shortly after half past eleven.

“You wanna get rid of us already, Allen?” asks Sam in a mockingly hurt tone and he laughs at the rather dry look he gets in return.

“We aren’t really up to anything right now.” explains James, and he takes another sip from his glass of water before he goes on. “We usually don’t do much when more than three of us are in the Heights, especially not without Cold.”

“Nice, Tricks. I’m sure Len will appreciate your blathering about our inner workings to an outsider,” snorts Sam, but he doesn’t really seem that troubled by it.

“Cold likes him.” James points out with a shrug and he throws one of his cards down on the growing stack.

This comment is somehow able to make Barry feel exceedingly uncomfortable, and he fidgets in his seat while keeping his eyes on his own cards.

The next couple of turns are played in silence.

“D-do y-you kn-know if th-they are… a-alr-right?”

He can’t bring himself to look at either of his guests as he says it, and is somewhat angry at himself for asking in the first place. Still, it has been gnawing at him for a while now.

“Well, as alright as you can be in that fucking shithole,” remarks Sam as he picks a card up. He sounds quite nonchalant about it, and it doesn’t really help to ease his concern.

“Don’t worry, Bear.” adds James, and he sounds much more sympathetic than his colleague. “They can take care of themselves. We can be pretty tough if we have to.”
He shoots the other blond a hopeful glance and nods hesitantly. “Y-yeah, I-I kn-know.”

The question about whether they are going to haul them out of there is on the tip of his tongue, but he can’t bring himself to ask it. He shouldn’t have touched upon the topic in the first place, but still, he feels a bit better now.

“Hey, are you any good at making burgers?” asks Sam after a long moment of silence passed between them, and he meets Barry’s surprised and slightly annoyed look with obvious amusement. Before he can tell him that he can look for another cook, James cuts him off enthusiastically.

“Yes! Please!! Burgers!”

Despite the initial urge to tell them off, as he isn’t their damn private cook, he can’t really bring himself to do so. He’s feeling better thanks to them, after all, and while they have mostly forced their presence on his Sunday, they have also brought food, and have behaved surprisingly well for the most part.

“S-somewh-what.” he concedes hesitantly, and winces when James cries in delight once again.

It seems he wouldn’t get rid of them for at least another couple of hours, after all.

***

A rather harsh knock causes Barry to jump and spill most of the hot contents of the mug he has just filled over his right hand. With a soft curse, he puts it back on the counter before turning to his door with a worried expression as he grabs a dishtowel to dry himself.

It’s already half past two in the morning, and while he has gotten unexpected visitors before at a very early or very late hour, it has never been at as unreasonable a time as this.

Barry already regrets having gotten out of bed to make himself some tea. Once again, he hasn’t been able to fall asleep, and mostly tossed and turned for hours on end till the ache in his back and neck got too bothersome to bear.

There is another knock, again forceful enough to startle him, and he can’t help but feel a bit scared. His mind goes back to the dream he had nearly two months ago, and he unsuccessfully tries to reason with himself that this couldn’t be Michael. It couldn’t, the man wouldn’t be this reckless...

“Barry?”

His body freezes and his blood turns ice-cold when he hears the familiar voice of Len coming from behind the closed entrance to his flat.

For a horrible moment he expects him to hit the door again, more violently, before hearing Michael talking to him, threatening him. The fear he feels right now is so utterly smothering that for a moment he can’t breathe.

“Barry, are you there? Can you please open that damn door?”

Len doesn’t scream, or hit the door again, he doesn’t sound furious either, but oddly exhausted and this somehow shakes Barry out of his stupor.

The memory of that awful dream still lingers, but he is able to get himself to move even though he feels anything but sure on his feet.
At the door, he hesitates again and strains his ears to listen for anything. The hallway seems quiet once more, and he briefly wonders whether his tired mind hasn’t just played a horrible prank at him.

“L-Len?” he croaks quietly and doesn’t pay any heed to how much his voice is shaking.

“Yeah,” comes the answer from the other side, and despite his strained gruffness it’s still audible how relieved he is. “It’s me. Can you let me in?”

Hesitating for just another brief moment, Barry finally unlocks the door and does as asked.

His stomach makes an uncomfortable jump as soon as his eyes land upon the other man, and he immediately make a step towards him as if to assist him, but he freezes just a second later. The notion of touching anybody, even Len, who’s now standing in an obviously battered state before, him and is probably too exhausted to do any real damage even if he would want to, still makes him exceedingly uneasy. Especially after the fright he got just a moment ago.

“Hey, Allen,” greets the criminal with a crooked and tired grin, and Barry notices how heavily he is leaning against his doorframe. “Long time no see.”

A tense and uncomfortable silence follows and he isn’t sure how to react to any of this.

“Y-yeah,” he finally agrees quietly, before stepping back a bit to give him the space to enter.

Len doesn’t need more of an invitation than that, and limps his way over to the couch, which is the nearest possible place for him to get off his feet.

Barry watches him for a couple of seconds before realizing that his door is still wide open, and he quickly closes it again.

“Shit,” hisses the other man under his breath as he sits down rather clumsily. Judging by the pained expression on his face, moving isn’t a very pleasant experience for him right now. Len stays very still for a long moment after he is finally seated, his eyes closed, and Barry has the feeling that he’s trying to cope with how most of his body is likely letting him know what it thinks of him not resting sooner.

Then, he exhales slowly and turns his gaze to him. He looks bone-tired.

They watch each other quietly for a while, and Barry can’t shake the feeling of how surreal all of this is. It’s been about three months since he has seen the other man.

“You look like you’re doing alright” comments Len quietly. “That’s good.”

“Y-you l-look horrible.”

This causes his unannounced guest to bark a laugh before he flinches and makes a face as if someone has just stabbed him. Barry moves before he realizes what he’s doing, and just a moment later he is standing next to the other man and studying him with growing feelings of concern, frustration and a bunch of other emotions he really doesn’t want to think about right now.

“Y-you’re h-hurt,” he states rather curtly and swallows around the lump in his throat that has formed sometime over the last few minutes without his noticing.

“Y-you’re h-hurt,” he states rather curtly and swallows around the lump in his throat that has formed sometime over the last few minutes without his noticing.

“It’s nothing,” disagrees Len even as he’s having obvious difficulty breathing.

“It’s n-not n-noth-thing, y-you d-damn j-jackass!”
His voice gets loud enough for a second that it startles both of them.

“Y-you a-are in p-pain and y-you l-look l-like s-s-someone wh-who h-has b-been r-roughly p-patched up after a-a c-car accid-dent.” Barry goes on after an uncomfortable moment passed between them.

Someone has obviously already taken care of his wounds, which is good, really good, because Barry doesn’t think that he could do so now without causing the other man some serious unintentional discomfort.

“Y-you sh-should b-be r-resting, y-you sh-should b-be in a d-damn h-hospital!”

“I’m fine, stop worrying so damn much! This is hardly the first time I’ve gotten hurt,” grunts Len, and he gives him a clearly annoyed glare.

“And th-that m-makes it b-b-better in what w-way?!”

“What do you want from me?! I didn’t come here for you to nag my damn ear off!!”

Barry wants to ask what he’s come here for then, he nearly does, but he’s able to catch himself. Both quietly glare at each other stubbornly for a while before he turns around and makes his way to his bathroom. He can feel Len’s surprised and puzzled gaze follow him out of the room.

The bottle of painkillers they gave him the day he was released is still in the small cabinet below his bathroom sink, and he pulls it out to study its expiration date. The pills are still fine, safe to take for another year, and there’s still nearly half the bottle left. He takes them with him back out to his living room, where Len is waiting for him.

Barry grabs a glass of water for the other man but hesitates to bring it over. “H-have y-you eaten a-anything r-recently?”

Len, who is not really able to turn his upper body to face him, throws him a confused look over his shoulder before he seems to get what he means. “I had dinner.”

“Th-that w-was m-more th-than eight h-hours ago,” states Barry, who is still able to remember when mealtime is at the Heights. “Y-you d-didn’t eat a-anyth-thing s-since?”

“Haven’t really had the opportunity to.”

Barry frowns but nods and puts both the glass and the bottle of pills down on his counter before walking to his fridge.

“You really don’t need to bother, Allen, just give me the damn pills,” Lend tells him in an audibly exasperated tone. “I’ve had them on an empty stomach before.”

Ignoring him, Barry picks out the ingredients he needs to make a simple sandwich for the other man. Seeing as it’s the beginning of the month, and he got his paycheck just a couple of days ago, he has enough food to throw something decent together.

Len scowls at him when he holds out the plate of food in offering a couple of minutes later. For a moment Barry is sure he isn’t going to take it and make this whole damn situation even more daunting, but it seems that he’s also too tired for any of that.

“Thanks,” he grumbles quietly, and Barry just nods before he walks back to his kitchenette to heat
up some water for tea.

After the sandwich is gone, which takes much less time than he had expected, he hands the other man two of the small white pills along with the glass of water. As before, Len accepts them without complaint and actually looks a bit relieved as soon as he’s taken them. Despite his insistence that he is fine, it’s obvious that he doesn’t feel anything but awful, and he doesn’t seem to have gotten any drugs to help him with the pain before now.

“No coffee?” asks Len when Barry offers him a mug of still hot tea a short while later. He accepts it rather reluctantly.

“No, not for you anyway. Your body needs to quiet down and caffeine wouldn’t help with that.”

“Tea tastes like dishwater,” replies the other man rather sullenly, and Barry can’t help but chuckle even with how worn-out he is feeling.

“It doesn’t, you’re just picky.”

“Picky my ass.” grumbles Len before taking a sip of the hot liquid and grimacing.

“You are such a child.” Barry rubs his temple, behind which a familiar throbbing pain has started up again, but he smiles slightly. He is so damn tired, but at the same time he feels better than he has in weeks.

Despite his battered state, Len is obviously doing alright and could be far worse off, all things considering.

“Are the others okay as well?”

“Yeah, everybody’s got out alright.”

“Good.”

“Sit down already, you look dead on your feet.”

Len meets his surprised gaze and nods to the spot next to him on the couch.

The notion of sitting isn’t very appealing to Barry right now, not with how close they would be, seeing as the other man has placed himself mostly in the center of the couch.

“I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.” scoffs Len, and he gives him an annoyed look. “I’m not going to bite, so just sit down.”

“No, you lay down and get some sleep. I don’t think staying up talking is something you should do right now. You need rest.”

“On this piece of shit furniture?”

The incredulousness of Len’s voice probably should be irking to him, but it causes Barry to halt instead, as he is right. His couch is clearly no place for anybody to recover. “You can be so damn troublesome.”

“Takes one to know one,” snorts the other man tiredly, and he pats the cushion next to him in invitation. “Just sit down already.”
Barry doesn’t. He watches him quietly for another moment, pondering his options.

“Y-you c-can t-take m-my b-bed f-for t-tonight if y-you’re p-planning o-on s-staying. I w-will m-make d-do w-with th-the c-couch.”

“Stop being so damn ridiculous, I’m not going to make you sleep on this thing.” The way Len studies him with a darkening expression isn’t comfortable, but he still meets his eyes. “You’re angry.”

It isn’t a question, and Barry stays quiet. Mostly because he isn’t sure whether he really is or not. Right now, he’s just exhausted, and slightly overwhelmed by this turn of events.

“Wh-why h-have y-you c-come h-here, L-Len?”

“You don’t want me here?”

Barry frowns and looks away. This shouldn’t surprise him, and it really doesn’t. He’s known the other man for a long time now, and he is well aware of how mulish he can be if he puts his mind to it.

“I-I w-will ch-change th-the b-bedding,” he utters and turns to head to his bedroom. This is really not necessary, he knows that the criminal couldn’t care less whether he sleeps in a bed with fresh sheets or not, but he wants to get some distance between them.

“You don’t need to change that fucking bedding, Allen, I’m not sleeping in your bed.”

Len sounds like he is honestly getting angry, which is unsettling, even now. Barry still ignores it and proceeds on. He closes the door behind himself and just stays in front of it for a couple of seconds before starting with what he had come here to do.

His initial relief about seeing the other man again is slowly making way for a mixture of confusion and frustration.

What had Len been expecting? How did he think that he would react? The last time they saw each other Len slammed his door in his face and didn’t show himself again afterwards. Not before he and the others got locked up in the Heights.

“D-damn i-idiot.”

Barry isn’t sure whether he is talking about the other man or himself, and he doesn’t really want to think about it either. He can easily go through the motions of changing his bedding without paying any mind to it, but he wants to focus on the task as he prefers it to letting his thoughts go back to his guest, who is currently sitting in the other room waiting for his return.

For weeks now he has been so worried about him, about all of them, that it actually cost him sleep on more than one occasion. And now, seeing Len again is an extremely reassuring thing on one hand, but on the other it also causes a tumult of emotions in his chest he hadn’t expected.

The other man had been right, Barry may try to tell himself otherwise but he is angry at Len, angry and hurt. He has been this entire time if Barry is honest with himself.

After he is finished with the bed, he grabs the old bedding and takes it to the bathroom to put with the rest of his dirty laundry before making his way back out to where his guest is waiting.

Len is still sitting on the couch when he re-enters the living room, his head laid back and his eyes
closed. For a second Barry wonders whether he could have fallen asleep, and frowns slightly in concern at that thought, seeing as this position would hardly do him any good regarding his injuries.

“You finished sulking?”

Barry bristles at those words, and meets the other man’s tired eyes with a scowl as he opens them slightly and turns his head to look at him.

“Th-the b-bed i-is d-done, y-you c-can g-go and l-lay d-down if y-you w-want t-to.”

They watch each other in silence for a long moment afterwards. Len doesn’t return his scowl, nor does he glare at him as Barry had expected. Instead, he just looks exhausted.

“I came here because I wanted to see you.”

The words are unusually soft-spoken, and Barry isn’t sure how to react because he honestly hadn’t expected the other man to say anything in regard toward his reasons to coming here. Especially not something like that.

“I’d been wanting to pass by for a while. I mean, before the whole mess with the museum that took me out of the picture for the last couple of months,” Len goes on and keeps his eyes locked with Barry’s. “I know that I behaved like an ass when you passed by before.”

He snorts and rolls his head back so that he is looking up at the ceiling again while he lifts a hand to rub his eyes.

“You idiot, you probably spent most of your money on that damn take-out. You’re so infuriatingly stupid at times…”

“It’s ok-kay. I sh-shouldn’t h-have p-passed b-by,” says Barry after Len has fallen quiet again, and he turns his own gaze towards the window above the sink. “I w-was s-stupid. I d-didn’t c-cons-sider th-that y-you c-could h-have a-a g-guest.”

His cheeks grow hot and he tries not to think of Izzy, or the way she looked at him like he was something disgusting and pitiful at the same time.

“I w-won’t d-do it a-again.”

The way Len looked at him back then, so very furious, is still clear in his mind. It’s just as unsettling as it was then. He knows what it means when people react like that to him. It wasn’t the first time this has happened in his life, it won’t be the last, and that thought is so very daunting.

He swallows and coughs lightly before he quietly adds. “I-I d-didn’t w-want t-to emb-barrass you.”

His words are met with silence and neither of them say anything for a while, but he is able to feel the other man’s gaze on him the whole time. It’s uncomfortable, and he knows that Len wants him to look back at him, but he can’t bring himself to.

“Y-you sh-should r-really l-lay d-down,” he says after the tension has become too much for him to stand anymore, and he briefly glances at Len before he walks back over to the kitchenette to pour himself another cup of tea.

The other man doesn’t move from his spot, and while Barry has his back to him, he knows that he is still watching him. Why couldn’t he just do as he’s told, just this once?
Then, he can hear him get up and Barry briefly believes that Len has finally taken him up on his offer to use his bed for the night, before he realizes that he is actually limping towards him instead of the bedroom.

“Wh-what are y-you d-doing, y-you sh-shouldn’t m-move a-around, y-you’re h-hurt,” scold Barry in frustration as he turns to face him. “J-just g-go t-to b-bed alr-ready.”

“I will,” assures Len, who has stopped just a couple of feet away from him at the kitchen table, on which he is bracing himself. While he’s obviously trying not to show it, it’s hard to miss what a strain it puts on him to simply be on his feet right now.

“You don’t need to sleep on that piece of junk, though,” he goes on and gives a slight nod towards the couch. “Your bed is big enough for both of-“

“No!”

“I’m not going to try anything, for fuck’s sake! I am not a rapist and I am not going to hurt you in any other way either! Take a look at me, do you really think I could cause you any harm even if I wanted to with how messed up I am right now?”

Barry frowns and averts his eyes again. He doesn’t notice that he has raised his arms to hug himself in that pathetic subconscious way he hates so much.

“Th-the b-bed is h-hardly b-big e-enough f-for b-both o-of us, i-it w-would b-be u-un-necessarily unc-c-comfortable and y-you n-need r-rest.”

Len huffs in clear frustration, but doesn’t reply, which gives Barry some hope that he has finally decided to let this stupid idea drop. When he notices that he is once again moving closer, he can feel his stomach sink, and despite not wanting to, he turns back to him in slight alarm.

“Easy there,” says Len in a calm voice, and halts a bit more than an arm’s length away from him. It has to be difficult for him to stand without any kind of support, but Len doesn’t show it as he meets his wary eyes.

“Barry, I came here because…” Again, Len huffs in frustration, this time over himself, though. Barry isn’t sure what he’s trying to say, or whether he actually wants to really know.

“L-Len-“

“Share the bed with me, nothing will happen to you and… and I really want to have you close by.”

They watch each other quietly after Len stops speaking. A mixture of bewilderment and a faint warmth spreads through Barry, and while he knows that he shouldn’t agree to this, that this would quash any chance for him to find any sleep tonight, he nods wordlessly.

It’s odd to observe how Len’s expression relaxes at that, and how he actually smiles. A real smile. Not a smirk.

“Good… that’s good.”

Suddenly, Len doesn’t seem so sure on his own legs anymore, and he lets Barry usher him towards the bedroom without any further protest.

As expected, Barry doesn’t find any sleep that night, but he’s surprised by how oddly nice it is to have the other man resting next to him. It’s unsettling, of course, but it’s also nothing like he’d
thought it would be. And at the same time, also it’s a bit comforting. After all, he does know that Len wouldn’t hurt him, no matter what his subconscious tells him at times.

Thus, Barry finds himself awake and listens to the slow and soft breathing of the warm body next to him while the night slowly makes way for dawn. He can’t really bring himself to regret it in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been uploaded a day early because I will be at a family's BBQ tomorrow and thus probably won't have time to do so then.

So, it seems that Len is back in the picture and I hope that has pleased some of my dear fellow Barry/Len shippers as much as it has pleased me.

I want to briefly touch upon something regarding Barry and how he seemingly can't catch a break. It will get better for our favourite blond speedster (or not so much speedster right now) but it will happen in due time. Things won't always be just bad for him, though, like with everybody's life, there will be up and downs. He just has to deal with a lot more than an ordinary person due to his special circumstances.

And, hey, he does have the Rogues (for better or worse) and they may not always be the best source of support he can have but they really do help him and makes it easier for Barry to deal with everything.

I've been asked how long this story will be and I honestly can't answer this just yet. I will be long, lets keep it at that. Singularity is just the first part of a (probably) two part series, and it will likely have around 100+ chapters.

Anyway, hope you guys liked this chapter and feel free to share your thoughts because you have no idea what a joy it is to read them.
Barry runs into Edward in the staircase again.

“Still don’t fancy any lemonade?” asks the other man with a lopsided smile as he shifts the two paper bags of groceries in his arms so that he won’t lose his hold on them.

“W-would y-you m-mind if a f-friend o-of m-mine c-comes al-long?”

Barry really doesn’t want to be rude, especially now that he’s being invited over for the second time, but he still isn’t sure what to think of his neighbor. Even though he’s been nothing but nice toward him so far there’s just something a bit strange about him. It’s something he can’t really put his finger on, and he would feel much safer with another person around. Aside from that, Mary had offered to tag along should he want to accept Edward’s offer for a drink after he told her about the neighbor he usually meets about once a week on his fire escape.

“The more, the merrier,” grins the other man, and he tells Barry to just knock after he’s asked his friend about joining them.

Mary, who had told him that she would be home today, agrees readily enough, and actually brings some of the fried cheese balls she made the night before along.

“Nice,” Edward mouths to him after Barry introduced them, when Mary is already on her way to the living room. At his slightly disapproving frown, the other man just chuckles and reminds him that he brought her along.

“Aside from that, I’m a real gentleman,” he adds and winks at him before he follows the dark-haired woman into the next room.

Despite his concern, it turns out that Edward is mostly just fooling around. He obviously has no real interest in Mary, who takes his rather blatantly flirting with good humor.

There is no lemonade, as Edward hadn’t bought any lemons during his shopping trip today, so they settle on root beer and snacks while making small-talk. It’s a surprisingly nice affair, and Barry starts to relax enough within the first twenty minutes to really enjoy it.

They can’t stay for more than an hour, as Edward is going to meet up with friends after that, but they agree to get together again in the coming week. With that they also agree to do a video night,
as the other man actually possesses a rather nice flat screen TV and a DVD player; along with quite an impressive movie collection. Barry just needs one glance to notice that his neighbor seems to be quite fond of horror movies, and he really hopes that they won’t end up watching something gory.

After they’ve said their good-byes, Mary comes back to Barry’s place with him and stays for dinner.

“He’s nice,” she remarks as she helps him cut the onions for a Bolognese sauce. “And definitively a cheerful fellow.”

Barry hums in agreement while he cuts the tomatoes. When Mary fails to go on, he notices that she is watching him with a slightly worried look.

“You don’t like him?”

“No, he’s f-fine,” he disagrees quickly, and he really means it. “I… it’s n-not r-really him, it’s m-me. I-I’m n-not s-so g-good w-with…”

His cheeks grow hot and he turns back to the cutting board. Mary knows what he means, he hasn’t told her so far outright what happened to him, but she is a very attentive and bright young woman. She’s most likely already started to draw herself a picture of what’s still haunting him from his past.

She touches his elbow tentatively and he glances at her to see her smiling softly and reassuringly at him.

“I think he’s nice, I really do, and I don’t think that you have to be worried about him,” she tells him with a surprising certainty before her expression suddenly hardens. “But should he ever hurt you, I will make sure that he is going to regret it for the rest of his life.”

Barry is slightly taken aback by the fierceness with which she has spoken, and he’s not sure how to react. Mary, who notices it, blushes slightly and smiles a bit embarrassed but the seriousness doesn’t leave her gaze.

“We’re friends, Barry, we’re going to stick together.”

“Yes,” he agrees, and despite how slightly unsettling it is to get a glimpse of this unexpectedly unkind side of his friend, he still feels warmed by her words.

“We are.”

She smiles and squeezes his elbow lightly before she lets go again and turns back to her task.

***

“A m-mirror?”

Barry looks up from the small object in his hand he had been given by Len just a moment ago with a confused expression. “You w-want m-me t-to have a…” he stops and frowns as he realizes what this probably means.

“I c-can use th-the m-mirror i-in m-my b-bathr-room like I-I’ve d-done s-so f-far,” he points out a bit hesitantly and doesn’t like how heavy the small item suddenly feels in his palm.

“Yes, but you can’t carry your bathroom mirror around with you.” Len gives him a look as if he’s behaving like an especially slow child, and Barry’s frown deepens. It’s annoying at times how his friend seems to expect him to just take what he says at face value.
“Wh-why w-would I w-want to c-carry it ar-round w-with m-me?”

“In case you need to contact us,” replies Len rather curtly, and he goes on before Barry has the opportunity to ask any more questions. “Just take it, you don’t have to use it, and it’s hardly heavy enough to be a bother.”

“B-but-”

“Barry, just do me this favor, okay?”

“Wh-why? Is s-someth-thing g-going on? A-are you in t-trouble?”

“No, nothing is going on,” grunts the other man, and while he is meeting his eyes easily, Barry is well aware of what a good liar his friend can be when he wants. “But you aren’t exactly living in the safest area of the Gems. You could always run into trouble, and you don’t even own a damn cell phone.”

“I d-don’t n-need one.” he replies rather snappishly, and he immediately feels bad for it afterwards, seeing as Len actually just wants to make sure that he’s alright. “L-look, I w-will t-take it, b-but you are n-not listen-ning in on m-me, alr-right?”

Len looks honestly puzzled for a moment before he snorts and shakes his head in amused disbelief. “You really think Sam would need this thing to spy on you if he wanted to? You’re surrounded by reflective surfaces all damn day.”

The other man quickly realizes that was probably not the wisest thing to say when trying to convince him to accept the small mirror, as Barry’s expression is now clearly showing alarm and wariness over this piece of information.

“Scudder doesn’t do that shit,” he scoffs before he smirks. “Why do you even think he would want to? You think he fancies you?”

These words cause Barry to bristle and he shoots the other man a dirty look before he stuffs the small item into his pocket and turns around to leave the room.

“Where are you going?” Len is immediately close behind him again, and Barry wishes the man could just take a hint.

“I th-think I-I h-have h-had enough of y-your ch-charming p-personal-lity f-for today.”

“You’re really getting pissed over this?” Len follows him along into the hallway of the rundown basement they are currently in. It’s barely lit at all, as most of the bulbs have stopped working probably quite some time ago. The lack of light gives the whole place a rather eerie appearance as soon as one leaves the couple of rooms that are in active use.

“It was a joke!”

“Y-you are n-not f-funny.”

Barry hopes that Sam isn’t in the middle of a poker game and will be nice enough to take him back to his flat. This hideout actually doesn’t lay too far away from his apartment building, so he could find his way home on his own if he has to, but it’s rather late and he really would prefer not to.

A hand grabs his right wrist and he freezes up immediately. Len lets go just a second later, and Barry quickly gets some additional space between them while his skin starts to itch all over. He swallows
with some difficulty, and it’s so damn hard to keep his breathing even and ignore the unsettling feeling of being in fear despite knowing there is no reason to be.

In moments like this he really hates Len a little, because he knows how horrible this is for him, how it scares him to be touched when he isn’t expecting it; especially when he’s already in an agitated state of mind. He glares at him and tries not to let himself feel so damn shaken by this brief touch.

Len is returning his look with that damn closed off expression of his once again that makes it impossible to read him. Barry swallows again, feeling suddenly less annoyed and more wary. He averts his gaze to the side and studies the wall beside him.

“Look, I shouldn’t have said that, I didn’t think, and I didn’t mean anything by it,” starts Len after the silence between them has grown increasingly uncomfortable.

Barry presses his lips together and keeps his gaze on the dirty wall with its flaking paint. His arms itch badly, and the urge to hug himself is so strong it’s almost painfully right now. He forces himself to keep still, though.

“Th-this is n-not f-funny, L-Len.”

“I know.”

Their eyes meet and Barry searches the other man’s face for a second for any trace that he doesn’t mean it. His body relaxes a bit when he can’t find any.

“I d-didn’t m-mean to r-react l-like th-this either.” he states quietly, and he awkwardly shifts his weight from one foot to his other while looking at the ground. “S-some th-things j-just… it m-makes m-me w-want t-to j-just g-get away.”

It makes him want to get out of his skin, to be more precise. To scrub himself until nothing is left, but Barry couldn’t share that with Len, or anyone else for that matter.

“I get it.”

Barry glances at Len and notices the severity with which he is studying him.

“You still want to go back to your place?”

He hesitates for a moment. Sam picked him up earlier today, shortly after noon, and most of his time here has been fine, aside from when Mick and Marco started a fight over a poker game, or Lisa’s quips, which, to be honest, have lost quite some of their bite since he’d been around the last time.

Still, he’s getting tired, and he doesn’t think that he wants to watch another game of poker for at least a week; even with how amusingly snarky the Rogues usually are.

“Y-you w-want to c-come along?”

Len considers him for a moment, but doesn’t seem bothered by his request. Then, he smirks. “Sure, so long as you have coffee there and not just that herbal dishwater.”

***

“Barry, could I speak to you a moment before you go?”

Barry, who has just grabbed his backpack from the small room he usually uses to eat or rest during his breaks, is surprised to see his employer at the bottom of the stairs that lead to her living area
upstairs. He thought that she would have gone to bed by now, as it’s already after ten.

“Of course.”

Suddenly, a nagging worry settles heavily in the pit of his stomach and he tries to think of anything he’s done today that could have caused him to be in trouble. It’s unlikely, and even if he should have messed up in some way, he’s pretty sure that Mrs. Ming wouldn’t fire him, but the notion itself is still quite unsettling.

“Don’t look so worried, my dear,” laughs the old woman, and she gives him a fond smile before she explains that she has to ask a favor of him.

“You see, my great-grandniece is being Christened in two weeks and I am planning on attend the ceremony. Afterwards I would like to stay with some family that I haven’t seen in a while, so I will be in Chicago for about three weeks. Under normal circumstances I would have to close the store for that duration of time, but I was thinking that this might not be necessary with you around.”

She laughs again softly when Barry just looks at her with big incredulous eyes, as if he had just misheard what she has said.

“You want me to look after your shop while you’re gone?” he asks, just to make sure that he has really understand the meaning of her words.

“Yes, my dear, you would help me a great deal by doing this. And I would raise your wage for the time you are handling everything on your own, of course.”

“But… do you really think that is a good idea?”

While it is really nice to think that she would actually see him fit for the task, despite who he is, he isn’t certain whether this is really something she should do. He’s an ex-convict on parole after all, and trouble tends to sniff him out like a bear does honey.

“I do,” Mrs. Ming assures him, and she gives him a soft look and a somewhat sad smile that causes him to feel a bit uneasy. “You have been doing such a fine job from the very start, and I know that you are a reliable person who is capable of handling this store while I am gone.” Barry swallows around a small lump in his throat and isn’t sure how to say to that.

“Don’t feel obligated to say yes, though. I don’t want to force you,” the elder woman goes on, “You don’t have to, I just think that it would be a nice solution for this little problem that would suit both of us quite nicely. If you don’t feel comfortable with it, though, I understand, and I won’t hold it against you.”

She is honest about it, he knows that, and it’s so strange to realize that she trusts him so much.

“Though If I have to close the store, I will not able to pay you for the time I am gone.” she adds with a regretful expression, and it’s obvious that this concerns her.

Barry swallows again and shakes his head with an uncertain smile.

“N-no, i-it’s f-fine, I w-will t-take c-care of th-the s-store w-while you are g-gone.”

Over the last year most of the tasks of running the store have fallen to him anyway, and he is pretty sure that he would be able to hold down the fort on his own for a couple of weeks.

“Thank you, Barry.”
Mrs. Ming gives him a grateful smile and then both say their good-byes before Barry finally leaves.

***

“Right, you’re already out on legal terms for a year,” remarks Mick, who is sitting opposite of Barry, and is currently shuffling the cards for their next game.

“Shit, man, can’t even remember the last time I was able to stay out of that hole for that long,” chuckles Sam, and he takes a pull of his bottle. “No less on parole.”

“Probably because they never let you out on parole.” snorts the other Rogue before he starts to deal the cards.

It’s just the three of them right now, and Barry still isn’t sure what possessed him to agree when Sam asked him whether he would like to join in for a round.

“True enough,” agrees the brunet, and he picks up his cards. “Can’t say I see the charm of it.”

Mick grunts in agreement and Barry hopes that they leave it at that. His luck doesn’t work like that, though.

“You wanna celebrate and get smashed?”

The appalled look he gives Mick at that causes both of his current companions to laugh outright.

“Seriously, Allen, live a little,” snorts Sam as they start the first round. “Check.”

“I’m qu-quite f-fine, th-thanks,” he returns rather drily. “Check.”

“You are one of the most boring people I know,” disagrees Mick, as he throws down one of the one-dollar plastic chips Hartley turned up with about a week ago so that they could at least pretend they’re playing for money whenever Barry joined in.

“I l-like b-boring.”

“You don’t say?” scoffs the bald man, but there’s no malice or hostility behind it. “What you need is some real fun.”

“N-no, I d-don’t.”

“Hey,” interjects Sam, and he gives the impression of someone who is certain that he has just had a brilliant idea. “We could play a drinking game, we haven’t in a while.”

“What are you, ten?” The annoyed glance Mick throws the other man makes it clear what he thinks of that.

“We could play ‘Circle of Death’, Lisa would definitely be all for it.”

“Hell no, I won’t play that retarded game again.”

“You’re just pissed that you weren’t able to finish that tongue twister without making a total ass out of yourself.”

“I’m not going to play that, or any other drinking game. You wanna get plastered? Just grab another beer.” Mick shoots his colleague an irked glance before he turns his attention back to the game.
Barry’s thankful when the topic moves from his parole to the fact that Hartley is currently having a hissy fit because one of his rats has vanished and he is certain that Digger had something to do with it. “D-Digger d-doesn’t l-like h-his p-pets?”

Sam snorts while Mick scoffs.

“Nah, it’s the other way around. The little pests can’t stand him,” explains the pyromaniac, and he takes a pull of his beer. “Probably think he is some kind of disgusting moldy cheese.”

“Yeah, he definitely has the smell at times.”

Both men snort while Barry isn’t sure whether he should be disgusted or amused.

“I h-haven’t r-really s-seen Hartl-ley’s r-rats around.”

“They aren’t really his pets. Apart from a couple the rest usually vanish back into the sewers after a while. He just calls them when he needs them.” remarks Sam with a shrug. “Which I’m damn glad for, seeing as they’re nasty little vermin.”

“Yeah, for such a neat freak, he definitely has weird taste in pets,” agrees Mick with a disgusted frown. “I mean, he lets them crawl all over him.”

“We all have our oddities.”

Sam seems rather undisturbed by his colleague’s rather questionable choice of co-workers. Barry had picked up on the rather laid back way with which the man usually handles things a while ago. Which hadn’t exactly been what he’d expected. Mirror Master has never been one of the Rogues who would outright blow a gasket, but, like most of his colleagues, he just always seemed rather hot-headed.

Then again, the times Barry himself put on a mask and fought any of them is nearly a decade gone. People change as years go by, he definitely knows this, and why shouldn’t it be the same for them?

“If you’re finished staring into space, Allen, it’s your turn.”

Barry flinches slightly and flushes in embarrassment as he realizes that he has let himself get carried away by his own thoughts.

“S-sorry.” he mutters and throws one of the plastic chips at the slowly growing pot in the middle of the table.

“Are Piper’s rats really that fascinating to you?” chuckles Sam as he exchanges two of his cards. “I’m sure he’d let you pet one of them if you asked him.”

The only answer Barry gives the other man is an annoyed look, which seems to amuse him even more.

They play for another fifteen minutes before the round ends with Mick winning. After that Barry takes his leave to go look for Len, who is most likely still in his room tinkering on his cold gun.

“Had enough mingling for today?” the other man greets as Barry enters, without looking up from where he is currently sitting at his workbench. Some music is playing on a low volume in the background from the small portable radio next to the cot that serves as a bed.

“Y-yes.” The room is rather dimly lit as the only light source is the lamp on the bench, and he can’t
help but frown slightly.

“You are r-ruining y-your eyes,” he comments and turns the ceiling lights on before walking over to him. Len glances briefly at him with a look that’s a mixture of annoyance and amusement, but doesn’t disagree.

Barry takes a seat on the empty crate he has used as a seat the last couple of times he’s been around, and just watches the other man work for a while in silence. Len never seems bothered by his quiet presence, which is oddly comforting in a way, and he enjoys these quiet moments between them.

He never asks him what he’s working on, he doesn’t really want to know, even though he is somewhat curious. Len never tells him either, as both of them seem well aware what thin ice they’re treading.

Thus, they sit together in a comfortable silence, listening to the low music from the radio in the background as the minutes tick away.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys liked it!

Regarding my OCs, I get that not everybody of you likes them and that is fine, I usually see them as the weak link of most fanfics I’ve read so far (with some really nice exceptions, tho), and I will try not to go overboarded with them but they will be a part of the story and I don’t intend to change that (I just love my little OCs too much to delete them).

Next chapter will introduce someone new (not so new), so stay tuned.
Of Concussions and Unexpected Encounters

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by the very lovely palpablenotion.

Thanks again to everyone of you who took the time to leave me a kudos or a comment, I always love them and really appreciate it.

November 2nd year

The lock of the door latches with the usual brief rattling sound as Barry turns the key. It is late, already half past elven, and he is really looking forward to his bed before he has to get back to the store again in about seven hours.

Mrs. Ming had offered him the use of the couch in her flat while he is working the store on his own as it usually takes him nearly an hour to get to the store from his home in the mornings and even longer the other way around as the intervals between the busses grow longer the later it gets. It is really kind of her and he has considered it more than once already but he can’t bring himself to do so. It just doesn’t feel right and, knowing his luck, he worries that this could get him in trouble one way or another.

At times like this one, though, he really has a hard time not taking her up on the offer. Even with the current shorter opening hours it is quite a hassle to handle the store all by himself and with how unusually busy it has been today, he had to stay about an hour longer to finish closing and prepare things for tomorrow.

It also doesn’t help that the weather is rather cold, fittingly so for the beginning of November, and the drizzle he had woken up to this morning has become an outright shower towards midday that is still holding on.

Well, it isn’t as if he doesn’t like the rain. The patter against his window always makes it easier for him to relax and fall asleep.

Still, he could do without the freezing temperatures…

Opening his umbrella, he makes his way towards the bus stop that sits about five minutes away from the store and starts to go through the list of items he has to order the next day in his mind once again.

The last five days have gone by surprisingly smoothly and the initial gnawing worry about making some stupid mistake that would have severe repercussions for him or his employer have slowly started to ebb away.

Most of their usual customers knew him quite well by now and a couple of the older ladies, who were friends with Mrs. Ming, complimented him on what a fine job he is doing in her absence. … which was nice and unexpected.
In general, though, nobody picked up on the fact that the actual owner of the store wasn’t around and, after the first two days, Barry realized that nothing has really changed that much.

A car passes by next to him and lightens up the dark sidewalk he is currently on.

The streetlamps in this area are mostly not working so there are rather long patches laying in darkness. It is uncomfortable to pass through them at night with nobody else around and, for a long time, he really dreaded this way.

As with anything else, he has gotten used to it over the months and especially now, with how tired and busy his mind is, he hardly pays any mind to his surroundings.

Thus, the hit to the back of his head catches Barry completely by off-guard and he hardly has the presence of mind to dampen his fall with his hands. A sharp pain in his knees and palms adds to the one in his skull before someone lands a kick to his hip.

Automatically, he rolls onto his side and pulls his limbs close while ducking his head and his hands covering his neck. Another kick against his back follows, which causes a white-hot pain to flash through his body and he starts to feel oddly lightheaded.

Someone grabs his hairs and pulls his head back while someone else forces his arms away from his chest. He feels paralyzed and frightened enough that he isn’t able to produce a single sound.

Memories overcome him, from his time in the Heights and from further back – a mixture of events Barry tries to never think of if he can help it.

Hands are patting him down before one reaches into his coat and he chokes on a whimper, certain of what would now follow. There is laughter, it sounds odd, like through a thick wall of cotton.

Then it is gone and he is alone again.

Barry keeps laying there, not moving an inch. He feels shaken and confused and he isn’t able to think straight. The only thing he is really aware of, is that his head hurts and that he feels sick.

His body starts to tremble and while it could be due to the rain that is still coming and causing him to quickly grow wet and cold, even in his current state of mind Barry is well aware that he is going into shock.

The rational part of him urges him to try and get up, just move and get to safety, while the scared and confused part just wants to stay like he is right now.

Even though he knows how ridiculous it is, he somehow is sure that all of this could simply pass by should he stay small and quiet enough.

This helped him a lot as a child.

Barry has no idea how much time has passed when he suddenly picks up on footsteps just a moment before they stop next to him. A couple of cars have passed by so far, he thinks so at least, but it is hard to pick up on the world around him with the throbbing in his head and it grows steadily harder with every passing minute.

“Bugger, jimmy,” someone says and again it sounds as if he was hearing the person talk through water. Not a good sign, Barry knows from experience that he must have gotten himself quite a severe concussion.
Just his damn luck…

Still, despite how dizzy he feels, he is certain that it is a man.

“Someone mistook ye fur a punching poke?”

It is most likely meant as a rhetorical question; Barry still tries to answer but isn’t able to get his voice to work. The throbbing behind his temples and forehead grows worse and he starts to feel really sick.

The stranger doesn’t say anything for a long moment and even though Barry can’t see his face in the darkness, it is obvious that he isn’t exactly excited about running into him out here.

Barry expects him to simply walk away but it still causes his stomach to sink when he actually does.

“W-w-wait, p-please…”

His voice sounds faint and feeble and the pain in his head increases so badly that he whimpers softly. He doesn’t think that the man would stop but he is surprised. The steps halt for a second before they come closer again and stop next to his head once more.

A tense silence follows and Barry knows that the stranger is pondering whether he should help him or not.

“Ye have ony dosh oan ye?”

The words sound like gibberish to him in his current state and Barry just makes a confused noise which causes his current companion to huff.

“Money, ye have money?”

There had been a total of two bucks and twenty eight cents in his wallet. Clearly not worth a mugging and Barry feels a slight satisfaction at the notion that the people who attacked him didn’t get more out of it.

This stranger would most likely not have seen this as a satisfying reward, anyway.

“I-I g-g… m-mug-ged…”

“Richt…”

It is harder and harder for Barry to stay focused and a part of him just wants the stranger to go and leave him in peace. The part of him that actually helped him through most of his life stomps the other one quickly down, though.

“I-I… m-mon-ney a-at h-home.”

His tongue feels heavy and it becomes difficult and awkward to talk. He really hopes he would not lose conscious before getting away from here. He is really not keen on the idea of dying on a dirty and wet sidewalk.

“Thay git ye guid,” mutters the stranger and the frown with which he is currently studying him is palpable to Barry despite him not being able to get a good look at the other man.

“P-pleas-se… h-help m-me…”

He doesn’t want to die.
This realisation hits Barry like a punch and it steals his breath for a second because, for the longest time, he has been in a really dark place now and while he forces himself not to listen to this ugly little voice in the back of his mind, he knows what it is telling him – what it has been whispering to him for the longest time...

Barry told himself that he was just exhausted, he always assured himself that he would not even consider this notion. A part of him knew that it was at least partly a lie, though.

Over the years it had become so very hard to cling to the thought that this life is worth all the pain, even now that he was no longer alone… but apparently, it is enough for him as he really doesn’t want it to end like this. He knows that Mary would be incredibly upset, so would be Mrs Ming and Len too…

… Len.

The other man has stayed quiet for a long minute, oblivious to what is going on in Barry’s mind, before he hisses something that sounds like a string of swears under his breath.

“Yer better makin’ tha worth th’ pumpin’ effort, pal,” grunts the stranger before he kneels down next to him. “Whaur tae?”

This is a good question.

On the one hand, Barry really wants to get home but he is not so far gone that he doesn’t know what a stupid idea it is to actually try to make it there in his current state.

“Th-th-there i-is… a-a sh-shop… b-b-back th… th-there…”

It takes him a surprising amount of effort to lift his hand to point in the direction he has just come from. “Shop?”

He doesn’t have to see him to know that his somewhat reluctant Samaritan isn’t sure what to think of that.

“W-w-work…” Barry explains feebly and is relieved when the stranger grunts in understanding before he asks him whether he thinks that he can be moved.

Barry agrees, not really all that certain, but rather eager to get away from here.

Being touched by someone he doesn’t know anything of is as horrible of an experience as always, especially now, and while he tried to brace himself for it, it is still worse than he had expected. The other man doesn’t comment on his reaction as he is most likely assuming that this is due to the fact that he has just been assaulted and mugged.

It doesn’t take them long to get back to Mrs. Ming’s shop, not even two minutes, as Barry hadn’t gotten that far before the assault. Still, it is a very daunting experience.

Moving hurts and the nausea he is feeling becomes so bad that he is actually throwing up a couple of feet away from the back entrance.

The stranger is understandably not thrilled by this and mutters something under his breath Barry isn’t able to pick up but is quite certain that he probably doesn’t want to know anyway.

“Whaur ur th’ keys?”
With some difficulty, he is able to pull the small keychain out of his trouser pocket and hands it to the other man, who picks it up and asks about which key it is. He sounds quite irritable by now.

Barry can’t hold it against him. He is pretty sure that neither of them both expected their nights to go like this.

After he pointed the right one out and the door has been unlocked, they move into the small room where he usually counts the cash. It is also the nearest one to the back exit.

The other man helps him to the table with the chair and it is a real blessing to be off his feet again. Barry has grown rather worried that they would finally giving out under him any second now.

“Dae ye sell heavy?”

At his confused look, the other man huffs in annoyance and repeats his question in a clearly irked tone.

“Beer, ye sell beer?”

Barry nods slightly and flinches as even the little movement causes a sharp pain to go through his head, making him feel like it is about to crack open at the top.

The other man frowns and asks if he should pick him up some aspirin as well, to which he agrees readily.

While the stranger is gone, Barry slumps down at the table and can’t really bring himself to worry about the guy possibly helping himself to more than just the drink. Instead he thinks about what to do now.

It is clear that he has been hurt and he isn’t sure whether he should just go and lay down or not.

If he has a concussion, of which he is mostly certain by now, it is likely a really stupid idea to let himself fall asleep. At the same time, he is well aware that he wouldn’t be able to keep himself up for long and he sure as hell won’t ask the strange man to assist him with staying awake, not that it is very likely that he would want to help him anyway seeing how impatient he has already grown.

Barry can’t be sure but he has the feeling that the man is at least some kind of shady person and the notion of having him around when he is in a position in which he isn’t able to defend himself in any way, is growing increasingly unsettling.

The throbbing in his head is steadily worsening and he feels how the nausea is getting stronger again as well. This makes it even more difficult to come up with a plan of what to do now.

His first thought is to contact Mary but he lets got of this idea quickly again as he doesn’t know the number of her mobile phone by heart and she is visiting a friend in Kansas City till the day after tomorrow and thus isn’t around, anyway.

Aside from that, he really doesn’t want to worry her or burden her with taking care of him till he feels more like himself again.

Then, his mind goes back to Len once more and this time it takes him only a second to remember that he still is carrying around the small mirror he had been given a couple of weeks ago.

Despite having had no intent to ever use it so far, he usually puts it into his trouser pocket, where he finds it now as well much to his relief.
A sharp pain goes through his right hand as he grabs for it and it takes him a couple of moments to realize that he seems to have been unlucky enough to get it injured while being mugged. He studies the swelling below his knuckle area of his hand and wonders how he would be able to pay for the medical treatment or if it maybe would heal by itself should he bandage it firmly and be careful enough not to move it too much.

Well, he is not going to worry about this right now.

Instead, Barry turns his attention back to the small round reflective surface in his fingers and he realizes that this probably would have been a good alternative to depending on the help of some guy he doesn’t know anything about in the first place.

It is then that the stranger enters the room again and Barry glances at him.

As he has assumed, the man has helped himself to a beer but was also carrying an orange pill bottle and a Coca Cola.

“’ere, some asprin ’n’ a coke.”

The goods are put next to where he is mostly resting on the table and Barry utters a small thanks.

“Sae, whit’s aboot th’ dosh?”

Barry took a moment to decipher what he just said and his tongue feels oddly heavy as he answers.

“Y-you’ll g-g-get i-it… j-just a-a m-mom-ment…”

The other man frowns but before he can object, Barry has turned back to the small mirror and, after hesitating for a second, calls for Sam.

The stranger, who sips on his beer, is clearly thinking that he lost it after he has peered over his shoulder to see what he is talking to. He then nearly chokes on the drink, though, as Sam’s face appears on the small reflective surface just a moment later.

“Barry?” asks the other man and his slightly annoyed expression with which he has answered his call is quickly replaced by a much more concerned one. “What the hell happened to you?”

“M-mugged.” Barry explains and is frustrated by how slurred he sounds despite his best effort.

“Where are you?” Sam really seems worried now.

It probably is a bad sign that Barry needs a moment to remember his current whereabouts.

“W-w-work…”

“Okay, stay put, I will be over in a few.”

The little mirror shows the reflection of his own face again and Barry stares at it blankly for another couple of seconds before letting both his head and his hand drop onto the table. He groans very quietly and tries to will his stomach to calm down again.

“Whit th’ hell?” mutters the stranger next to him and causes Barry to flinch as he has momentarily forgotten all about him.

“Did ye juist blether tae a jimmy thro’ a mirror?”
Barry frowns but nods and decides that he has enough of thinking of this man as the stranger and asks him for his name.

“I-I’m B-Bar-ry,” he adds when the other man doesn’t reply and simply stares at him with an odd expression.

“Evan,” answers his now no longer nameless companion before his frown deepens and he takes a gulp of his beer.

The sound of a door being opened somewhere outside the small room cuts through the silence that has settled between them. Footsteps follow, from more than one person, and Barry can hear Sam telling someone else that it is this way.

A moment later, Sam and Hartley enter the room and he can’t help but feel immensely relieved by their arrival.

“How are you feeling, Barry?” The redhead crouches down next to him and studies him with open concern.

Barry tries to answer but can only produce a miserable sounding groan.

“Who the fuck are you?”

Both, Barry and Hartley glance over to where Sam is currently eyeing Evan with a suspicious look.

“Awright, calm doon. Ah hae nae dane anythin’ tae him. If it wur nae fur me, he wid aye lay outdoors in th’ pumpin’ storm.”

“... was that just English?” asks Sam as he studies the other man with a confused frown, which in turn causes Evan to scowl in annoyance.

“Awa’ an’ bile yer heid!”

“Stop it, Sam, we have other problems than you starting something again,” interrupts Hartley with a glare to his colleague before he turns back to Barry and tentatively touches his shoulder. He makes a shushing noise when he receives a small whimper in response.

“It’s alright, Barry. We’re going to help you.”

The redhead turns back to Sam and tells him to get some ice from the store which causes the other man to grumble in annoyance but still do as asked.

Afterwards, his friend asks him where he is hurt and it is ridiculous how hard it is for Barry to come up with an answer.

It becomes obvious that his hand is most likely broken when Hartley touches it slightly and the pain it causes is enough that he cries out in protest.

“Sorry, I won’t do that again,” assures his friend and asks him not to move it if he can help it. Barry tries to nod but finds himself throwing up instead. Hartley is quick enough to avoid it, for which Barry is immensely grateful because he knows that he would have felt horrible otherwise.

“S-s-sorry…”

“It’s alright. Don’t worry about it,” Hartley tells him in soothing voice. “How are you feeling?”
“D-d-diz-zy… a-and… m-my h-head h-h-hurts…”

Barry closes his eyes and groans again softly, no longer content with the bright light around him. He listens to how Hartley sends Sam to catch Len as soon as the other Rogue comes back. Sam does so without protest.

Hartley turns back to him next and asks him whether there is a place for him to lay down.

“U-ups-stairs…” he answers before he realizes that Mrs. Ming most likely wouldn’t appreciate a bunch of strangers in her flat. His protests fall on deaf ears, though.

“You need to rest, Barry, you are seriously injured. I am sure you employer will understand this.”

Hartley touches his shoulder slightly again and meets his upset expression with a reassuring one before he turns his gaze to Evan, who is still standing at the same spot as before. It is obvious that he isn’t sure what to make of this situation.

“Can you help me get him up?”

“Aye, sure. Bit thae fellow promised me fiftae bucks fur mae help.”

Barry frowns and is quite sure that he never mentioned a certain amount of money the other man would get as a reward. Especially not one as ridiculously high as this.

“Well,” answers Hartley and his tone makes it clear that he has just decided that he doesn’t like Evan all that much. “We can clear that one later.”

“A’m waantin’ th’ dosh.” insists the other man and while he doesn’t sound aggressive it is hard to miss that he isn’t joking.

“I am sure you do,” answers the redhead and while he doesn’t sound aggressive it is hard to miss that he isn’t joking.

“I am sure you do,” answers the redhead and there is a slight edge to the way he speaks that hasn’t been there before. “And you will get it but I would really appreciate it if you could help me with getting him upstairs first.”

A strained silence follows and Barry, who has closed his eyes again, suddenly feels extremely uneasy.

Then, he can hear Evan start to walk over to him and the aggression in the room seems to decrease palpably again.

“It’s alright, Barry, we are just going to touch you to get you somewhere more comfortable,” says Hartley in a calm and once again soothing voice before he takes a hold of his right arm. Evan grabs his left and while he knows that nothing would happen to him, he can’t stop himself from feebly protesting.

While Hartley pulls his arm over his shoulder, the other man hesitates.

“Whit’s it wi’ him?”

“None of your business. You want your money, you better start moving.” Hartley gives him a hard look and Evan grunts something that is probably an insult before he finally does as asked.

The way upstairs isn’t very long, Barry knows that, he has gone there a number of times already, but it still feels like an eternity to him until they are finally in the small cosy living room of Mrs. Ming’s flat.
His head is hurting so badly by now that he is now entirely sure it is going to split any moment now and he is hardly ably to support any of his own weight anymore as his knees seem to have turned into jelly somewhere along the way.

They get him over to the couch and, as soon as they have helped him to sit down, he throws up again.

Barry grows quite distressed over it as this is Mrs Ming’s home and the notion of what has just happened is pretty much horrifying to him.

“I will take care of that,” Hartley assures him as he carefully pushes him back so that he is laying down. “Don’t worry about it, the carpet will be as good as new when I am finished with it. Just try to calm down a bit, getting upset is not helping you right now.”

“Ah wull fetch masell anither beer, yi'll waant me tae git something else fae doonby tae?”

Both Barry and Hartley look over to Evan, who has walked back to the door that leads directly to the stairs.

“No, it’s fine, but don’t help yourself to anything else or you can be sure that the next thing you know is that you’ll wake up in a police car,” warns the Rogue and while the other man briefly looks as if he is getting pissed, he seem to think the better of it and just mutters something rather hostile sounding under his breath before leaving them alone.

“You really have a knack for getting to know the worst kind of people,” muses Hartley and shoots Barry an amused glance before his expression turns more serious again.

“You want me to get you some water?”

“N-no… s-sick…”

“Okay, then let’s just wait for the others to arrive.”

“L-Len?”

“Yeah, he will be here soon,” agrees Hartley and crouches down next to Barry’s head again before he cups his shoulder lightly. “He knows a doctor who can help you.”

Another fifteen minutes pass before Sam finally comes back along with Len and a very grumpy looking older guy.

Barry can’t help but feel a bit better as soon as he sees his friend.

An expression flickers over Len’s face, so quickly that Barry is hardly able to pick up on it but even in the hazy state his mind is in right now he is pretty sure that it had been worry. The sudden urge to have Len closer is nearly painfully strong and he utters his name before he even realizes what he is doing. He feels like such a damn fool just a second later.

Len doesn’t seems annoyed by this, though, and gives him a very thin smile before he turns to the old man whom he and Sam have brought along and who is undoubtedly the doctor Hartley mentioned before.

“If you want the money, start doing your job, Simmons.”

The doctor, who is rather short and thin fellows in his early sixties with a very wrinkly face, shoots
Len an annoyed and very unimpressed look.

“Watch your tone, boy, or you can look for someone else to take care of your friend,” he grouses and gives the criminal a hard look. “You know that I don’t do late night visits anymore and I should have shot you two for being insolent enough to turn up in my damn house.”

“You did shot at us, you old geezer,” reminds Sam with dark glare to the older man, who ignores him.

The doctor instead turns his attention to Barry, who is watching him with a mixture of fear and apprehension. He steps closer to him but is stopped by Hartley before he can go to work.

“It is difficult for him to be touched by people he doesn’t know.” The redhead explains, which causes Simmons to give him a slightly exasperated frown before he turns back to Barry.

“Well, that is too bad but it can’t be helped if you want me to treat him.”

“Just go to work, he will be fine,” interjects Len and Barry isn’t exactly comforted by those words. Then, the other man walks over to him, though, so that he stands close to the end of the couch where his head is resting and it makes this whole situation a bit less awful.

Barry throws up just a couple of minutes into the examination, even though there is nothing left in his stomach anymore and he is mostly just dry heaving, which is just as horrible of an experience as he remembers. He also starts to grow increasingly disorientated much to the doctor’s concern.

“He has quite a severe concussion,” concludes the old man after he finishes examining his head and neck while Barry keeps making small distressed whimpering sounds and keeps his eyes firmly closed. “I will give him an injection that should help him with the headache and nausea but I still need you to keep him awake for as long as he displays symptoms of disorientation and sickness. After that he can sleep but you need to wake him up every thirty minutes.”

Simmons turns to Len with a serious expression and adds that they need to grab him again should the symptoms not go away within the next four hours.

“It is most likely necessary for him to go to the hospital in that case.”

Barry makes a protesting and upset noise but falls quiet again when a sharp pain shoots through his skull in response.

“Stay still, you idiot,” admonishes the doctor annoyed. “Moving around will only worsen your state and I really don’t want to come here again tonight if I can help it.”

He gives him the injection shortly afterwards and tells the Rogues what exactly to be mindful of for the next couple of hours. Barry hardly listens to it as he feel groggy and sick but is glad when he soon realizes that the shot he has received, is helping with both the pain and the nausea. The old man starts gives him another shot close to his right wrist, which catches him by surprise but he is too tired and oddly relaxed to really react to it.

“His hand is broken. Most likely the metacarpus.”

There is some more talk but Barry doesn’t really care. The throbbing pain in his right hand, on which he hasn’t really picked up on so far, starts to decrease and he just feels grateful for how much better his body as a whole starts to feel again. The light-headedness grows a bit stronger over the next minutes and he can’t help but be fascinated by the chandelier above him.
He has never noticed how nice it looks.

“Don’t let him fall asleep until he no longer feels disorientated.”

Barry frowns and turns his head slightly so that he can see the doctor. To his surprise, he is no longer kneeling next to him but standing a couple of feet away behind the small couch table along with Len.

“We will,” assures Hartley, who is still close-by and meets his confused gaze with a friendly and reassuring smile when he notices it.

“That would be 350 bucks, then,” says the doctor and for a moment Barry isn’t certain whether he has really heard the old man asks for such a ridiculous amount of money but when he glances over to him and Len again, he can actually see the later one pull out a bundle of notes and hand it over to the doctor.

A feeling of incredulity overtakes him at that but he isn’t even able to protest.

“Well, it has been a pleasure to make business with you as always, Snart.”

The sarcasm is not to miss and Len only grunts in response before he tells Sam to get the old man back to his home.

“Barry, do you want me to make you some tea?” Hartley’s voice startles him a bit as he hasn’t noticed the man crouching down next to him again.

It takes him a while before he is able to really process his question but he finally nods slightly, which causes his friend to give him a warm smile before he turns to Len and asks him whether he could keep an eye on him while he is gone.

It is then, when Barry looks past Hartley, that he notices that Len is currently talking to Evan and, judging by his sour expression, he hasn’t really found a liking for the other man.

The Rogue hands the other thug a couple of notes and it is obvious that Evan is just as glad to finally get away from here as Len is to get rid of him. Briefly, the man, who is most likely a Scot judging by his thick accent, shots Barry a glance but vanishes down the stairs without any actual parting words.

“R-rude…” mutters Barry and can’t help but feel a bit annoyed by this behaviour. He would have liked to say his goodbye and thank him for his help.

Hartley, who has also watched the strange man depart, shoots him an amused look and agrees with him before he gets up and leaves for the small kitchen next door.

Len appears in his stead just a moment later and, with some effort, Barry moves closer to the backrest of the couch so that he can sit down next to him.

Having him close is nice and he can’t help but smile as soon as he has taken a seat.

The other man’s grim expression cracks a bit and he returns his smiles faintly.

“The stuff Simmons gave you has to be quite good.”

Not sure what Len means by that, Barry only keeps on smiling and is glad to have him here.
Evan’s accent is thick, really, really thick and the reason for this is because I have a very odd sense of humour.

... and I work with an online English-Scottish translator, so...

Palpablenotion pointed out to me that his lines could be trouble for people to understand, thus I’ve decided to add ‘translations’ to the end of this chapter (and probably the further ones he is in).

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Evan to English translations:

Bugger, jimmy – Fuck, man
Someone mistook ye fur a punching poke? – Someone mistook you for a punching bag?
Ye have ony dosh oan ye? – You have any cash on you?
Money, ye have money? – Money, you have any money?
Richt... - Right...
Thay’v git ye guid. – They’ve got you good.
Yer better makin’ tha worth th’ pumpin’ effort, pal. – You better make this worth the fucking effort, pal.
Whaur tae? – Where to?
Whaur ur th’ keys? – Where are the keys?
Dae ye sell heavy? – Do you sell beer?
Sae, whit’s aboot th’ dosh? – So, what’s about the money?
Did ye juist blether tae a jimmy thro’ a mirror? – Did you just talk to a guy through a mirror?
Awright, calm doon. Ah hae nae dane anythin’ tae him. If it wur nae fur me, he wid aye lay ootdoors in th’ pumpin’ storm. – Alright, calm down. I haven’t done anything to him. If it weren’t for me, he would still lay outside in the damn storm.
Awa’ an’ bile yer heid! – Fuck you!
Aye, sure. Bit thae fellow promised me fiftae bucks fur mae help. – Yes, sure. But the fellow promised me fifty bucks for my help. (no he didn’t ;)
A’m waantin’ th’ dosh. – I’m wanting the money.
Whit’s it wi’ him? – What’s it with him?
Ah wull fetch masell another beer, yi’ll waant me tae git something else fae doonby tae?
– I will fetch myself another beer, you want me to get something else from downstairs as well?

///

It is possible that the few updates will happen with some delay over the next couple of weeks (till around mid-July) due to a number of bigger exams coming up and friends from Germany coming to visit me for a week in the beginning of July because summer is just awesome.
Barry has an appointment with Mrs. Jenkins the day after being mugged. He is hardly awake when he remembers this and as soon as he does, still half asleep and not completely aware of his surroundings, a familiar apprehension and dread overcomes him.

These appointments are always an awful affair for him and he is so damn glad that they were reduced to once every other week now that he has passed his first year out of prison without any incident. There were still the check-up calls he has to do twice a week but not having to be in the elder woman’s presence makes this hardly look like such big of a deal.

“Did any little boy catch your eye while you were at work this week?”

Questions like these always are like a slap and she never fails to make him miserable. Her disdain for him has been plain from the get-go and like with everything else, Barry just tries to keep his head down and take it. She could be one of the quickest tickets back to the Heights for him and he would take any verbal abuse and ridicule over that any time.

Still, the visits to her office are a thing he dreads every single time and he already feels himself becoming depressed before he notices the odd heaviness that has settled all over his body. Worried, he tries to open his eyes and see what causes this odd sensation but as soon as he does so, a sharp pain shoots through his head that is intense enough to draw a soft groan from him.

It is then that he realizes that he isn’t laying in his bed and while he quickly concludes from the feeling of the cushions under him that he is resting on a couch, he is certain that it couldn’t be the old piece of junk he owns. The notion of being somewhere where he hasn’t expected to wake up causes a familiar fear to rise in his chest and he tries to get his own body to work again so that he can sit up and find out where he actually is.

Barry flinches when a hot pain flashes through his right hand and the memories of the former night flood back into his head, which causes a nearly smothering stupor to overcome him.

For a long few minutes he keeps laying still on the couch that is part of Mrs. Ming’s living room and just listens to his own breathing.

His body is hurting all over. He has hardly picked up on it before but now the pain is intense enough that the slightest movement is an awful experience, especially his head. At least, he has to be doing better and it hasn’t woken up in the hospital. He doesn’t even want to imagine what kind of trouble that would have meant for him.

Well, considering that he owes Len nearly 400 dollars now, he doesn’t actually feel all too relieved.
It would take forever to pay him back and he already owes him so much. Barry pushes that thought away and decides to worry about it later, when his head isn’t throbbing that badly anymore.

The noise of someone opening the door to the stairs and entering the room a couple of minutes later causes him to freeze just as he was close to drifting off again.

“How are you feeling?”

Len studies him with a calm expression that doesn’t give much away but it isn’t as closed-off as it had been last night. He doesn’t seem as tense anymore either and Barry wonders whether the other man could have really been that concerned about him.

“How are you feeling?”

Their gazes meet for a moment and Barry still feels a bit overwhelmed by the emotions that are currently filling his chest to the brim.

“I’ll grab you some water.”

With that, Len gets up and heads to the kitchen.

Barry swallows and lifts his left hand with some effort to rub his eyes. He feels so exhausted again and wonders how long it would take for him to recover enough to be able to take care of the store again.

The thought that he would have to keep it closed at least for the next couple of days makes him feel miserable with guilt and while he is certain that Mrs. Ming wouldn’t hold it against him after learning the reason, he feels so bad about disappointing her after she trusted him with it.

His eyes, which have been fixed on the light above him, move absentmindedly to the side and he notices a nice looking wall clock above the entrance to the room.

At first, he doesn’t really pick up on what he is reading there but when he finally does, he feels sickened by the horror that floods through him then.

“N-no…”

It is already half past ten, and he is quite certain that he has slept through the whole day because he knows that Hartley had made sure he stayed up until around eight before he allowed him to fall asleep. He briefly remembers that he has been woken up a couple of times but now all he can think about is the fact that he didn’t call his parole officer.
Barry has to get to a phone.

“What the *hell* are you doing, idiot?”

Len’s sharp voice causes him to halt his attempt to get up and he looks over to him while he is more sitting than kneeling on the floor next to the couch.

“I-I… I-I n-need t-t-to-”

“You have a damn concussion, the only thing you *need* to do is stay put and rest.”

The other man’s impatience is obvious and Barry feels immensely frustrated and a bit scared when he walks over to him with an exasperated scowl on his face.

“Can I help you back onto the couch without you freaking out on me?”

“No,” he disagrees vehemently and hates how frightened he sounds. “I-I n-need t-t-o c-ccall m-my p-par-ole o-offic-er. I-I m-missed i-it a-and I-I… sh-sh…”

The pressure behind his eyes gets stronger as he thinks about what kind of trouble he has brought upon himself.

“I-I c-can’t g-go b-back…”

With his shaking left hand, he starts to rub his eyes and huffs in anger and frustration when this doesn’t help with the tears that have started to run down his cheeks. He turns away from Len so that his back is to him.

The throbbing in his head, which has just been slightly annoying but not unbearably painful, slowly increases in intensity and he feels how the familiar nausea from earlier starts to come back again.

“I-I c-can’t,” he utters, more to himself than the other man, because if he is certain of anything then it is that he wouldn’t be able to make it through that damn hell again, not for another decade, not for another month.

A touch to his shoulders startles him badly enough that he cries out and flinches away, which in turn causes his headache to spike. With a low groan, he sinks against the couch next to him and tries to will the pain away that is now slowly spreading from his temples down to his neck and shoulders.

“Barry,” he hears Len say and berates himself for how he has reacted because he should really have known that it is the other man, nobody else is around, there is no threat, other than his own damn mind.

“Can you tell me the name of your parole officer?”

His friend is talking in a low and calm voice but isn’t trying to touch him again, for which Barry is very glad.

“J-Jenk-kins… S-Sam-mantha,” he answers and while he would have hesitated under normal circumstances as Len’s question should have made him wary, he doesn’t even think of the possibility that the other man could have something in mind that could potentially harm the woman. The sharp throbbing pain is too intense to really think much about anything right now and he just wants it to *stop*.

“I will help you back onto the couch,” he hears the other man say. “I won’t hurt you, there is no
Despite being told about the touch beforehand, it is still deeply unsettling and Barry is so very glad when he is back on the cushions and the other man’s hands are gone. A blanket is spread over him he hadn’t picked up on so far and he utters a quiet thanks.

“Just try to rest,” says Len and Barry wonders how he could with how horribly his head is hurting.

A moment later he is gone.

***

The next time Barry wakes up, his head doesn’t feel like it is going to split from the top downwards anymore but he still feels exhausted enough that it is a pain to move.

It doesn’t take him nearly as long to remember where he is and what has happened. The urge to fall back asleep is strong but he is thirsty enough that he has started to feel slightly sick and he needs to use the restroom.

There is nobody around again, everything is quiet but the lights are still on. A look to the clock shows that it is close to four and after he has been able to get himself to a sitting position and turn his gaze towards the open kitchen door behind which he can see the window, he realizes that it is in the morning as it is still dark outside.

Moving is just as awful as before and it is hard for Barry to get onto his feet for which he needs a ridiculous amount of time. Seeing that he has been here before, he knows where Mrs. Ming’s bathroom is and, after hesitating for a moment as his legs still feel mostly like rubber, he is able to make his way over to it.

After he has relieved himself, he washes his hands and can’t but shudder when his eyes fall upon his own reflection in the mirror. He looks pale with dark enough circles under his eyes that he could rival a racoon. Frowning, Barry turns away and makes his way back to his resting place.

Len is there when he enters the living room again, sitting at the couch with a grim expression and he doesn’t know why but he feels his stomach sink.

“H-hey,” he greets quietly and can’t bring himself to move past the door frame.

“Hey,” replies the other man and to his relief, he doesn’t sound really all that angry, mostly just exhausted. Barry can understand that.

“You keep standing there and I will have to carry you over here again after your legs give out under you.”

Barry’s face grows hot and he makes a small protesting sound but still starts moving again as Len does have a point.

It shows how mindful his friend is that he has placed himself on one of the ends of the couch so that there is still space between them after Barry has taken a seat. Being off his feet is an incredibly good feeling.

They sit in silence for the next couple of minutes and the former drowsiness returns.

“Y-you a-asked m-me f-f-for m-my p-p-parole o-offic-cer’s n-name.”
Barry turns his head that has been resting at the back of the couch and meets the other man’s eyes. He frowns slightly.

“W-why?”

“What do you think?”

There is a slight edge to his voice and Barry wonders what has him angered again. Even with how tired his mind is right now, he knows that they most likely didn’t harm her. Threatening his parole officer, especially someone like Ms. Jenkins, would just mean a hell of a lot of consequences for him and he is certain that the other man knows that as well. Besides, people like her don’t get intimidated easily.

“D-did you ask H-Hartley t-to t-talk t-to her?”

Len scoffs at that and shoots him a clearly amused but not very friendly look.

“I did and they had quite an interesting conversation.”

Barry frowns again and isn’t sure why the other man seems in such a bad mood. A tense moment passes between them before Len heaves a sigh and rubs his eyes.

“She thinks you called and you don’t need to worry about her for now.”

“Y-you d-didn’t h-hurt her,” he asks a bit wary as he doesn’t like the supressed aggression that is coming off Len in waves.

“We didn’t do anything to that bitch, so don’t worry your head off.”

And suddenly Barry understands and he really doesn’t want to talk about it anymore.

Still, he briefly wonders what Hartley has learned from his conversation with the older woman and just the simple notion of this causes him to feel sick with humiliation again.

Another silence spreads between them and the exhaustion starts to seep back into him as he studies the ceiling above them. Despite everything, he knows what they have done for him and he can’t help but feel grateful for it.

“Th-thank y-you, L-Len.”

Barry’s voice is faint and raspy and he expects the other man to snort or glare or do something else he usually does when he is in a bad mood and someone presents themselves as an easy target for it.

Len doesn’t, though.

Instead, he looks over to him and studies him quietly.

“Sure.”

There is something in his expression Barry doesn’t know how to read.

“You really have the most rotten luck.”

“Th-thanks,” he answers dryly and causes the other man to chuckle. His mood becomes more solemn again and he wonders how Len will take his next words. “I w-will p-pay y-you b-back f-for th-the d-doctor.”
The annoyed scowl that appears on Len’s face isn’t really a surprise but Barry still had hoped he
would not make this difficult again.

“You don’t need to pay me back shit, Allen.”

“Y-you p-paid n-nearly f-four h-hundred d-dollars—“

“Stop being such a damn idiot all the time, will you?!“

The sudden surge in his friend’s anger causes Barry to flinch back and emit a small protesting and
scared noise for which in turn causes him to feel immediately embarrassed.

The fury seems to drain from the other man and he studies him with a tired look instead.

“Whatever. You want to pay me back? Fine, just give me the money when you have it together,”
Len gets up and turns back to him. “You feel like you can keep something down?“

Seeing that his throat has closed up on him again, Barry nods quietly while he keeps his eyes on the
small table in front of him. He doesn’t feel hungry, mostly just thirsty, if anything, but he is just glad
that Len seems willing to let their former topic go. It is obvious that he doesn’t expect him to get the
money together to pay him back and Barry hates that he is likely right about it.

Len vanishes in the kitchen without another word and Barry, too tired to move much, just keeps
sitting and listens to him in there.

About ten minutes later, he comes back with a bowl of tomato soup and a slice of toast as well as a
big glass of water, which he puts on the couch table in front of him. Seeing the food, Barry feels his
stomach make a small lurch and suddenly his eyes start to itch all over again.

“I can get you something else,” says Len who hasn’t missed his reaction and while he sounds mostly
gruff, there is also a slight note of concern in his voice.

“N-no… th-thanks, I-I…“

Barry bites his lip and rubs his eyes before he briefly glances at the other man.

“Th-thanks.”

Len frowns and seems both doubtful and confused by his odd reaction but nods. It is understandable
that he doesn’t get it. Barry knows how silly it is for him to get sentimental over this simple meal but
he can’t help it. It is so close to his childhood comfort food that it hurts.

“You don’t like tomato soup?”

“N-no, I l-like it… v-very m-much…“

A soft chuckle passes his lips and he thinks that sometimes things work in a really, really odd way.

“C-can y-you s-stay f-for a b-bit?”

Len seems a bit surprised about this request when Barry turns his gaze back to him but nods and,
after another moment, takes his former seat again.

They don’t talk while he slowly eats his meal but it is nice to have Len around nonetheless. His
presence is reassuring and calming and while there is a lot Barry should be worrying about right
now, he instead concentrates on him and the feeling of companionship.
After he is done, he feels so tired that he has problems keeping his eyes open and he doesn’t protest when Len helps him lay down.

“Go back to sleep.”

A hand cups his shoulder and he hums in agreement as his eyes slide close once again.

***

The older lady is obviously enjoying James unabashed flirting and takes it with good humour against Barry’s initial concern.

Still, he would really like for his friend to turn it down a bit. Thankfully, Hartley seems just as annoyed by his colleague’s antics as he is.

“James, the box with the canned corn isn’t going to put itself away,” calls the redhead over to the other Rogue, who rolls his eyes in response but does as he is told in the end. The con artist makes one last flourishing bow to Mrs. Brown, who is giggling behind her hand like a young girl, and wishes her a very nice day before he goes over to the shelve that holds the canned vegetables.

Hartley huffs in annoyance before he turns back to Barry.

“There is really no reason to worry, we have everything under control,” he reassures him once again and nods to the door that leads up to Mrs. Ming’s apartment. “Just go upstairs and rest some more. You are still as white as a ghost.”

He says the last bit with obvious concern and Barry has to fight the urge to repeat that he is fine. It is really getting annoying how nobody seems to take him serious when it comes to his own health.

“I c-can help,” he argues. “You d-don’t n-need t-to d-do all m-my w-work f-for me.”

“You have been mugged not even four days ago, Barry. You are still suffering from symptoms of your concussion and the last thing you should do now is take care of a store.”

It is frustrating how stubborn Hartley is about it and it doesn’t help that he has a point, no matter how little Barry likes it.

“I f-feel b-better, you d-don’t n-need t-to d-do this, Hartl-ley. Wh-what if s-someo-one r-recog-gnices you and c-calls th-the p-police? Th-this is s-so d-damn reckl-less of you!”

When Len told him about Hartley and James taking care of the shop while he was recovering, he initially thought that the other man was making a joke. Unfortunately, no such luck there.

His friend sighs and gives him a look that is more sympathetic than exasperated by his insistence. “Barry, we have been criminals for a very long time by now, we know how to go out in public without running the danger of being arrested. You really don’t need to worry about this.”

“Y-you are sh-showing your f-face in b-broad dayl-light.”

“Which is sometimes the best disguise there is. When people don’t expect to see someone in a certain situation or location they usually don’t,” explains Hartley with an amused smile and lifts his glasses slightly off his nose as if to show them to him. “Aside from that, we are both wearing disguises.”
Barry frowns but has to agree that the other man does look surprisingly different just by the few little alterations he made to his usual appearance. The thin rimmed oval shaped glasses and the clothes he wears as well as the loose ponytail in which he wears his long hairs make him look a lot like a college student who is working here part-time in-between lectures. He is too old for this, of course, but at the first glance he really could pass as one.

James, on the other hand, has died his familiar blond hair into a deep auburn and Barry is still not sure what to make of it, as it actually makes the man look eerily different. His character has stayed the same, though, and he has started pestering Barry about dying his hair as well so that they could be in partner look again as soon as he entered the shop about twenty minutes ago.

“Please, Barry, don’t worry so much. We know what we’re doing.”

Hartley reaches for his left arm, slowly enough for Barry to pull away if he wanted to, and squeezes it slightly.

“Just go back upstairs and catch up on some sleep. You still look like you’re going to keel over any moment now.”

“I am f-fine,” he insist stubbornly but knows that his friend is right. He still feels very much out of it and making his way down the stairs has left him feeling dizzy and tired.

“No, you are still recovering,” corrects Hartley but doesn’t sound unkind as he does so.

“We will take care of the store, don’t worry about it for now.”

Not really pleased with this but no longer as troubled as before, Barry finally relents and lets his friend help him back upstairs to Mrs. Ming’s apartment again.

***

“You really should have let us known about what had happened. I was worried that you were dead, laying somewhere in some damn side alley.”

Mary looks both furious and close to tears and Barry feels like a monumental jackass for not informing her about his whereabouts.

“Well, I told her that this is most likely not the case,” interjects Eddy who is sipping on a coke, “but you can never be sure in the Keys. I thought it would be more likely to find you shot in your own flat, to be honest.”

The other man ducks his head and looks very much ill at ease when Mary glares rather furiously at him.

“This is not funny,” she states firmly before she turns back to Barry and her expression finally softens a bit. “I was so very worried. I came back and you were gone.”

It is humbling to see how much he means to this young woman.

“M-Mary, I am s-sorry, th-that w-was awf-ful o-of m-me.”

His voice sounds a bit coarse and he coughs lightly to clear it but before he can say anything else, he notices that Len entered the room again. His friend had left about ten minutes ago after Mary has forcefully made her way up to them, closely followed by Eddy and Hartley, who had looked somewhat exasperated and quite amused by the young woman at the same time.
The redhead quickly lost any trace of humour when he noticed Len’s pissed off expression, though.

Len’s mood doesn’t seem to have improved much, even though his expression is clam and gives hardly anything away. There is a palpable tension and hostility coming off him and Barry starts to get a bit annoyed by it because he notices how Mary is clearly intimidated by it, while Eddy doesn’t seem to pay him any mind at all.

Len passes them without a word and vanishes into the kitchen, where he gets himself a cup of coffee.

“A charming fellow,” snorts Eddy and Barry isn’t sure what he should think of how he is watching the Rogue with open interest now.

“Are they hiring?” Eddy meets his alarmed gaze with an amused smirk and shrugs. “Not saying that I am interested, or anything, but it is generally good to be aware of such things.”

“Th-they d-don’t… th-they, aren’t…”

“Could you not bring it up that you know who they are in front of one of them?” asks Mary in a low and very much exasperated tone but Eddy only shrugs.

“They know we know, they aren’t stupid. I mean, Snart’s mug-shot has been all over television just three months ago and even without the blue parka it isn’t hard to recognize that pissed off face.”

The other man’s smug smile wanes when he notices Barry’s horrified expression and he quickly adds that he wouldn’t cause him or his friends any trouble. “Look, they don’t cause me any problems, I won’t cause them any problems. It is as simple as that.”

Somehow, this doesn’t calm his worries very much, but seeing that there isn’t much he could do about it, Barry just nods and hopes that this wouldn’t come back to bite them later.

He likes Eddy but he also knows that he had been involved in criminal activities earlier in his life, most likely due to his family, and Barry has seen such cases often enough to know that it is hard to really get away from something like that.

“Anyway, when will you move back to your own flat again?” asks Eddy in an obvious attempt to change the subject. “It has been about a week since you’ve been mugged, hasn’t it?”

“Yes,” nods Barry and glances briefly over his shoulder towards the kitchen, where he can see Len sitting at the table with his back to them. He turns his attention back to his two visitors and smiles tiredly. “I w-will go b-back s-somet-time t-tomorrow.”

“That is great,” adds Mary. “We can come by and pick you up, then.”

“Well, the ‘me’ part of ‘we’ is excluding himself from this little endeavour,” remarks Eddy and ignores the woman’s irked look. “I have other plans and I think Barry would most likely prefer to accept the help of his friends to move back to his apartment.”

It only takes a moment for Mary to get what her friend is talking about.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh’,” grins Eddy and gives Barry a wink. “Has to be rather neat to travel via a pocket dimension.”

He doesn’t replay, as he is really not comfortable talking about this with anybody other than maybe
the Rogues themselves, and he is quite grateful when they redirect their conversation to safer grounds afterwards.

Chapter End Notes

I've somehow hurt my back and it seems to be bent on driving me crazy (that damn bxxx), so that I'm unable to concentrate enough to do anything really productive (like, for example, studying). Thus I've decided to put this chapter up today already.

I hope you guys enjoyed it.
“What has happened to your hand?”

Jay sound honestly concerned and Barry wishes the man would have waited a couple of weeks longer before passing by again. Then, he would have gotten rid of the cast already and he wouldn’t have to worry about explaining any of this.

“An accident at work.”

It is a lie but Barry really doesn’t want to bring up what has really happened to him. Thinking about the mugging still causes him to feel slightly sick.

The way the older man studies him, makes it obvious that he doesn’t believe him, which isn’t really surprising, seeing that the bruise on Barry’s right cheek is still faintly visible, at least if you look for it.

“A work accident?”

The disbelief in his words is nearly palpable.

“Y-yes,” agrees Barry curtly. “I f-fell off a l-ladder in th-the s-storer-room.”

“Did the ladder also punch you?”

Jay meets his irked look firmly.

“Have you been mugged?”

His anger dissipates at this question just like that and Barry is slightly taken aback that the other man would actually consider this possibility before assuming that he got involved in something illegal that came back to kick him in the face.

“That’s f-fine,” he answers finally after a long moment of uncomfortable silence and steps aside to let the other man inside.

“It’s f-fine,” he answers finally after a long moment of uncomfortable silence and steps aside to let the other man inside.

“That is not an answer, Barry,” remarks Jay as he enters the flat. “When did this happen?”

“About t-two w-weeks ag-go.”

Barry makes his way over to the small kitchenette and decides to make both of them some coffee.
“Two weeks?”

Jay sounds surprised but there is something else in his voice and in the way he is studying him now as well that Barry can’t really interpret.

“It’s f-fine, r-really, I just g-got a c-concussion and b-broke p-part o-of m-my m-metacarpus.”

He shrugs slightly, with his back to the older man now, and grabs the can of grinded coffee out from his cabinet. Working with his right hand still in a cast is difficult and slightly frustrating but he knows that it would be just for another two weeks, so it doesn’t really bother him that much.

“That is not exactly what I would qualify as fine.” Jay sounds grim and while Barry is still not looking at him, he can feel his eyes on his back.

“I-it c-could h-have b-been w-worse.” Barry knows that all too well, thus he is not going to complain about how this little assault ended.

Jay stays quiet and he wonders what the other man is thinking. The open concern he is displaying isn’t something Barry has expected and he isn’t sure what to make of it.

It doesn’t take long for the pleasant aroma of brewing coffee to fill his living area and Barry carefully takes two cups with his left hand before walking over to the table, where Jay is already sitting, seemingly deep in thoughts.

The older man thanks him when he hands him the coffee before Barry takes a seat opposite to him. Jay eyes the cast on his right hand with a slight but grim frown before he looks up to meet his gaze.

“How is your hand doing?”

“G-good.”

Trying to work with it is still difficult but he has mostly gotten used to its restricted usability by now.

“And your head?”

Barry frowns slightly and shrugs.

“It’s alright, r-really, I a-am f-fine.”

“A concussion is nothing to underestimate,” reminds Jay in a grave voice and Barry really wishes the man would let it drop.

“I h-have rec-covered f-from it.”

“That is good.” Jay sounds honest as he says so and Barry wonders why this suddenly matters so much. It isn’t the first time he’s had a concussion.

“Did you go to the hospital?”

The question causes Barry to bristle for a second before he shoots Jay a rather annoyed look.

“C-could w-we p-please l-let th-this d-drop, it’s o-over, n-nothing happened.”

“You have been hurt,” Jay reminds him and gives him a stern look, as if he was being a brat. “This is not something to just shrug off.”
“It’s n-nothing,” he insists and really doesn’t want to talk about this anymore. This could get him into a lot of trouble should Jay somehow find out how he got his medical treatment.

Barry averts his eyes to the mug in his hand when the other man’s intense gaze becomes too uncomfortable for him. He knows that he is making himself appear just that much more suspicious by acting like that but he can’t help it.

“How long do you still have to wear the cast?”

“Ab-bout two w-weeks.”

“It has to be rather difficult to handle work right now,” remarks Jay and there is honest sympathy in his voice.

“It’s ok-kay. I c-can h-handle it.” Barry lifts his mug and takes a sip, just so that he has something to do because he can still feel the other man’s gaze on him and it is becoming quite unsettling.

“Barry,” Jay’s voice softens again a bit, “You are not getting in trouble for being mugged. Things like this unfortunately happen, especially in the Keys.”

Barry swallows and nods. He knows that this is utter nonsense but the older man doesn’t seem to and somehow this is a very saddening realisation.

“I know that it’s not easy for you to believe me when I tell you that you can come to me or Joan if you need help, but I mean it.”

Turning to the other man for help hadn’t even entered his mind that night and Barry thinks that this says more about their relationship than anything else could. Still, would he have the misfortune to run into this kind of situation again, he probably would not ask him for help either.

The silence is most likely an answer in itself and he knows that Jay isn’t happy about it but there is nothing else he could offer him. It is nice that the older man actually still seems to care about him in some way, but Barry is not stupid. Jay thinks of him as a criminal and he knows how quickly one misstep could get him sent back to the Heights.

“Have you been able to pay for the visit to the doctor so far?”

Barry glances at him with a frown and really doesn’t like where this is going.

“Yes, a f-friend l-lent m-me th-the m-money.”

“Those doctor appointments are not cheap,” remarks Jay before he adds in a softer tone. “I could-“

“No, it’s alr-right,” Barry cuts him off and hates that they even touched upon this point.

“Barry, it would really be no problem.”

“N-no, I c-can h-handle it,” he refuses stubbornly and forces himself to meet Jay’s gaze. “Ththank y-you, it i-is a v-very k-kind offer f-from y-you b-but it is n-not n-necessary.”

While Barry really would love to have a way to pay Len back, he isn’t going to get it that way. Being dependent on other people has always been a demeaning experience, being in someone’s debt is even worse.

For a moment he fears Jay would try to convince him to accept his money once more but to his relief, he doesn’t.
The mood stays somewhat chastened afterwards and while they talk a bit more, it isn’t long before the older man takes his leave.

Afterwards, Barry is glad to be alone again.

***

Mary passes by his flat after he has come back from work, which isn’t all too late as Hartley and James are still helping him out and both insisted on him leaving shortly after seven, despite his objection.

She makes them hot chocolate and they end up at the couch, talking while listening to some calm music on her mobile phone. It is nice and relaxing and she ends up teaching him a couple of words in Romanian.

***

Someone knocks at his door.

Barry, still mostly asleep, groans slightly and pulls his pillow over his head.

Then, he realizes that the knocking is coming from the bedroom door. It is loud and persisting and for a horrible moment he isn’t able to say whether he is awake or still asleep.

“For Pete’s sake, Allen! Are you dead in there!?” asks a familiar sounding voice he needs a moment to place.

“Seriously, you have five seconds to give me a damn sign that I am not talking to thin air or a corpse, otherwise I am going to come in.”

Her annoyance is audible and Barry has utterly no idea what Len’s sister is doing in his apartment in the middle of the night. At the thought that something could have happened to the other man, his stomach makes a very uncomfortable lurch and he forces himself to get up and move to the door before that crazy woman would actually enter uninvited.

“About time,” she hisses into his face and gives him a brief once over which causes his cheeks to heat up uncomfortably before she turns around and walks into his living room.

“Wh-what are you d-doing h-here, L-Lisa? H-has someth-thing h-happened t-to L-Len?” As soon as the last part is past his lips he could kick himself. Could he be any more obvious?

The blond woman shoots him an amused look before she scoffs.

“My dear jackass of a brother is as fine as he can be. Drowning the last of his brain cells in beer while playing poker as we speak.”

This is a relief, even though her unexpected visit makes even less sense now.

“Wh-why are you h-here, th-then?” he asks, slightly irked now by her intrusion and he swears softly under his breath when he notices what time it actually is. “It’s n-not even t-two y-yet!”

“So?”

Lisa shoots him an unimpressed look before she turns back to a big paper bag on his kitchen table, he notices just now.
“I h-have to w-work t-tomorrow,” he reminds her and slowly but surely feels his patience thinning.

“You don’t,” she argues and nods to his still casted hand. “Hartley and Tricks are taking care of the store because you hurt your wrist.”

“I a-am also w-working!”

“Good for you, if it makes you feel better.”

Barry can’t decide if this flippant behaviour is actually amusing or infuriating. This woman is unbelievable!

“Wh-why are you h-here, L-Lisa?” he asks her again and tries to keep calm as his stammer would just get worse otherwise. “And h-how d-did you g-get in?”

His glance to his entrance door doesn’t show any signs of a forceful entering and he really hopes Sam hasn’t brought her over or he would seriously punch him the next time he sees him.

“I picked the lock.”

“Wh-what!”?

Lisa snorts when she meets his disbelieving look and shrugs.

“We are criminals, Allen, we do stuff like that.”

“No, y-you d-don’t! N-not w-with p-people y-you kn-know!”

“Of course we do, why do you think most of James’ doors hold booby-traps?”

Barry isn’t sure whether she is joking or not but it doesn’t really matter, seeing that it really angers him how nonplussed she is about breaking into his flat.

“Y-you c-can’t d-do th-that, L-Lisa!”

“Oh?” she replys in a fake surprised tone. “Who is going to stop me? You?”

“Th-this is m-my f-flat! You h-have n-no r-right t-t-to c-come h-here w-without m-my perpermission!”

Her taunting expression changes when she notices how worked up he is getting over this and she frowns.

“You are quite a touchy guy, aren’t you? You really should think about who you pick as your friends if you have problems with them turning up like this.”

“Th-the others h-haven’t b-broken i-in here s-so f-far,” he points out angrily and ignores the little voice in the back of his minds that points out that, yes, they actually have. “I d-don’t wwant y-you t-t o d-do th-that again! D-do you unders-stand m-me, L-Lisa? You c-can’t j-just ppick th-the l-lock on m-my d-door a-and intrude l-like th-that.”

“For fuck’s sake, alright,” she huffs and shoots him an annoyed look but he doesn’t miss that she is quite taken aback by his reaction. “I will keep knocking on your damn front door till all of your stupid neighbours are up the next time around. Because you seem to sleep like the fricking dead.”

They glare quietly at each other for a couple of seconds and Barry wonders how long she was
standing in front of his apartment and tried to get his attention like any normal person would before she lost her patience and performed a break and enter. Not that it really gives her any points seeing how god-awful early it is.

“Wh-what is th-this?”

Not wanting to prolong the uncomfortable air between them, he nods towards the bag and the things she has started take out of it and put on his table.

“Food, as far as I can say,” she replays dryly. “But then again, I am not the crazy smart scientist between us two.”

Ignoring the little jab, he finally walks over to her and studies what she has brought along.

“Th-those are th-the ing-gridients f-for spag-ghetti B-Bolognese.” He frowns and looks over at her on the other side of the table. “Are y-you p-planning t-to c-cook?”

The incredulity has to be plain on his face but Lisa just nods and smiles sweetly. “That is the plan.”

“A-at t-two i-in th-the m-morning?”

“Yep.”

Barry groans softly and decides that he is definitely too tired for this. He still ends up joining her, as he feels even less like getting her to leave again, which undoubtedly would involve another fight.

Against his worries, preparing the meal with the blond woman is a surprisingly calm affair. She seems quite impressed by his obvious knack for cooking and even though she makes it clear that she is the one who has the say during the preparation, she let him work mostly the way he wants as soon as has realized that he actually knows what he’s doing.

“Not bad,” she tells him with an appraising nod after she tried a bit of the nearly finished sauce. Despite still being a bit miffed about her unannounced turning up, Barry can’t help but preen a bit, much to Lisa’s amusement.

They eat in an unexpectedly relaxed atmosphere without talking much other than for Lisa complaining briefly about his lack of a television. Aside from that she doesn’t pick on his flat, much to Barry’s surprise.

“What is that one about?”

She nods towards a novel that is resting on the chair next to her where Barry put it before they started preparing the food.

“It’s a b-book about ch-chemistry.”

Judging by her expression, she isn’t really all that interested in learning more about it anymore. He smiles slightly and explains that it is actually quite a funny read.

“It is a b-bit of a p-parody r-reg-garding s-some p-popular c-concepts and imp-portant historic-cal p-people wh-who inf-fluenced its d-development.”

“That sounds fascinating,” she remarks dryly and Barry decides to let it rest. Not everybody shares his love for science.

In the end, he never learns why Lisa decided to pass by in the middle of the night to cook spaghetti
but he believes that they are on somewhat friendlier terms now when she leaves about an hour later.

***

Mrs. Ming is quite upset to learn what has happened to him while she has been in Chicago and she immediately vanishes upstairs for a moment to fetch some tea and almond cookies.

“I am so glad that nothing worse has happened,” she gives his cast a worried glance. “You really don’t have to be back at work already. You should be at home and rest, Barry. Getting a lot of rest is the best medicine in situations like these.”

“I am alr-right,” Barry assures her with a warm smile but agrees to close the shop earlier today and join her for dinner afterwards.

It is good to have the nice old woman back.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it!
The soft ringing of the doorbell causes Barry to momentarily stop dusting the shelves with the drinks and he turns to see who has just entered the store.

It has been a rather slow day so far with just a couple of customers, mostly due to the bad rain once again, which has been persisting since midday. His mild curiosity is quickly squashed and replaced by a familiar feeling of dread when his gaze falls upon Izzy who is accompanied by a Hispanic woman he doesn’t know.

A rather sardonic smile appears on the auburn haired woman’s lips as soon as she spies him but it is just for a second before she turns away to make her way over to the isle with the fresh fruits. The other woman, a bit taller and more slender than Izzy, meets his gaze with an amused smirk before following her friend.

Barry frowns slightly and decides that he would go on with the dusting after his current customers are gone. He doesn’t like the thought of standing with his back to them and so makes his way over to the counter.

The women talk quietly as they stroll through the store while picking up a couple of things to buy. He can’t understand them and he is rather glad for it. Judging by the looks they are giving him whenever he is in sight of them, it is obvious that he is most likely the topic of choice.

Barry keeps his eyes on them, secretly glad for the break as his right hand is feeling a bit sour again, which isn’t really unusual as he has been using it quite a lot over the day, but the pain seems somehow more distinct now, so much so that even just dusting has started to agitate it.

… thinking about it, he probably would prefer the pain over these two women, though.

It takes Izzy and her friend about ten minutes to finish their shopping and come over to him with their intended goods.

“Well, hello there, Sissy-boy,” greets the auburn woman, which causes her friend to snort but otherwise stay quiet. “It has been a while.”

Barry feels how his face grows hot due to the embarrassing nickname Izzy seems to have decided to stick with when it comes to him but forces himself to stay calm.

“He is quite a scrawny fellow,” remarks the other woman and eyes him unabashedly. “Looks like he has sticks for arms.”
“Don’t be rude, Cam,” admonishes Izzy in a clearly fake tone. “Trannies are generally skinny, otherwise they would look like an actual man.”

She turns towards him with a smile that shows way too many teeth.

“Aren’t I right? And Len doesn’t exactly like blokes.”

“C-can I-h-have t-the i-items y-you w-want t-to b-buy?”

Barry’s voice is strained but he is glad that it isn’t actually giving out on him. He swallows and nods at the couple of things both women are holding in her hands.

“So, Sissy-boy is interested in getting ride from the infamous Captain Cold?” laughs Cam and obviously ignores his request. He feels himself tense up in a mixture of anger and mortification.

“I think so,” agrees Izzy with a smirk. “He definitely looks to me like a gal who like big strong men, don’t you, Sissy?”

“L-leave.”

So far, Barry never had to throw a customer out, even though it has happened that some behaved rather disrespectful towards him, especially teenagers. Usually, he ignores it and leaves it at that. It doesn’t matter what other people say, it hurts, but it doesn’t matter, he knows that.

This, however, goes too far and he isn’t going to take this kind of insult just because those two women need a doormat.

“Don’t be like that,” huffs Izzy and throws him a sardonic smile. “We are just having a little talk between girls.”

She winks at him and he really feels like grabbing the jar for the tips and throwing it into her face.

“N-no, y-you a-are b-disr-respectful a-and o-offensive b-because y-you a-are h-holding a-a s-silly g-grudge a-against m-me f-for b-being f-friends w-with L-Len-”

“Watch it, Sissy-“

Barry ignores her and stubbornly goes on because he really has enough of her and her ridiculing of him. He hasn’t done anything to her, for Christ’s sake!

“I-it c-causes y-you t-to b-behave l-like a-a l-little b-brat a-and th-there i-is n-no r-reason f-for m-me t-to t-take th-the b-brunt o-of y-your j-jealousy.”

A tense moment of silence follows in which both just glare at each other and it isn’t hard to see that Izzy is now the one who would love to smash the tip-jar into his face.

“Is everything alright here?”

Barry’s stomach make an uncomfortable jump. Mrs. Ming is standing at the doorway that leads to the back area of the store and watches them with a slightly concerned gaze.

“You are the owner of the store?” asks Izzy and shoots Barry a dirty look.

“Well, yes, my dear, I am,” agrees the old Chinese woman and makes her way over to them so that she too stand behind the counter. “Is there a problem?”
“Yes, there is,” states Cam and nods towards Barry. “Your employee is one of the rudest guys I’ve had the misfortune to meet so far.”

She sneers at him and goes on about how he has been insulting her friend openly just now.

Mrs. Ming lifts her eyebrows slightly at that and studies the two women in front of here for a second.

“I have to say that this is very hard for me to believe. Barry has been working here for over a year now and he has been nothing but hardworking and polite,” she explains in a calm tone. “Even to people who haven’t necessarily earned it, which is a remarkable trait.”

Izzy starts to scowl at the older woman but before she can say something, Mrs. Ming goes on.

“I don’t know what the cause for this little dispute between you has been as I haven’t been around, but I am certain that Barry didn’t mean any harm by what he said.”

She meets Izzy’s dark look and studies her for a second before she goes on.

“Sometimes it is the clever choice to listen to what other people tell you, even if it doesn’t seem like it at first.”

“He insulted me,” hisses Izzy and glares at her. “Are you telling me that this is common place in your shabby store?!”

Barry feels himself bristle at the insult and he can’t help but grow angry over it all over again as it is directed towards Mrs. Ming this time and not him. To his surprise, the old woman just smiles, friendly, and shakes her head.

“Of course not, my dear. I am quite certain that this is a simple misunderstanding that has just occurred and I certainly don’t want you to feel as if I don’t take your words seriously.”

Izzy and Cam seem both a bit surprised and pleased by this turn of events and watch Mrs. Ming turn to Barry, who suddenly feels a bit sick as he isn’t sure what to expect.

“Barry, I want you to get me when these two young ladies pass by again. I can take care of their shopping and we won’t have to worry about any further problems, wouldn’t you agree?”

“S-sure,” he stammers and glances to Izzy and her friend, who appear less than satisfied by this. He doesn’t want this to proceed and he is pretty certain that Izzy wouldn’t give it a rest with this presented solution.

Still, it is touching to think that Mrs. Ming doesn’t even seem to consider that those two women could tell the truth and this helps as he turns to them once more.

“I-I d-didn’t m-mean t-to insult y-you,” he says towards Izzy who seems still as irked as before but is a bit surprised by his words. “I-I r-really d-didn’t b-but I-I w-will n-not l-let y-you t-talk t-to m-me l-like th-that. Th-there is n-no r-reason f-for th-this anym-mosity, w-we b-both kn-know th-that I-I… I-I a-am n-not… h-he w-wouldn’t...”

His voice breaks off and he turns away again. He really hopes Mrs. Ming doesn’t understand what this is about, not because he thinks that she would have a problem with his feelings towards another man, which, to be fair, he doesn’t even really understand himself, but because this is not something he wants to discuss in general.

A brief uncomfortable silence follows before Mrs. Ming asks him whether he could go back to the
storeroom and see whether they still had enough bin bags or whether they had to reorder them.

“I will take care of our customers,” she assures him when he hesitates and while he really doesn’t like the idea of running away from this situation, no matter how uneasy it makes him, he does give in in the end.

Barry leaves the store without glancing back to either Izzy or her friend.

***

“I fucking hate that bastard!”

Roscoe’s agitated voice is the first thing that greets Barry after Sam got him over to the hideout the Rogues are currently using.

“And back to the caterwauling,” says the other man with a sigh and appears quite exasperated about the ruckus his colleague is making.

The Rogues did another job this late afternoon. Barry hasn’t known about it and it was just a couple of minutes ago that he learned so from Sam after he had asked him to pick him up.

Despite him not wanting to get involved in any of this, it still bothers him that Len has kept quiet about it. It isn’t as if he wanted to know any details, all of the Rogues are well aware that he isn’t comfortable around them when they are talking business. This isn’t really a problem, as the criminals usually don’t seem all too keen on having him around during these times anyway.

Nonetheless, Len has started to tell him when they are planning something, just as a sort of heads-up and he appreciates it. He doesn’t want to pick up the papers again and be surprised by a damn headline telling him that a couple of them have ended up in the Heights once more.

“Wh-what h-happened?”

Barry, who has picked up by now that Roscoe doesn’t just sound really pissed off but also in pain, turns to Sam in concern, who huffs and shrugs.

“The red jackass got to him and broke his right ankle.”

“How?”

The notion that Wally would do something like that doesn’t sit well with him. He tries to rationalize with himself that it is more likely that this happened due to an accident, though.

“What do you think?” asks Sam drily. “Roscoe caused the Flash to slam into a wall and he gave him the favour back as soon as he had his footing again. Bastard has been in an abysmal mood for months now.”

Barry doesn’t reply and follows the other man instead to the big room the Rogue’s have chosen as the main room.

Roscoe is laying on the old couch, his ankle, which is thickly bandaged and has an ice pack resting on it, is propped up on a pillow. Judging by his expression, he is in severe pain. Lisa is standing next to him and looks tense and worried while she talks to her brother in a rather agitated manner.

Len, who doesn’t seem to have been severely hurt during the heist, much to Barry’s relief, looks grim and like he is in a really bad mood. Not surprising after a failed job.
Barry turns his gaze back to Roscoe, who is sweating noticeably despite the rather chilly temperatures in the basement room.

“D-did h-he s-see a d-doctor?” He turns to Sam, who shrugs.

“Old geezer Humphrey has been here before.”

At his confused expression, his friend snorts and explains that he means the sunny gentleman who had taken care of him.

“D-doctor S-Simmons?”

“The one and only,” agrees Sam while he glances over to Roscoe who is currently hissing a string of swears again. “He said that it is either a very severe strain or a fracture of the later mallus or something.”

“The lateral malleolus?”

The other man gives him a surprised look before he snorts in amusement again and shakes his head.

“Yeah, that thing.”

Barry frowns and looks over to Roscoe in concern, who has one of his hands pressed over his eyes and looks unusually pale. Without an actual x-ray it is hard to say whether the lateral malleolus is still in place or not and thus whether a surgery is necessary.

Dr. Simmons helped him, and while he appeared rather unorthodox, he obviously understands craft. Still…

“Hi, Barry!”

He snaps out of his thoughts and looks over to the table where James and the rest of the Rogues are currently sitting. All of them also nursing visible marks of their latest run in with the Flash.

“H-hey,” he returns with a faint smile. “Y-you are d-doing a-alright?”

“Peachy!” agrees James which causes his colleagues to shoot him rather nasty glares. The blond man does seem to be in the best shape of all of them. Hartley, with one eye completely swollen shot, the right side of his face badly bruised and his nose visibly broken, seems to have taken to worst of it, aside from Roscoe that is.

They are all still wearing their costumes, which is a bid odd of a realisation to Barry as he hasn’t seen them do so in a very long time. Apart from the Trickster, nobody is wearing their masks, though.

“You want a beer?”

Barry turns to Sam and shakes his head before he makes his way over to Len. Lisa has crouched down next to Roscoe and runs her fingers calmingly through his hair while she speaks softly to him.

“What are you doing here?” Len’s bad mood has been expected and while Barry feels slightly irked about the other man not telling him about this heist, he decides to not give in to the urge to answer in kind. He really doesn’t want to get into a fight with the other man, especially not when he is so obviously ready to use any opportunity to get rid of some of his frustration.

“I-I w-wanted t-to p-pass b-by,” he explains and studies Len briefly. “Y-you’re a-alright?” “Sure,” grunts the other man but seems to relax a bit.
“Because he looks any worse for wear,” remarks Lisa angrily and shoots her brother a dark look before she turns back to Roscoe who is gritting his teeth. “He isn’t the one that damn nutcase smashed into a wall.”

Barry feels the urge to point out that this is something the other man most likely brought on himself but pushes it away. He is not going to start an argument about this right now.

“H-has d-doctor S-Simmons l-left h-him any p-pain k-killers?”

“Does it look like it?” grouses the blond woman and shoots him an annoyed glance.

“He was in a hurry,” remarks Len and takes his glasses off to rub the bridge of his nose. “Said to keep his leg still and cool and to give him some aspirin.”

Lisa scoffs at that and shoots her brother another nasty look. “Because that old drunkard knows anything of what he is blathering about.”

Len sneers and nods to Roscoe.

“You want him to go to the Heights instead?”

Both sibling glare daggers at each other and Barry starts to feel rather uneasy.

“Is th-there a d-drugs-store around?”

They turn their attention to him and give him a near identical frown before the blond woman’s expression becomes slightly hopeful.

“You want to get him something for the pain?”

So close after a heist it would be nothing short of idiotic for them to show themselves in public and Barry knows that too. He, on the other hand, could easily get into a drugstore and buy a couple of things that would help Roscoe to deal with his injury.

Barry nods but adds a bit embarrassed. “I-I d-don’t h-have a-any m-money o-on m-me, th-though.”

This isn’t a problem, as Lisa quickly fetches her wallet and presses a fifty dollar note in his hands, even though he insists that this is way too much. Len, on the other hand, doesn’t really like his idea but only tells Sam to get him back to his flat so that he could use the drugstore in his living area. Just in case and Barry is really glad for his mindfulness. While the chance is very slim, he doesn’t want to run into trouble and have to explain what he is doing so far away from his home this late at night.

Sam grumbles about having to play taxi once more but waits for Barry to come back from his little errand nonetheless. It doesn’t take long for him to walk to the drugstore and back again, maybe fifteen minutes, which is enough time for the other man to make himself a sandwich and steal one of Len’s beers, much to Barry’s displeasure. It doesn’t help that he isn’t using a plate either.

“What did you get him?” asks Sam as they enter the hideout again a couple of minutes later.

Barry lifts the small white bottle to show him.

“Ibuprofen.”

“And this is any better than Aspirin, why?”

“It’s s-stronger and h-helps w-with inf-flammation.”
“… the more you now.”

Barry shoots Sam a brief amused glance before they make their way back to the others.

Len and Mick helped Roscoe to his room while they have been gone, which is probably a good idea as the best way to recover for the other man is to rest and sleep.

“I c-can imagine th-that h-he isn’t h-hungry r-right now,” he tells Lisa after Len brought him to Roscoe’s room and he has handed her the medicine along with the change. “B-but I w-would r-really advise f-for h-him t-to eat s-someth-thing n-noneth-theless b-before t-taking th-these. I c-could only g-get t-two hund-dread m-milligram p-pills b-but you c-can g-give him f-four of th-these at once, th-that sh-should help h-him w-with th-the p-pain.”

“I will see to that;” agrees the blond woman and her relief is nearly palpable now that she has something to help Roscoe with the pain.

Lisa studies him for a moment before giving him a faint smile.

“Thank you, Barry.”

“Of c-course.”

Neither Barry nor Len feel like joining the others again afterwards and instead go to the later one’s room. Tomorrow is Sunday, which means that he has some more time before he would need to ask Sam to get him back to his flat again.

Len’s room isn’t very big but it holds a bed and a table that is sturdy enough to serve as a work bench. There is also a small rather shabby looking cupboard where he has stashed some clothes and work tools but that is about it. Barry has kind of expected that he would prefer this kind of sparse environment, it fits the other man.

The air in here is cool and a bit humid but not uncomfortably so. It smells a bit stale, though and Barry decides to open one of the smaller windows that are close to the ceiling.

“I’m taking a shower,” Len informs him, after he has picked up some fresh clothes, and leaves the room without waiting for a response from him.

Feeling a bit tired, Barry takes a seat at the table and eyes the blueprints but can’t bring himself to be really interested. Instead, he rests his head on his arms and closes his eyes for a moment.

A warm hand touches his neck and startles him out of his sleep.

“It’s alright, it’s just me.”

Len’s calm voice causes him to pause, despite the urge to get up and away from him as quick as possible. The throbbing of his pulse in his ears lessens and his body relaxes a bit again as he opens his eyes and spots the other man, who is standing next to him, once again wearing normal clothes.

“You’re okay?”

“Y-yes,” he sits back up and rubs his eyes. “S-sorry, I d-didn’t int-tend t-to f-fall asleep.”

“Usually the case,” remarks Len and pulls the second seat closer that Barry usually uses.

“Thanks for getting the dipshit medicine.”
He nods and gives him a tired smile.

“I am g-glad I c-could h-help.”

A broken or strained ankle can hurt like hell the first couple of days if you don’t have anything to relieve the pain and he really doesn’t wish that on anybody.

Len hums softly and keeps on watching him with a calm look that doesn’t give much away that Barry could use to find out what kind of mood his friend is in.

“You d-didn’t t-tell m-me th-that y-you w-were p-planning on d-doing a h-heist t-today.”

It is not a reproach but simply a statement. His earlier irk from not being informed about this has waned by now and he is mostly just curious of why. In the end, it is none of his business.

“I didn’t know I have to.”

The other man doesn’t sound gruff or annoyed as he says that.

Not the answer Barry has hoped for and he feels a familiar disappointment arise in his chest.

“N-no,” he agrees quietly, “y-you d-don’t.”

He freezes when Len grabs his left wrist and squeezes it lightly.

“I didn’t know you’d want to know.”

Their eyes meet and Barry feels slightly taken aback by how intense the other man’s gaze is. There is no anger or any other negative emotion, it is just the way he is watching him, as if he was trying to read him.

“I-I…”

His throat is suddenly very dry and he swallows.

“I d-don’t n-need t-to kn-know any sp-specifics, I j-just w-want t-to kn-know th-that…”

He stops and averts his eyes so that he is looking at the blueprints and the notes on the table in front of him. Len’s hand on him is just a simple touch but it is still so very intimate and makes it hard for him to find the words he is looking for.

The other man doesn’t urge him and waits quietly. Barry can feel his gaze on him.

“I d-don’t w-want t-to r-read in th-the p-paper about anyth-thing h-happening t-to y-you and n-not… n-not b-be p-prepared.”

His face grows uncomfortably hot and he feels rather stupid as soon as the last word has passed his lips. There is no way to be really prepared for such a scenario, whether it be them being arrested once again or something more serious. He could know that they do a job and it still wouldn’t make him feel any better in case something should happen. The only difference is, he would not be caught as off-guard as he had been last time.

Over the last year they have become very important him, not just Len, and while he hates what they are doing, who they decide to be, he doesn’t want to see them hurt.

They are his friends, it’s as simple as that.
A familiar guilt starts to crawl up his mind but he stomps down on it forcefully, because he just couldn’t deal with it right now.

His left wrist is squeezed slightly again and he turns his attention back to Len.

“Okay.”

They sit together quietly for a moment before Barry nods.

“O-okay.”

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“What is such a nice little fellow doing all alone here in this dark place?”

Barry freezes up as soon as he hears the deep raspy voice behind him and he silently curses himself for not having paid more attention to his surroundings.

The laundry room of his apartment house he is currently in is a dingy old place with most of its ceiling lights broken other than for two old neon tubes, one of which keeps flickering as soon as it is turned on. This causes the big room to hardly be lit, with many dark corners and places to easily hide.

Barry has hated it from the first time he had to do his laundry here and while he got used to the creepy feeling and the musty smell, it never made it any easier for him to come down here.

Right now, he wishes he would have just stayed in his room. It is already half past nine and the majority of the other residents aren’t using the laundry room after seven anymore as it has happened a number of times that someone got mugged here at night.

Usually, Barry prefers to do his laundry very early in the morning, so that he wouldn’t run into anybody but he is quite tired and he doesn’t want to get up at half past four again tomorrow morning.

He likes to use Sunday to catch up with some sleep when he is able to and thus has decided to finish this off today. A stupid idea, he really should have known better.

“Barry, relax, you look like you are going to snap any second now,” chuckles a suddenly much more familiar voice that causes him to whirl around in anger and embarrassment as soon as he realizes who is actually standing behind him.

“Woah, careful there or I am going up in flames if you don’t turn down that glare a bit,” grins Eddy and steps next to Barry to the table where people could sort out their clothes. He puts his laundry basket down, which is already overflowing with dirty laundry and gives him a rather amused smirk.

“Seriously, you should just have asked me to come along if you are so scared of this shitty hole down here. Not that I don’t—”

The other man breaks off when Barry, who has grabbed his own basket after hastily throwing the last couple of freshly washed clothes in it, makes his way towards the exit in a rather swift tempo.

He has hardly reached the foot of the stairs when Eddy is suddenly in front of him, which causes the tension he is feeling to increase uncomfortably.

“Wait f—

“O-out of m-my w-way!”

The other man looks honestly taken aback and steps aside to let Barry proceed; he does follow him
though.

“Look, I am sorry, I didn’t mean to make fun of you. It was supposed to be a stupid harmless joke.”

Barry ignores him and keeps his eyes in front of him. He feels like such an idiot, he has had to look like such a fool. Why does he always have to freeze up like that? He would never be able to fight someone off if the first thing he does is go stiff like a board because of the fear that is nearly smothering him in such situations. It is understandable why Eddy finds it amusing, he is a damn walking and talking joke!

“Barry, listen, I am really sorry, it was a mean and stupid thing to do. I won’t do it again, I wasn’t thinking, which is one of my less charming character flaws but I am working on it.”

They are nearly at their floor and before Barry can set his foot onto the last step, Eddy gets in front of him once more and causes him to stop as he doesn’t want to collide with him.

“Will you just slow down for a second and think?” asks the other man and sounds rather exasperated but also guilty. “You are making a pretty big deal out of this. I ju-”

“B-big d-deal?!” hisses Barry and surprises both of them with his vehemence. “Y-you m-made m-me th-think s-someo-one w-want-ted t-to…”

He breaks off and turns his gaze towards the ground where he is glowering at the dirty steps in silent frustration and humiliation.

For a brief moment, Eddy doesn’t reply and Barry wonders what he is thinking and whether he has said too much. Most of the time he has the feeling that other people could simply see the horrible and disturbing things that have been done to him by looking at him long enough. It is so damn embarrassing.

“I won’t do something like this again,” says his neighbour finally in an unusually soft voice, “and I am really sorry I have been such an insensitive ass to begin with.”

They keep standing there for a couple more seconds with Barry not looking up from the steps.

“Okay?” asks Eddy and there is no impatience or annoyance in his voice.

“Y-yeah.” Barry swallows and lifts his eyes to meet the other man’s gaze.

Eddy smiles.

“Good.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys liked it and let me know what you think. :)

I'm going to lift my current once(-ish) a week schedule for my uploads due to being simply too busy in real life and due to having too many stories I'm working on right now that need my attention as well. This doesn't mean that you will have to wait like a month between each chapter from now on, I just don't want to bind myself to a fix schedule right now that I can't keep. I hope you understand.
I went over the first eight chapters, I've picked up quite a bit from palpablenotion and ladyofpride so far and wanted to polish them a bit. I feel somewhat embarrassed by how many mistakes I've found but it is probably a good sign that I've picked up on them in the first place. The chapters should be a more smooth read now, I also changed a bit of the writing and think it improved them but it is not necessary to re-read them to keep up.
I've had a rather busy week and feel quite exhausted but I want to update at least one story. It's rather easy to do so with Singularity thanks to having a lot of it already done (most of that still needs editing done, tho), so I've decided to put this one out. It is not edited yet other than by myself and I will switch it with a betaed version as soon as I've got it.

With this chapter Barry will stumble in a rather dark place for a bit and Len is probably not coming over as the nicest guy. This is no new status quo, though.

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November 2nd Year

Barry is sweeping the floor while listening to the news on the radio. It is still rather early and over the last half an hour since he opened the story not a single person has shown up, which is fine with him, as he woken up with a slight headache this morning and hasn’t been able to get rid of so far.

The nervous energy, that urges him to move even though he feels slightly sick, has been following him around since he left his bed and while he tries to tell himself that it is nothing, that he has just a bad day, Barry knows that it is most likely not the case.

The Rogues had planned another heist for yesterday, he didn’t learn any specifics from his friends as he doesn’t want to know too much about this kind of business, but it was supposed to be an easy break and enter, nothing too big, nothing too complicated.

Len usually tells him about their job these days as kind of a heads up and he hasn’t seem particularly nervous about this one, which put Barry’s mind at easy.

At least, till he woke up this morning.

Now a sense of foreboding is following him around with every step and he isn’t sure what to make of it. Thus he turned the radio on, with the slight hope to learn more, even though he really would rather not.

“And to other news,” says the female newscast over the old radio behind the counter and Barry halts in apprehension.” Last night Keystone City’s port has been scene of another confrontation between the Flash and the Rogues. The twin cities infamous criminals broke into one of the warehouses very early this morning, most likely to steal jewellery and other valuables that have been stored for an upcoming exhibition in Central City’s art gallery. Luckily, the Flash–”

Being still the only person in store, Barry walks over to the old portable radio and turns the volume a bit up to learn what has occurred just a bit more than an handful hours ago. His stomach sinks as he listens to the female voice and learns that the heist escalated rather spectacularly when during the resulting fight between the Flash and the Rogues a supporting wall of the building got damaged and
caused parts of it to collapse.

The Flash, hindered by the criminals, couldn’t get to the people in time when part of the building collapsed and a couple of dockworkers and two security guards got hurt due to that. One of the men is in such a critical condition that he is still in the ER and it isn’t sure whether he would make it.

The whole commotion allowed the Rogues to get away but Barry can’t bring himself to feel any real relief as he hears that.

He just feels sick.

Sick and so very guilty.

***

“Shit like this happens,” hisses Len angrily, obviously fed up with the topic of their current conversation and likely also the situation in general.

The other man hates it when things don’t go according to his plans and last night was just an abysmal fiasco. Barry knows that, he has seen this happen before once or twice and it usually is a cue for him to back off and let the other man find another target for his anger but tonight he just can’t bring himself to stay quiet and look away.

It is close to midnight, Len has just arrived about ten minutes ago and they have spent the majority of it arguing, which is never a pleasant experience, especially because the other man could be so very intimidating and he is all too aware of it.

“It is a fucked up situation but it happens,” Len glares at him, daring him to say something and Barry hates how much this scares him, despite knowing that the other man wouldn’t hurt him. He curses himself for it but he can’t just stay quiet.

“P-people g-got h-hurt!” he angrily points out and ignores the small voice in the back of his mind that orders him to shut up and reminds him that he knows that he shouldn’t do this. Arguing with Len when the other man is so clearly already in such an agitated mood would just end in him lashing out and for both of them regretting it later.

Despite knowing that, Barry returns the glare stubbornly. He is upset in a way that makes his inside feel cold and brittle. This is his fault as well, even if he hadn’t been part of it, he still knew about it and he didn’t do anything to prevent them from making this mess, from hurting people.

How the hell did he become like this? Just a damn bystander to whom this angry man and his colleagues are more important than innocent people?

The small voice starts to remind him about why exactly he is letting this happen and he squashes it with all his force because he can’t listen to this. He doesn’t want to know any of this!

This is his damn fault… if this man dies…

Both of them are standing in his living room, between the couch and his kitchen table, and the air is so damn thick that Barry is sure whether it could even be cut by a knife.

“Yes, people got hurt,” agrees Len and he is so tensed up and angry that he looks ready to punch a hole in something. “They usually get when we get caught by the Flash or any other those fucking capes.”
“Th-that i-is n-not th-the F-Flash’s f-fault!”

“Of course not, how could shit like this be a cape’s fault,” Len sneers and makes a step closer to Barry who forces himself to stand his ground despite the urge to retreat. “Because we both know how fucking infallible they are, don’t we?”

“D-don’t, th-this h-has n-noth-thing t-to d-do w-with th-that! Y-you t-tried t-to r-rob th-that p-place a-and y-you m-messed u-up! If th-that m-man d-dies i-it’s b-bec-cause o-of y-you a-and nob-body else!”

An icy and uncomfortable silence follows and Barry immediately feels sorry for what he has just said.

“Screw you.”

Len turns around without another word, which catches Barry off-guard as he hasn’t expected the other man to react like this. Suddenly, an intense fear overcomes him and he hurries after the other man.

“W-wait, L-Len, I-”

“What?”

The other man stops and turns around to him, a cold expression on his face that causes Barry to stop.

“You’re sorry?” he scoffs.

“Who gives a fuck, Allen? We both know what this little hissy-fit of yours is really about, don’t we?”

Not sure what to say, Barry stays quiet.

The other man sneers at him and is about to leave before he stops again, obviously thinking the better of it, and turns back to him.

“You really should stop acting so high and mighty, you are not any better than the rest of us. You have to know that people still would pick any of my Rogues over someone like you? A rapist, murderer and ch-”

“S-stop! I-I d-didn’t-”

“Who cares?!?”

Len’s voice gets so loud that Barry is certain his neighbours above him have to have heard it. It causes him to freeze and stare at the other man in a mixture of fright and dismay.

Len couldn’t really believe this, he is just angry, he has to be.

“You are just another fucking criminal to them, a sick twisted little man they put away for nearly a decade and they couldn’t even give a shit about what happened to you as soon as they closed the lock behind you.”

A sickening fear overcomes Barry when Len steps closer, so much that he can actually feel his hot breath on his face but he can’t get himself to move an inch.

“Maybe they are right. Maybe you really liked to get a little bit too touchy with your nephew,” the other man goes on with a cruel little smile on his lips. “They do say that it are usually the ones you
suspect the least who turn out to be the most deranged and I am pretty sure nobody would have suspected the gem’s adored scarlet hero to be such a twisted little sicko.”

“S-stop…”

Barry’s voice is faint and weak and he realizes that tears have started running down his face but he can’t really be bothered by it right now. He hurts too much for it, he feels raw all over in his inside and sick to his stomach.

“You are a sad little person, Allen,” goes Len on in an uncomfortable calm voice that cuts deep into his chest. “I may be a scumbag and a criminal but nobody would put me on the same level as a damn paedophile and rapist.”

Another smile spreads over Len’s face, as unsettling and nasty as the one before.

“Who knows, maybe you really enjoyed what they did to you? Some kind of twisted self-punishment for what you have done? It would fit you.”

A small noise escapes his throat and Barry isn’t sure if it is one of protest or pain but it doesn’t matter. Len seems to have said his part as he turns around and walks toward his bathroom.

At the door, he stops again and faces him one last time.

“Don’t contact us again.”

Then he is gone and Barry keeps standing there, between his couch and kitchen table, and tries not to fall apart.

***

“Come on, I need your opinion on it.”

Mary, who is currently wearing the familiar purple apron with the small white sheep on it, which Barry got her for a birthday a couple of months ago, nods toward the pot next to her on the stove. She is cooking some new curry recipe she found in a magazine a while ago and has invited him over for dinner to try it out.

Initially, he didn’t want to accept but the sad and slightly hurt expression in her eyes, when he was about to tell her so, caused him to change his mind.

They haven’t seen much of each other over the last weeks as he made himself rather scarce to any person who actually wanted to spend some time with him. It aren’t really that many these days anyways and he prefers it like that.

Still, despite rather wanting to hide in his flat and crawl under his blanket to end another day, he still accepted Mary’s invitation to spend the evening with her just to set her nerves a bit at ease as it was hard to miss how much he has her worried these days.

Even though he feels not at all like moving seeing that his body seems to have turned into lead sometime over the last couple of weeks, which makes everything but resting to an awful ordeal, Barry forces himself to get up from his spot at Mary’s small kitchen table and makes his way over to where she stands.

She is already holding a spoon with some of the curry out to him and he accepts it with a faint smile.
Like everything he eats these days, it tastes simply bland to him. He knows that she put a lot of effort into it, though, and nods approvingly.

“I-it i-is d-delicio-ous.”

Judging by her frown, she doesn’t believe him and he immediately feels like such a piece of dirt again.

“I-it i-is,” he tries to insist and averts his eyes to the still cooking curry.

“Thanks, Barry,” she says in a quiet voice that sounds painfully sad.

They stay like that for a moment, neither sure what to say next.

“Can you help me set the table? I think it will be done in about five minutes. We just have to wait for the rice.”

He does as asked.

There is not much of a conversation going on while they eat. Mary tries to start one up a few times but he can’t really bring himself to say a lot. He feels exhausted and depressed and can hardly think of anything else but his bed.

Barry is well aware of what an ass he is for how he repays his friend’s kindness but he can’t help it and it only causes the heavy feeling in his chest to increase, which seems to make even the smallest movement more strenuous.

“Why don’t you put the movie in while I put the dishes away? I will join you in a minute,” Mary suggests after they had finished their food and he helped her with doing the dishes.

Barry nods tiredly but briefly considers making up an excuse to be able to leave, like feeling sick or having a headache, but he can’t bring himself to do so. His depressed mood isn’t her fault and she doesn’t deserve to be lied to just because he isn’t able to deal with his messed up life. Thus, he makes his way over to the living room and looks for the DVD.

The film she has picked is another old one, a comedy called ‘Some like it hot’, and he wonders whether he would be able to laugh at anything in it.

It would be a nice change.

Mary makes them popcorn and sweet fruit tea and they spend the first half of the movie mostly in silence. His friends laughs at a couple of scenes in the beginning but stops when she notices that he doesn’t seem to get into it at all. For a while, Barry can feel her gaze on him and he wishes she would just turn her attention back on the screen and not make him feel like such a damn sideshow attraction. It is unfair, he knows, but his skin has started to itch again.

It is during the scene after Sugar and her ‘female’ friends arrive in Miami that Mary reaches for the remote and stops the film.

Surprised, Barry looks to her and can feel his stomach sink when he meets her concerned eyes. She doesn’t say anything at first and he thinks that she isn’t sure how to start this conversation even though he is already pretty certain where this is going to go.

“Barry, you know that you can talk to me about anything that is bothering you, right?”
The honesty with which she is saying that causes the urge to get up and leave to become nearly
unbearable. Mary seems to notice it, as her gaze grows even more worried.

“What happened?”

“N-noth-thing.”

Barry turns away from her and wishes she would not do this right now. He doesn’t want to deal with
any of it… he just wants to hide away in his bed and shut it all out…

“Something must have happened,” she insists firmly. “I don’t want to be nosy. I know it is not my
place to be but I am worried. Not just me but Eddy too.”

“I-I a-am f-fine, I-I a-am j-just a-a b-bit u-under th-the w-weather.”

His voice is trembling slightly and he sounds exhausted. It doesn’t surprise him that she doesn’t
believe him, he has to appear like such a wreck.

“You look sick and pinched, Barry,” she argues and her frustration is audible for a second. “You are
shutting yourself off, you only leave your flat to go to work and, as soon as you are back, you hide
inside it again.”

Out of the corner of his eyes he can see how Mary is reaching for him but stops when he noticeably
tenses up in response. Her voice is much softer when she goes on after an uneasy moment of silence.

“I’m not forcing you to confide in me, Bar, if you don’t want to talk about it just yet, it is fine. I just
want to help you.”

Barry swallows and closes his eyes. His hand is trembling a bit when he rubs the bridge of his nose
slightly and he takes a shaky but deep breath before he forces himself to meet his friend’s gaze again.

“Y-you kn-know th-that I-I a-am a-an e-ex-c-convict.”

It isn’t really a question but Mary still nods.

“Th-they p-put m-me th-there b-bec-cause I-I k-k-… k-killed m-m-my w-w-wife a-a-… a-and r-r-…
r-raped m-my u-u-un-dera-age n-neph-phew.”

Barry watches how Mary’s eyes grow wide in a mixture of disbelief and horror.

“I-I a-am a-a m-mons-ter,” he goes on and forces himself not to look away, despite what he can
recognize on her face. “I-I’m s-sick, y-you r-really d-d-don’t w-w-want t-to f-frequ-quent w-with a-a
p-p-person l-l-like m-me, M-Mary.”

Barry keeps sitting there for a moment longer, feeling horribly guilty and the urge to apologize for
putting this on her. He gets up instead and walks to the entrance.

The hallway he enters is dark. He doesn’t bother to turn on the lights.

***

“Barry, dear, do you have a moment?”
Barry, who has just about been to leave, isn’t really surprised about being stopped once again on his way out. It has become some kind of an odd game between Mrs Ming and him over the last couple of weeks. She would ask for his help regarding one little thing or another, like exchanging a bulb or helping to put up a picture or something similar, before inviting him to stay for a cup of tea and cookies or, as it has become common place for a few days now, small sandwiches.

He really has to look bad if she sees it necessary to provide him with meals. In some way this is probably even funny, he just can’t bring himself to look for it.

“S-sure,” he agrees tiredly and slowly follows her up the stairs to her small apartment.

It is as nice of a place as it has always been and the warmth it emits is something he can appreciate even now. He just doesn’t like the couch to much anymore, though. It remembers him of when he had been mugged and how Len kept him company afterwards…

At the small coffee table, in front of said couch, rests a box containing a couple hundreds of puzzle pieces by the look of it. Next to it is a very small part of the already started picture and he doesn’t know why but the sight causes him to smile. He can’t really say that he is surprised to learn about this little hobby of his employee. She seems the type who would enjoy spending her time fitting the small pieces together.

“You like puzzles?” she inquires with a warm smile as she has obviously notices his look and he nods slightly.

“Y-yeah, I l-l-liked t-to d-do th-them w-when I-I w-was a-a k-kid.”

Doing a puzzle is a very calming task, you can solve it on your own and it is easy to hide it away in a small box and start all over again later. Aside from Mr Bunny he had just two other things that followed him through his whole childhood and one of them was the puzzle of a little girl with a big straw hat and a pretty but simply white dress standing in a meadow full of flowers. It was a hard one, with more than five-hundred pieces, but he was able to solve it in less than one hour when he reaches his fourteenth birthday.

“That is wonderful,” remarks Mrs Ming and explains that she too is an avid friend of puzzles but that her waning eyesight is making it harder and harder for her to follow this little hobby.

“Maybe you could assist me a bit with it sometimes after the shop is closed?” she suggests and quickly adds. “You don’t have to, though, my dear boy. I can understand if you want to get home instead.”

Barry studies the puzzle and to his utter surprise, he doesn’t just feel the same lethargic way as he usually does when he is confronted with any task these days, may it be serving customers, preparing a meal or simply getting out of the bed in the mornings.

“N-no, i-it… I-I w-would l-like th-that.”

Mrs Ming smiles warmly at him and it is obvious how pleased she is by him agreeing to this.

“Wonderful.”

She ushers him over to the couch before she tells him that she would make them some tea.

“And a couple of sandwiches. It will be easier for you to concentrate on full stomach,” she adds as she makes her way over to the kitchen.
Barry watches her vanish in the next room and doesn’t correct her.

Instead he turns toward the puzzle and starts to study the pieces.

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Barry finds himself reaching into his pocket and holding the small mirror he got from Len a while ago more and more often these days. It annoys him to no end and he decides to throw it away.

Len hasn’t shown himself in over a month, neither has any of the other Rogues, and it is obvious that having this little thing around is of no use for him anymore and most likely could even cause him some trouble in the end.

In the end, he can’t bring himself to do so, though, and puts it into one of the drawers of the small cupboard he has in his bedroom instead.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed it and let me know what you think, I always appreciate your feedback very much. :)
It is late when Barry gets a visit from Eddy about one and a half weeks after he talked to Mary the last time.

“So, a little birdy told me you are a paedophile?”

Barry bristles and shuts the door into his face. At least, he tries to because the other man turns out stronger than him and pushes his way into his flat. Eddy ignores his angry protests and closes the door behind himself.

“Calm down, I am not here to roughen you up, idiot.” Eddy gives him an annoyed look that quickly loses its intensity when he notices that Barry isn’t just upset by his unwanted intrusion but also scared. “Sheesh, stop looking at me as if I am about to give you a trashing. I am just here to talk, alright?”

Barry doesn’t reply.

“Man, you are such a difficult fellow,” Eddy grumbles and scratches the back of his head, “and a stupid jackass, just so you know. Do you have any idea how upset and worried Mary is because of your little confession?”

Barry keeps quiet and once more feels how a smothering tiredness overcomes him.

“Barry,” the other man goes on after an uneasy moment of silence. “What the fuck happened? What is wrong with you?”

“N-nothing.” His voice is feeble and Barry notices a familiar and painful lump in his throat as he speaks. “C-can y-you p-p-please l-leave?”

“Not before you tell me what is bothering you? You are obviously not alright,” Eddy insists and his frown deepens the longer he keeps studying him. “What the hell turned you into this depressed heap of self-pity?”

Barry bristles at that, angry and hurt to have said something like this to his fact, and briefly thinks about asking the other man to leave his flat once more. He is sure that it would be probably pointless, though. The other man seems hell-bent on making him miserable.
Thus, he stays silent instead and tries to ignore the sickening feeling that causes his stomach to seemingly curl up into a painful knot.

“Shit, you look awful, man, like really horrible. Did someone… hurt you?”

The last question is asked with a visible reluctance and Barry nearly cracks. What does the other man mean? Like being mugged again or being beaten up or does he know more?

Is it really like Barry is walking around with a fucking sign around his neck that says rape-victim on it?

Why couldn’t they just leave him alone?!

“Hey, look, I didn’t mean… fuck, don’t cry, man, I’m really not fit to handle this kind of mess.”

Frustrated and ashamed of his own damn inability to keep it together, Barry turns away from Eddy and tells him once again to leave. His voice is trembling horrible and he regrets not keeping his mouth shut as soon as a sob forces his way out of it a second later.

Barry presses a hand over his mouth and tries to smother the next one or the one after that but it only makes it worse. Tears start to run down his face and he just wants it to stop.

He makes an unsteady step away from Eddy, toward the couch and his legs give out under him. The other man grabs him, surprisingly quick in his reaction, and Barry cries out in fright and protest like the touch itself is hurting him.

“Fuck, Barry, calm down. I am not going to hurt you.”

Barry doesn’t listen, he just wants the other man stop touching him and desperately tries to get away from him. Eddy, who seems to understand, lets him go and swiftly gets up again to get a bit more distance between them.

“Bar-“

“I-I-I d-d-didn’t… I-I-I d-d-didn’t w-w-want i-i-it… I-I d-d-didn’t w-w-want i-i-it!!!”

His skin feels too small for him, too tight, and he can feel them again, their hands, all over him. It is such a horrible feeling, it is so damn disturbing, he just wants to get away from it so badly but he can’t, he never can.

“What–”

“I-I-I d-d-didn’t d-do i-i-it!!! I-I a-a-am n-n-not… I-I I-I-loved th-th-them, s-s-so m-m-much… b-b-but I-I-I c-c-couldn’t p-protect th-th-th-them… I-I c-ca-c-can’t…”

Barry grits his teeth and there is so much anger and self-loath in him that it nearly causes him to burst.

“Fuck, are you crazy!? Stop that!”

Eddy is suddenly at him again, grabbing his hands and pulling them away from his face and Barry realizes just then that has actually crawling at himself. His eyes have difficulties to focus on his hands but when he finally does, he can see blood at his own fingers. There is no pain, though.

“Shit,” Eddy hisses again, much quieter now, though, and when he speaks to Barry again his voice is oddly low and strained. “I believe you, alright? You didn’t do that, I know.”
These words catch him utterly unprepared and Barry looks at Eddy in utter bewilderment.

“I d-d-didn’t k-kill I-Iris…” he explains quietly and his voice is thick with emotions. “I-I-I l-love W-Wally, I-I w-would n-never… I-I w-would n-never h-have h-hurt e-either o-of th-them...”

“I know,” the other man assures him with an odd certainty Barry can’t understand. Why would he believe him? He doesn’t know him at all!

Why would a near stranger believe him!? Something breaks in him and he starts crying once more, harder than before and even less able to restrain himself.

Everything hurts so much. He wants it to stop so badly.

Barry’s mind grows foggy over the next few minutes and he hardly notices how he slumps against the other man or how a hand starts to rub his back a bit hesitantly.

Later, he isn’t sure how long as it feels to him like it could have been mere minutes or hours, Barry comes around again to realize that he is resting on his couch, with the blanket from his bed spread over him.

It takes his tried mind a couple of seconds to catch up with what has happened. When he does, he grows momentarily sick enough that he is sure he is going to throw up. The feeling is only fleeting, though, and he instead pulls the blanket over his face, as if to hide from the world around him.

There are voices.

Barry freezes and it is hard for him to not panic till he remembers that Eddy is most likely still around. The other man isn’t alone, though, and when he recognizes who the second voice belongs to he feels nearly smothered with apprehension and shame.

It seems that Mary has noticed him being aware of his surroundings again as he can hear her come up next to the back of the couch just a moment later.

“Barry?” She sounds hesitant and worried and he feels so bad about pulling her into this dump of his life.

“Pui.” She tries again and he listens how she walks around the couch to crouch down next to him.

“Can you look at me, please?”

For a long moment he doesn’t move before he slowly pulls the blanket down again and his gaze meets the worried face of his young friend.

“Hey there,” she says with a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes and Barry feels how the lump in his throat and the itching of his eyes returns when he realizes that he is the reason for the sadness he can recognize in her expression.

“Shhh,” she hushes softly and very tentatively touches his right arm. “It’s alright. Everything is alright.”

Barry swallows and takes a shaky breath.

“I a-am s-s-sor-ry…”

Whether he means about causing her the trouble to come here this late at night or for how their last
meeting ended, he isn’t sure. Most likely both and more.

“There is no reason for you to be sorry, my dear Bear,” assures him Mary and for a split-second she looks like she is going to cry as well but she is able to regain her composure quickly and instead gives him a somewhat watery smile.

“She is right, you are currently a walking, talking and breathing heap of depression,” Eddy agrees from the other side of the couch and meets Barry’s surprised and slightly worried look calmly. “This happens, there is nothing you can do about it but ride it out till the worst is over.”

Unsure how to replay, Barry stays silent. He still feels so tired, even worse than usual, which is most likely due to his little embarrassing crying fit from before. Just thinking about it makes him want to hide under the blanket all over again.

“Barry, I would like to take care of your face before you go back to sleep, okay?”

Confused, he meets Mary’s eyes and it takes him a moment before he remembers what has happened. He groans in sheer mortification and can’t stop himself from reaching up to his face. It is just now that he notices the slight persisting pain there and he flinches when he touches one of the streaks his nails have left behind.

What the heck is wrong with him? How could he go like this into work tomorrow?

“Don’t worry, the scratches are not too deep, I am sure they won’t leave any scars.” Mary squeezes his arm slightly and gives him an encouraging smile before she gets up and briefly leaves his flat again, most likely to grab some things for his injuries.

“You really had her worried,” Eddy remarks next to him and Barry can’t but feel uneasy by how the other man seems to watch him now. “You ever feel this shitty again, you come to one of us, alright?”

Barry swallows and nods quietly. It is still so hard to believe that those two people really care for him this much. He has been such an idiot to not see this earlier…

“Good, otherwise I am going to kick your depressed ass the next time around.” Eddy looks dead serious for a moment before he smirks and winks at him.

Barry feels how tears start to prickle in his eyes once again and nods with a faint smile.

“Sure.”

Somehow, his body doesn’t feel so heavy anymore.

***

Mrs Ming gives him an herbal paste to put on the scratches after work the next day.

Barry knows that he has her worried quiet a lot and despite feeling utterly exhausted, he agrees to stay after work to try and proceed with the puzzle for a little while. She makes him tea and Dim Sum and for the first time in weeks he is actually able to really taste something again.

“Take care, my boy,” she tells him as he leave close to ten and reminds him once again that he really isn’t as bad off as he tried to make himself believe.

There are nice people in his life, people who care for him.

“I-I w-will,” he assures her with a grateful smile before he adds a bit hesitantly. “I-I r-really ap-
preciate y-your k-kindness.”

The old woman seems briefly surprised before her expression becomes warm and she steps a bit closer to him so that she can take hold of his left hand.

“I know, Barry, and I’m really glad that I have been lucky enough to get such a kind and fine man like you to assist me with my shop.”

She squeezes his hand slightly before letting go of him again.

“Th-thanks,” Barry utters and decides to leave before his damn unstable emotions could cause him another embarrassing scene.

The air that encloses him as he steps outside is cold and he pulls his coat a bit tighter around himself, freezing slightly.

With not even two more weeks till Christmas, most people are glad that the temperatures have dropped enough to allow some snow to fall. Right now, the night sky is clear with no clouds around and even with the bright lights of the city he is able to make out the moon high above.

Barry watches it briefly before urging himself to move again as it sure isn’t getting any warmer and he really doesn’t need to catch himself anything. Aside from that, he doesn’t want to miss his bus, as the next one would not come before another forty-five minutes and while Mrs Ming insists on him to come back in such a case, he really doesn’t want to bother the nice old lady any more than he has already.

The street lights from the way that leads to the corner with his bus stop are still not fixed and he walks the distance with the familiar apprehension that always follows him these days as a result of having been mugged in this area.

It is hard to discern whether there is someone waiting around in the shadows and it is a really uncomfortable experience to not know whether he is being watched or not, especially because his mind tends to play tricks on him, seemingly hell-bent on convincing him that it is the case and that he is in danger.

He is halfway there when he notices a dark figure coming around the corner where his destination lays and proceeds to make his way toward his direction. This causes Barry to slow down, despite the more rational part of him insisting that this doesn’t have to mean anything and that he is being ridiculous again.

To his surprise and confusion, he can see how the stranger lifts his hand and starts waves toward him just a second later.

“Hey, it just so happened that I was in the area and I thought we could ride the bus home together!”

The tension leaves Barry’s body when he recognizes Eddy’s voice and he watches how the other man starts to jog toward him.

“What are you d-doing h-here, E-Eddy?” he asks when the other man stops next to him.

“As I’ve said, I was in the area,” Eddy explains with a shrug and a familiar smirk and when Barry just proceeds staring at him, he huffs and rolls his eyes. “Come on, slowpoke, you don’t wanna miss your bus in this piss poor weather, do you?”

Barry feels a smile starts to slowly spread over his lips as a deep gratitude fills him. He is certain that
his friend came here to accompany him home, probably still worried about him after how out of it he has been yesterday.

“R-right,” he agrees and the both of them start anew toward the bus stop.

They are lucky, the bus arrives just a couple of minutes after they reached their destination and while Barry feels too tired to be very talk active, it doesn’t seem to bother Eddy, who keeps on talking enough for both of them for the most part of their way home.

It is a bit after elven when they finally reach their floor and Barry is very grateful for it because he feels utterly spent.

“Don’t fall asleep on your feet.” Eddy is watching him with an amused grin, obviously not missing how tired he is, before he wishes him a good night and moves on to his flat.

“Eddy?”

His friend, who has just put the key into the lock of his door, halts and looks back to him. They turned on the floor lights but the couple of them which are still working aren’t enough to illuminate all of it so that the other man’s face is mostly in shadows.

“Th-thanks f-for… f-for p-picking m-me u-up,” Barry tells him and he really means it.

Eddy smirks and shrugs.

“Sure thing but don’t let it get to your head,” his friend tells him in good humour. “After all, I’ve told you I was already in the area, haven’t I?”

Barry nods and finally enters his flat with a warm and comfortable feeling resting in his chest.

***

“Someone is knocking,” remarks Eddy from his position at the couch while not moving his eyes from the science magazine he has brought over and is currently reading.

“Well, then would you be kind enough to move your behind up from the couch and answer it?” asks Mary in a slightly irked voice. “Barry and I are the ones cooking, you could at least do something to earn you seat at the dinner table.”

“Hey, I am here for moral support and to tell you how amazing your food is,” complains the man but is already getting up. “You people are so ungrateful.”

Barry, who is currently with both of his hands in the filling, doesn’t listen to them and instead studies the door with a worried frown as he isn’t expecting anybody.

Briefly, just for split-second, he thinks of Len and immediately could kick himself for doing so. Mary has been right all those months ago, some people are just not healthy to have around. Understanding this is important, even if it hurts like hell at times.

“Hello and welcome at the Allen residence, how may I help you?” Eddy greets whoever is in front of the door after opening it.

Mary huffs in annoyance next to him while Barry chuckles over the other man’s rather childish antics. The situation loses any of its humour a moment later, though, when he hears Jay answer.

“I’m actually here to see Barry. Is he at home?”
The older man sounds slightly suspicious and Barry quickly grabs a paper towel to clean his hands and makes his way over to them.

“I-I’m h-here.”

Eddy steps to the side to make him space and Jay’s expression immediately relaxes when he sees him.

“Hallo, Barry. I’m sorry if I bother you, I just wanted to pass by and wish you a Merry Christmas.”

Jay’s last visit lays nearly two months back and Barry has assumed that he may have decided that he wasn’t worth the effort in the end. Then again, with how bad his depression has been for the last couple of weeks, he is actually glad that the older man hasn’t passed by. It probably would only have been a very uncomfortable affair.

“Th-thank y-you, J-Jay,” he answers honestly. “I-I h-hope you a-and J-Joan are g-going t-to h-have a v-very M-Merry Ch-Christmas as well. P-Please s-send h-her m-my r-r-regards.”

“Of course,” Jay agrees before his gaze turns toward Eddy again, who is still next to Barry and it is hard to miss that he is a bit surprised to find another person around, which in turn is a bit insulting.

“Is that another friend of yours, Barry?” Mary joins them and regards Jay with a rather curious but friendly look.

“Th-this is J-Jay G-Garrick,” he introduces the older man, seeing that he hasn’t really any other possibility, and hesitates a bit before he goes on. “H-he is… a-a f-former w-working p-partner of m-mine.”

“You look quite different without the helmet, anybody ever told you so?” Eddy asks and his grin widens when Jay gives him a slightly annoyed frown. He gasps the next moment when Mary jabs his elbow rather forcefully into his side before she turns to Jay again and introduces herself.

“I am Maria Nicolescu but people usually call me Mary. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Barry is glad when Jay relaxes again and returns his friend’s greeting warmly.

“Yeah, well, I am Edward,” the man next to him grumbles while he still rubs his side. Jay’s frown returns but Eddy ignores it and instead turns around and makes his way back to the couch where he swiftly lays down once more with the magazine in his hands.

Barry feels a slight irk rise in his chest, annoyed that his friend would behave this rude towards Jay. What the heck is up with him?

“I am really sorry for disturbing you,” Jay says again and causes Barry to turn it back to him.

“N-no, it i-is f-fine.”

The older man passing by really isn’t a bother and it isn’t as if he could have called beforehand and asked whether he could come by or not with Barry’s ongoing lack of a landline or a mobile phone, which are both too expensive for him right now.

“It’s n-nice of y-you t-to p-pass b-by,” he goes on and while he doesn’t feel comfortable around Jay anymore, he really means it. The other man has taken the time to come here, after all, even if it doesn’t take much longer than the blink of an eye for him.
“Actually, I have something for you, but I can see now that you are probably not going to have any real use for it.” Jay hands him a paper bag, similar to the one he brought by before, and Barry accepts a bit surprised. In it are a couple of containers with some more of Joan’s cooking and he can’t help but feel touched by this nice gesture.

“Th-thanks, J-Jay, I r-really ap-preciate it.”

The older man nods. “You are welcome, Barry, and I am really glad that you are spending today not alone.”

It is odd to hear this, to have Jay treat him so nicely. He doesn’t understand the other man most of the time, he really doesn’t and while a part of him wants to shy away, he forces it to quiet down.

“Y-you w-want t-to c-come i-in f-for s-some c-coffee?” he asks and quickly adds that it doesn’t has to be for long.

“We also have hot punch if you want, we just finished it,” Mary remarks.

“Hey! Why don’t I know anything about this?!” Eddy shoots her an indignant glare but the young woman reminds him that only people who work are earning their share.

“But Garrick didn’t do anything either,” he complains with a fake hurt look.

“He is a guest,” Mary states with a frown and walks over to where Eddy is still lying and who is watching her with slight suspicion as she comes closer. “You’re getting up now and you’re going to peel the maroons.”

“What, but just brought them over and they are still hot.”

“Deal with it.”

“You are the most heartless woman ever, you hear me? Ever!”

Barry sighs quietly after watching his two friends for a moment and turns back to Jay who doesn’t seem certain whether he should be amused by what he is seeing or not.

“Y-you’re r-really n-not b-bothering us a-and w-we m-made qu-quite a l-l-lot of p-punch” he tries again and can’t help but feel a bit nervous when Jay turns his gaze back to him.

The older man seems to notice it as his face briefly darkens with an emotion Barry isn’t sure where to place. Before he can get worried about somehow having gotten himself into a trouble again, Jay’s expression relaxes again and he gives him a faint but friendly smile.

“I would like that very much.”

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to upload this on Thursday already but I’ve been too tired after work and the last couple of days have been really busy for me, so it turned into another Sunday upload again. RL can be so damn needy...

This chapter had me worried for a while now, tbh. Barry is badly hurting in it and
dealing with the aftermath of his fight with Len is hard for him seeing that the other man has become his main source for support by now and whose words have been pretty devastating to him.

I hope his reaction to all this is understandable and doesn't come over too crass for some people.

The next chapter will introduce another one of my fav characters of the Flash (and, oh boy, am I looking forward to them :) and the one after that will have some Rogues in it again and will shed some light on why the kept their distance. Len will take a bit longer to re-appear, though.

I hope you enjoyed it and let me know what you think, I'm always curious to read your thoughts on it. :)
The weather gets worse at the beginning of the New Year and both of the twin cities get buried under a thick blanket of snow during the second week of January.

Barry, who doesn’t like cold weather in general as it causes the pain in his joints to worsen, dreads every time he has to go outside. The fact that he is travelling by bus to and from work isn’t making things much easier as the bad weather conditions make it also more difficult for traffic to function in general. That most people seem to be in a constant bad mood these days is just another reason why Barry is glad that he usually uses the public traffic system at hours where hardly anybody else does.

Looking out of the shop window, Barry watches how the snowfall that has started over an hour ago is still going strong and while he really hates the cold and wetness of this time of the year, he can’t help himself but marvel over how beautiful even the dirtiest part of a city becomes when it is covered by an inch of freshly fallen snow.

He already caught himself a number of times sketching a bit during the day as hardly any person has passed by so far. It seems that he isn’t the only one who prefers to stay inside in such a weather.

Out of the corner of his eyes he catches a movement and turns his attention once again back to the young teenager who has entered the little shop about twenty minutes ago. It is obvious by now that he isn’t intending to buy anything and Barry can’t say that this surprises him all that much. The boy is one of the street kids of this area and most likely just wants a place to stay for a bit to warm up. This is not a problem for him, as long as the teenager doesn’t cause any trouble.

As if on a cue, he notices how the kid is stuffing the candy bar which he has been eying briefly into his pocket and Barry has to bite down on a frustrated groan.

Calmly, as to not call the teenager attention to the fact that he has been caught, he makes his way around the counter to the entrance door and locks it before turning the sign from “OPEN” to
“CLOSED”.

It doesn’t take the boy long to notice what Barry is doing and he is suddenly next to him and pulling at the door but to no avail.

“What the hell!? What the fuck is wrong with you jackass!?” yells the kid and whirls around to glare at him with such an intensity that Barry is certain he would have gone up in flames if such a thing was possible. “You are too stupid to see that you still have a customer in here before you lock up!”

“C-calm d-down,” he tells the boy calmly and really isn’t surprised then the kid starts to imitate him.

“N-n-no, I-I w-w-won’t c-c-c-calm d-d-down, r-r-retard! Open the fucking door and let me out!”

“If y-you d-don’t w-want m-m-e t-to c-call th-the c-cops f-for sh-shopl-lifting, you w-will w-wind d-down a a-a-bit and s-stop m-making s-such a r-ruckus,” he tells the boy sternly and really hopes that this would do the trick. There is no way that he would actually call the police over something like this, especially because the thief is a child and while he has been given this job he is still not supposed to interact with anybody underage on his own.

The teen visibly bristles at the mention of the police and for a moment Barry is certain that he is going to try and smash the glass of the door due to the panic he can see flicker in his eyes. His worry turns out unfounded when the kid’s expression suddenly makes a shift from fearful to taunting.

“So what, call the cops! You think I am scared of those pigs? Ha! They can go fuck themselves!”

Barry frowns and while he is pretty sure that the kid is living on the streets, he still doesn’t want to get the police involved, especially because such an attitude could get the little fool in quite some trouble. Thus, he asks for the boy’s parents’ number.

“Or d-do y-you h-have any other r-relatives I c-can call?” he probes on when the teen just glares darkly at him from under his too long bangs before stubbornly turning his gaze to the ground.

“L-look, you c-can either g-give m-me eith-ther th-the n-number of s-someone t-to c-call or I w-will h-have t-to g-get th-the p-police inv-volved.”

Slowly but surely he starts to grow frustrated, especially because he has the shop closed and while he doesn’t expect any customer to turn up anytime soon, he still doesn’t like it. Unfortunately, Mrs. Ming isn’t around right now, as her grandson is currently in town and has taken her out to eat lunch together before visiting some exhibition in one of the smaller art galleries Central has to offer. She could call the police or handle this little shoplifter any other way she deems fit and Barry wouldn’t be forced to break the top condition of his parole, which is to avoid any unsupervised contact with minors.

He could have let the boy get away, of course, but this wouldn’t be right and certainly would have done any good for the kind in the long run. Still, with each passing second, he regrets more to not have done just that.

“K-kid-,” Barry tries again but the teenager cuts him off angrily.

“I’m no damn kid, you old fart!”

Barry doubts highly that he is any older than thirteen but he keeps from mentioning so and instead goes on calmly. “I kn-know th-that y-you d-don’t w-want t-to g-get in t-trouble.”

The boy scoffs at that but glances curiously at him.
“C-come, l-lets g-get over t-to th-the c-counter and sh-show m-me wh-what y-you h-have t-t-taken.”

He doesn’t really wait for the teen to follow but is certain that he will. The boy is a big talker but by his initial reaction it has become quite obvious that he is scared of getting in trouble with the police, despite his boasting.

As expected, he hears the young teen start following him just a moment later.

The kid stops next to him at the counter and gives him a rather petulant glare.

“S-so?” asks Barry and lifts an eyebrow slightly.

With a huff and some mutterings under his breath, which he isn’t able to pick up on and most likely doesn’t want to understand anyway, the boy starts to pull out his stolen goods from different pockets of his clothes.

Barry notices once again how shabby and run down the teenager is looking and that he is quite thin, which could be due to a lack of regular meals or just a growth spurt as it wouldn’t really be that uncommon for boys his age. Still, he starts to feel slightly concerned for the kid and wonders when he had his last warm meal.

It doesn’t take long for the boy to put all the things he tried to lift onto the counter and as Barry has expected it turns out to be mostly snacks like small chocolate bars, small party sausages and chewing gum as well as two lighteners.

“Here you have it,” the kid grumbles and gives him the evil eye once again. “Happy? You have you shitty stuff back, not like anybody would want it anyway.”

While the teen is behaving like a real brat, Barry doesn’t miss how he keeps eying the sausages and chocolate bars yearningly and he can’t help himself but feel bad for him because he knows just too well what it feels like to be hungry.

“What!? I grew a second head or something without noticing it?” the boy asks irritably when Barry just keeps studying him for another minute.

“I h-have a s-sug-gestion f-for you.”

The kids dark glare changes slightly and he starts to look more wary but also curious.

“Yeah? What kind?”

“Th-the th-things you t-took w-would h-have c-cost h-hardly m-more th-than f-five d-dollars, all in a-a-all,” Barry remarks and really hopes he isn’t making a monumental mistake as he goes on. “I w-would s-say I c-can overlook it th-this t-time and th-this t-time o-only if you g-give m-me a h-hand in t-taking c-care of th-the s-store f-for th-the r-rest o-of th-the d-day.”

The boy looks honestly taken aback at that suggestion and eyes Barry sceptically. “With what? Cleaning?”

“If y-you l-like t-to b-but actually m-more w-with h-helping m-me r-res-stocking th-the sh-shelves.”

Due to his joints acting up for a while now, he has done just the minimum of restocking where it really was necessary for a couple of days now. He usually doesn’t have a problem in cases he could just carry cans one or two at a time but with the heavier stuff it has turned into a real pain for him.
If this should really work out, and the sceptical site of him is currently having a field day at pointing out what could possibly go wrong, it would be a rather good solution to this predicament for both of them.

“And you wouldn’t call the cops if I help you with that?” the boy asks in a rather suspicious voice and eyes him with a growing frown. It is obvious that he isn’t sure what to make of this offer.

“Yes, as long as you try not to make off with something else, this whole matter will be settled for me,” he agrees but quickly adds. “But should I ever catch you stealing again, I will contact the police and you won’t get off that easy, understood?”

The teen keeps eyes him oddly but shrugs. “Sure, whatever, man.”

“Good.”

Barry is glad that the kid seems to listen and seems honest enough about it.

“Then, please tell me your name. I am not crazy about calling you kid any more than you are,” he goes on with a kind smile and feels slightly amused by the clearly offended look the boy is giving him at that.

“I am no kid, I’ve told you so already, alright?” he grumbles and hesitates a long moment before he offers somewhat reluctantly. “Axel.

It isn’t a surprise that the kid doesn’t offered him his last name, Barry hasn’t expected him too and he accepts that. Instead of asking him for it, he introduces himself.

“I am B-Barry, nice to meet you, Axel.”

Axel harrumphs and shrugs.

For the next two hours, the teen helps him with restocking the shelves, some cleaning, tidying up the storeroom and folding empty carton boxes to put them into the containers next to the back exit.

Despite his initially rather grumpy attitude, Axel warms up to him a bit when Barry comments on what a good job the teen is doing, which is both endearing and sad.

During the last hour before the store closes, they are mostly spending their time behind the counter, waiting for any customers that most likely won’t turn up anyway as the snowfall hasn’t decreased at all so far and the white blanket that is visible through the store window is growing higher and higher.

“That sucks,” Axel remarks after he has watched the area outside the entrance door that is lit by the shore lights for a couple of minutes in silence. “How come you haven’t had to shut down yet? There isn’t anybody passing by.”

Barry smiles and watches the kid with slight amusement.

“I didn’t know you wanted to assist me with the customers.”

“I don’t! I am not some stupid gay salesclerk,” the teen replies swiftly and rather vehemently before he seems to realize to whom he is currently talking.

“B-being a salesclerk is just as good of an occupation as any,” points Barry with a slight frown but can’t really bring himself to be affronted by the teen’s words as he has obviously talked
without thinking and is likely not really meaning it. Not that this makes it a lot better but he know how teenage boys can be.

“It is an honest and h-hard j-job, n-nothing y-you sh-should l-look d-down on.”

“Yeah, whatever,” grunts Axel and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

A silence settles between them once again and like before it is tense but not really that uncomfortable. Barry can see that the boy is counting the seconds before he is allowed to leave and he worries about whether he has any place to go. During the winter it is the worst for homeless people, especially children and while he would like to help Axel, there isn’t a lot he could do.

The teenager notices his gaze and turns to him with a rather hostile sneer on his face but, before he can rebuke him for staring at him, the silence is broken by a rather loud rumbling of the boy’s stomach. Axel flushes in embarrassment and glares angrily at Barry as if to dare him to comment on it. He doesn’t and instead both turn back to the entrance door behind which is nothing to see but darkness and snowfall.

Closing time finally comes and Barry proceeds as usual with Axel mostly staying behind the counter and skimming through some magazine he has picked up about ten minutes ago at his suggestion.

When everything is finally done, he leads the boy to the back exit and into the cold night air.

“Finally! Sweet freedom you have me back!”

Barry chuckles at this rather exaggerated words and turns to the kid after he has locked the door. “You d-did a r-really g-good j-job, A-Axel, th-thank you.”

The teen, who is currently stretching himself like a cat, halts and turns to him with a surprised but also slightly pleased look.

“But r-remember, I c-catch you again-”

“And you will call the cops, yeah, yeah, I haven’t forgot,” the kid grumbles and pushes his hands deep into the pockets of his coat, which isn’t all too thick and really not fit for this weather.

“G-good.” Barry nods and hesitates before he goes on. “You kn-know, I th-think d-despite everyth-thing, y-you h-have earned y-yours-self a t-treat, s-so wh-what d-do you s-say about m-me b-buying you s-something f-for d-dinner?”

Axel, who has studies the dirty ground with a rather morose expression, snaps his head up so quickly that Barry fears the kid could get whiplash from it and stares at him with a mixture of disbelief, wariness and hope.

It would rip another hole in his already meagre budget for the rest of the month but he is sure that the teenager hasn’t eaten anything warm for a while and there it this rather cheap Chinese restaurant not too far away from here that has still been open around this time and actually offers rather decent food.

“But I tried to steal from you?” Axel points out and Barry doesn’t miss how he lifts one of his hands to dig its heel into his stomach as if to prevent it from making any noise again. He suddenly feels really bad for the kid.

“Y-yes and I h-hope f-for b-both of us th-that it w-was th-the l-last t-time,” he remarks sternly before his features soften again. “B-but you h-helped m-me a l-lot as w-well and I th-think I owe y-you a th-thank you f-for th-this. S-so, wh-what d-do you s-say?”
Axel proceeds studying him with a frown for another long moment and just as Barry starts to think that he would decline, his expression changes and a wide grin spreads over his lips.

“Wicked!”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter. :)

Axel has been introduced and in case you aren’t sure, yes, it is Axel Walker. This version of Axel is based on the Axel of the comics (mostly pre New52), so he is definitely younger than the one you know from the TV show.

Next chapter will bring some of the Rogues back and Barry isn’t really that sure how to feel about it.
Here You Are Again and It Still Hurts

Chapter Notes

So, my bus to my hometown is leaving in about half an hour but I thought I'll put this up now because I'm not sure whether I'll have time to do so later on after coming back.

This chapter is not edited other than by myself yet but I hope it isn't too bad when it comes grammar and spelling errors. ;)

Again, I have to thank those lovely people who took the time to give me feedback, I really enjoy reading them, it is so incredible nice to see that someone is getting invested enough in my story to leave me a comment at times. :)

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Barry is ripped out of his sleep by a sudden knocking. The immediate response of his body is to freeze up while an adrenalin rush causes his heart rate to spike at the same time and for a horrible long moment he has no idea where he is or whether he is safe.

Then, he notices the blanket he has cocooned himself in and the pale light of the glowing hands of his small alarm clock and the realisation that he is in his bedroom takes off the worst of his panic. He still feels frightened but he is pretty sure that any actual burglar would probably not have bothered with knocking and it only takes him another second to remember who has the bad habit to pass by his flat early in the morning. This causes a surge of anger, worry and hope to flash through him and he doesn't give himself the time to think about what would be the best thing to do now before he already starts to fight off his paralysis and gets up.

“Barry?” Hartley voice is somewhat muffled by the closed door but Barry has to problem understanding him or to pick up on James, who tells the other Rogue to knock again.

He doesn’t give him the opportunity to do so.

Both of his unexpected visitors seem a bit startled when he rips the door open without any warning and while James exclaims his name in happy surprise, Hartley seems to pick up on that Barry isn’t exactly pleased to see them.

“So he is awake? Great, he can make us pancakes.” Sam’s voice comes from his living room area before the man in question appears around the corner and his easy smile quickly vanes and is replaces by a frown as his eyes fall upon his expression. “… or not.”

“Wh-what are you d-doing h-here?” Barry nearly hisses at them and they seem honestly taken aback by the anger he is displaying.

It makes him even more furious because what have those bastards expected!? That he would just welcome them back and cook for them after they didn’t show their damn faces for nearly three months!?

“We wanted to visit you,” James pipes up after an uneasy moment of silence has passed and while
Barry just kept glaring at them. Despite not wanting to, Barry can’t help it but feel a bit bad about how confused and slightly hurt the other man sounds. “Sorry for waking you up.”

“V-visit m-me?” he repeats and clenches his fists which is really not the brightest thing to do because the joints in his fingers immediately flare up in hot pain. “J-just l-like th-that?!”

“Barry, what-“

Hartley is cut off by Sam, who has joined his colleagues in the meantime and is eyeing Barry with an annoyed frown.

“What crawled up your ass and died there? Sorry for interrupting your beauty sleep, Missy-“

“Shut up, Sam.” Hartley throws his friend a warning glare but the other man ignores him and goes on, audibly annoyed.

“What? He is behaving like an ass, so why can’t I give him the favour right back?” Sam turns to Barry again, who still feels like he has just been slapped by what the other man has called him. “Sorry for giving a fuck about you. We thought you would like to know that we are still a-“

“Sh-shut u-up! Y-you h-haven’t sh-showed y-yours-self f-for th-three m-months a-and th-this i-is a-all y-you c-can s-s-say?! Y-you j-just… y-you th-thought I-I w-w… w-would…” Barry grits his teeth and presses the heels of his hands against his eyes which are itching badly enough that he is certain he going to make a damn fool of himself again.

For a couple of seconds nobody says anything and he only hears his own breathing in his ears that sounds much too loud.

“Barry.” Hartley’s voice sounds so clam and gentle that Barry hisses slightly in protest because the other man has no right to talk to him like that. This doesn’t stop him, though, and what he says next is like a punch in his guts. “You think we abandoned you.”

It isn’t a question and it sounds really silly now that Barry has heard the words out loud but… it is exactly what he thinks.

They have abandoned him after all. After Len left that night, Barry hasn’t heard nor seen anything of any of the Rogues since. They just seemed to vanish…

“We didn’t-” James starts but quickly breaks off again and while nobody has said anything and Barry is still pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes, he is pretty sure that Hartley has cut the younger man off with a quick hand motion.

Barry doesn’t understand what they want from him, why they act as if it wasn’t obvious that they’ve turned their back on him…

… except if they haven’t been avoiding him.

His stomach starts to sink while a small voice in his mind whispers to him that this is great, that, if this is really true, he should be happy. He isn’t, though, and instead he only starts to feel sick.

“Barry,” Hartley speaks in a low and nearly calming voice as he step closer to him, which causes Barry’s body to tense up even more.

“It’s alright,” the ginger assures him and makes a hushing noise when a small noise escapes Barry that sounds an awful lot like a sob. “Hey, it’s fine, there is no reason to be upset. I think you’ve
misunderstood the whole situation.”

“Yeah, like the part where we weren’t avoiding you but trying not to get killed by a crazy team of psychos for the most part of the last couple of months,” adds Sam, who still sounds tensed and very uncomfortable but no longer hostile.

Barry lowers his hands and looks toward the other man with wide and horrified eyes before he even realizes what he does. A couple of hot tears run down his cheeks but he hardly picks up on them.

“Wh-what? Wh-what h-happened!? A-are y-you alr-right? Are th-the o-others alr-right?”

“Yes, everybody is fine, Barry,” Hartley assuresses him and meets his confused and worried gaze with one that is just as concerned. “We had some trouble for a while and were out of the country but everything is settled now.”

“Out of th-the c-country?”

“Russia!”

Judging by James tone of voice and by how he is bobbing up and down on his heels he seems to hold some fond memories of that place.

Sam’s pissed off expression tells him that the other man does not.

“Yeah, fucking Mother Russia,” agrees the brunette and looks a lot like he has just bitten in a lemon. “Some crazy arsehole send a head hunter team after us because some shit Digger got himself into a while ago. That jackass seems to have done a few jobs with those wackos a couple of years back and missed to mention this to any of us.”

“And they were totally pissed off because he had stolen some information on a huge Aztec calendar that can help you to talk to gods!” James provides with a grin and Barry decides that it is really too early for any of this.

“Y-you s-still w-want p-pan-cakes?”

His voice sounds raspy and he feels utterly exhausted, now that his chest no longer feels like it is bursting open any moment due to being stuffed to the bring with too many emotions.

James immediately is all for it. “Yes! With strawberries and whipped cream!”

“You really don’t have to,” Hartley protests and gives him a concerned once over. Barry realizes then that he has to look rather horrible to his friend, seeing that he lost around ten pounds over the first one and a half months they were gone and it is rather difficult for him to put them back on. He has been thin before but now gaunt is a much more of an accurate description. Aside from that, he has had troubles sleeping again for the most part of the last week and being awoken after just about three hours isn’t helping either.

“But if you want to, then it is totally fine,” suggests James, which causes Hartley to give him an annoyed glare.

“James.”

“What, he’s offered it?”

Barry rubs his eyes and wipes the traces of tears away that are still visible on his cheeks before he
utters that it is fine and moves past his friends towards the kitchen. There, on the table, he sees two plastic bags of groceries and for a second he feels like crying all over again.

“We bought all the stuff you need,” James explains after he has turned up next to him and smiles widely. “Even maple syrup and we paid for everything.”

“Th-that’s g-good,” Barry murmurs and walks over to the bags to see what they have bought. It is way more than the basic ingredients he would need to prepare pancakes and it such a damn nice thing to do because they really didn’t have to. So far, he hasn’t been able to pay any of them back for even a single purchase and he knows that the money they are using is stolen and that this somehow should it make less meaningful but it doesn’t.

Barry pushes the line of thoughts away and instead turns his attention back to the purchases. It is mostly basic and canned stuff but also a couple of fresh vegetables and fruits, for which he most likely can thank Hartley for.

As James has said, they have got him everything he needs for preparing breakfast and he has to smile when one of the items he pulls out is a pack of Jelly Babies. Definitely the other blond’s choice.

While Hartley helps him put the stuff away he doesn’t need right now, Sam and James take a seat on the table and start a game of poker.

It doesn’t take Barry long to prepare the batch for the pancakes and he listens to the other men as he does so, a bit surprised about how nice it is to have them around again. He still feels tired and a bit sick but something has loosened in his chest and it doesn’t seem like the weight of a small car is bearing down on him anymore.

His mind briefly goes to Len but he stubbornly refuses to think about him as he really doesn’t want to be reminded of the ugly and hurtful things the other man said to him the last time they saw each other. Barry isn’t sure what to make of the whole situation the Rogues brought themselves into just yet but he is pretty sure that even if this hadn’t happened, Len would have kept his distance.

The notion is saddening even though he should know better by now.

His small flat is soon filled with the smell of freshly fried pancakes and coffee. Hartley helps him whip the cream as he doesn’t has any electrical hand mixer and usually uses the whisk if he really needs to. The cold weather is making his joints seemingly stiffer with each day, though, and he is glad when the other man offers to do the little task.

Again, the food turns out to everybody’s liking and while Barry isn’t particularly hungry, he too eats two of the pancakes with a bit of whipped cream. He doesn’t miss that Sam keeps studying during the meal but pretends not to notice.

Afterwards, while they play another game of poker that Barry sits out, they tell him a bit of what had been going on during the last couple of months. Most of the story makes him wonder how his friends have been able to get out of this alive at all and some of it sounds so damn ridiculous that he most likely wouldn’t have believed it weren’t it for his own experience as a superhero and the knowledge that one’s life could get really crazy if you are involved in this kind of things.

“And then the whole underground cathedral started to collapse and those creepy shadow people appeared again but they just kept standing there while we bolted out of there.” James seems way too excited about their little adventure in Russia and Barry is certain that most of this would have caused him to end up with even worse troubles to sleep at night than he already has.
“Stop talking about that shit, Tricks,” Sam grunts clearly annoyed and gives his colleague a hard
look. “You’re just inviting trouble if you keep mentioning them.”

“You’re not seriously believing what that senile idiot of a priest told us?” asks Hartley and seems
more amused than really exasperated about the other man’s concern.

“You’re not the one that creepy kid has been following around for weeks,” Sam reminds drily and
Barry really doesn’t want to know what that one is about.

“What did you come back?”

“Early Friday afternoon,” answers Sam and eyes him once again oddly. “So, Cold hasn’t paid you a
visit yet, I guess.”

Barry feels himself flush in embarrassment and averts his gaze to the still dark window over his sink.

“N-no.”

He doubts that Len would show any time soon either and in a way he is glad for it. He doesn’t know
whether he could face the man again.

“You two had a fight or something? Because that jackass has been in a horrendous mood even since
before the whole thing with the suicide-idiots started.”

“Sam,” Hartley warns but the other man simply shoots him a dirty look.

“What? I’m just asking.”

“Are you sure those head-hunters are no longer coming after you?”

If there is an obvious way to try and change a topic then it would be this one but Barry doesn’t care
about subtlety right now. He doesn’t want to talk about Len, he doesn’t even want to think about him
if he can help it.

The other seems to pick up on this and thankfully play along.

“Their leader lost his head in a quite literal way and I doubt that any of them were able to make it out
from there before getting squashed to death,” Sam explains and shrugs. “Even if they should have
survived by some miracle, I highly doubt that they will be able to come after us anytime soon and the
information they wanted from Digger is obsolete by now anyway.”

“But if they’re dead, we could see them again as ghosts or shadow people,” James points out which
causes his colleague to visibly bristle.

“Shut your stupid trap, will you?” Sam hisses and looks about ready to hurl his coffee mug at the
other man. “We aren’t going to talk about any of this shit again, alright!?”

“Sheesh, fine,” James grumbles and rolls his eyes before he turns to Barry and asks him whether he
could make some hot chocolate.

“He isn’t our servant, James,” Hartley reminds him disapprovingly but Barry tells him that it is fine.
He doesn’t really want to talk anymore right now, anyway.

It is close to eight when his friends finally decide to leave and while he is glad that he is able to go
back to bed, he is also a bit sad to see them go. After all, it has been a while that they have been
around the last time and their visit has been a really nice surprise in the end.
While Sam and James are already in the bathroom, Hartley holds him back for a moment. Barry already knows what he is going to say and a familiar feeling of dread overcomes him.

“Look, I don’t know what has happened between Len and you but this has nothing to do with the rest of us,” the redhead explains and chuckles at his gobsmacked look as Barry hasn’t really expected to hear that.

“You are a good guy, Barry,” Hartley tells him in earnest and while he is smiling, the worry is still not gone from his face,” and while we are mostly not, we know that we can appreciate to have someone like you around.”

Barry’s throat starts to close up again and he ducks his head a bit as he utters a small thanks.

The other man’s amused expression changes to one of irritation a moment later but Barry’s worry that this could be due to something he has done or said is quickly put to rest.

“Len can be such a jerk at times and I’m pretty sure that he made certain that you know so too,” his friend says, which causes Barry to avert his eyes with an unhappy frown. When Hartley goes on, his voice is softer and a bit quieter. “He really seems to like you, though, Barry. I know that doesn’t excuse any of what he did or said but whatever has caused your current estrangement is really gnawing on him.”

A mixture of emotions walls up inside Barry similar to the ones before and he pushes them away forcefully because he doesn’t want to start feeling miserable just yet again. He wonders whether Hartley would still think so if he had been there and heard what had been said.

“Y-yeah,” he agrees quietly as there is not really much else to say to it.

Hartley gives him a sympathetic smile and steps a bit closer to cup his shoulder. It is a very light touch and Barry is able to keep himself from flinching.

“It has been good to see you again and thank you for the breakfast. It really was just amazing.”

With that, his friends follows the others into the bathroom and Barry is once again alone in his flat just a moment later.

He stands there for a couple of seconds longer before he sighs and rubs his eyes. He is still very tired, even more so now that his stomach is filled, and he decides that he would take care of the dishes later.

Right now, Barry just wants to catch a couple more hours of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it!

In this chapter my love for the paranormal comes a bit through, it is just a small gag for anybody of you who knows about ghosts and smudging or shadow people. ;)

Next up, Lisa joins us again! :3
It is a week after Hartley and the others have showed up in his flat that Barry gets a visit from Lisa, this time, much to his surprise, just before midday.

“I need a place to get away from those idiots for at least a couple of hours or I won’t be held responsible for what I am going to do,” she tells him in lieu of a greeting and doesn’t wait for him to invite her in before she pushes past him.

Barry, quite taken aback by this rather brusque intrusion, just looks after her for a second before quickly closing the door. He just hopes that none of his neighbours has noticed his unexpected visit…

Lisa stop close to his couch and lets her gaze slowly travel through the room.

“God, and I thought I have been depressed before,” she grumbles under her breathe but still loud enough for him to pick up on before she speaks to him directly again. “You still don’t even own a telly, do you?”

Again, she doesn’t wait for Barry to answer but instead walks over to his kitchenette and makes a beeline to his fridge.

Barry swiftly follows her.

“You c-can’t j-just m-march in h-here l-like th-that, L-Lisa,” he half says, half hisses and the only answer he receives is a rather unimpressed look from the blond woman before she turns back to the now opened fridge.

“Sam told me that you are a real chef. You wanna be a good host and cook me something?”

“N-no,” he states firmly and feels increasingly frustrated. “B-but you are g-going t-to l-leave a-again.”

She darkly frowns at him and closes the refrigerator door with more force than necessary.

“Too bad, Sweetie, you are stuck with me for now.” The smile she is now giving him is anything but friendly and both of them proceed glaring at each other for the next couple of seconds as Barry isn’t really sure what else to do.

“You always in such a pissy mood?” Lisa finally asks when she seems to have enough of scowling at him. It irks Barry because this is just ridiculous. He has every right to be not exactly welcoming
after her more or less forcing her way inside.

“Y-you alw-ways imp-pose y-yourself on others, wh-who c-clearly d-don’t w-want your c-
company?” he asks sharply in return and immediately feels sorry for it when a hurt expression
crosses Lisa’s face in response. It is quickly gone again, though, and replaced by anger instead.

“Well, because you stammering version of a scarecrow are so popular these days, aren’t you?” she
asks sharply and sneers. “You’re expecting some little boy to come by and don’t want me to interfere
with your fun?”

There is hardly anything Barry hates more than those awful insinuations. Every single time it is like a
punch and he feels utterly mortified for a seconds that people are really thinking that of him.

“L-leave.” His voice sounds strained and thin and he is pretty sure that it is plain on his face how
damn much he is hurting again.

“Look, I am sorry, I-

“L-leave!”

Lisa doesn’t but she falls quiet for a moment and studies him with a slight frown.

“I am really sorry, Allen, that was a low blow.”

“J-just g-go, you kn-know absol-lutely n-nothing and y-you h-have n-no d-damn r-right t-to t-talk t-to
m-m-me l-like th-that.” Barry feels how his eyes start to itch again and he angrily wipes his hand
over them. He hates this so much, he just wanted a damn Sunday to relax a bit.

“I know and it was horrible of me, I am just in a pissy mood and my mouth often works too quickly
for my mind to catch up. This is no excuse but I really don’t want to make you feel bad.” Lisa huffs
and pushes her fingers through her hairs in a rather exasperated manner. “Let me make it up to you,
please. I’ll order us some pizza and we can start over again, okay? No hissing and spitting at each
other but talking like the grown-ups we are supposed to be.”

The notion to spend any more time with her isn’t exactly thrilling and Barry’s relaxed mood from
before is now gone as well.

Before he can decline, though, she goes on with a pleading look. “Please, Allen, I’m really sorry for
what I’ve said and there aren’t exactly many places I can hang out with somebody without me
ending up in a damn holding cell. Just let’s start over, alright?”

Lisa does look sorry and despite not really wanting to have anybody around right now, Barry bites
his lower lip and nods reluctantly.

“Great!” The woman gives him a wide triumphant grin before she pulls out her mobile phone and
starts unlocking it. “Basilio’s is the best pizzeria in Keystone and they even deliver in this rundown
area, you’ll love it. They’ve the best Tiramisu you can imagine.”

“L-Lisa, I r-really d-don’t h-have th-the m-money f-for th-that,” Barry interjects and despite his lack
of appetite he offers to cook them something instead. He still has enough of the groceries Hartley and
the other brought over that he could make them something nice, after all.

“I’ve told you already that this is on me,” she reminds him and just lift her hand to stop him from
protesting anymore. “It’s my redemption for being such a pissy cow, alright?”
"This isn’t necessary, really."

"When is the last time you’d Italian food? And I’m not talking about this piss-poor excuse you get in those cheap spots around here."

"L-Lisa—"

"Barry, I really feel bad about what I’ve said before, so please, let me make it up to you."

A bit caught off-guard by her calling him by his first name, Barry just looks at her in surprise for a moment, which Lisa seems to take as an agreement because she gives him a satisfied smile and starts to dial a number she seems to know by heart.

"Do you like anchovies and capers?" she asks him as she waits for someone on the other line to pick up and he just shrugs a bit helplessly, because it still doesn’t sit well for him that he is invited for lunch but he doesn’t really see any way to get out of this.

Lisa proceeds to order a Pizza Napoli, along with a big bottle of diet coke and two servings of the formerly mentioned Tiramisu.

"So," she says after she ended the call and looks to him, "what are you doing on your days off without a TV? Any suggestion for how to pass time till the food arrives?"

Seeing that he usually either spends his free time trying to catch up sleep, reading or drawing, he isn’t really sure what to offer her. Usually, when Mary or Eddy are over, they talk or play cards and while he still is a bit wary of the first option, he thinks that a game of Crash is probably acceptable for both of them.

Lisa agrees and they end up playing a couple of rounds. There isn’t much talk going on, at least not on his part, while his guest tells him a bit about why she has actually turned up on his doorstep.

It seems that her brother and Roscoe had gotten into another fight, about some rather asinine reason she doesn’t really go into other than mentioning that it involves a job they are currently planning. Both of those hotheads started a quarrel over it, which resulted into Mick and Sam having to pull them off each other.

Barry thinks that it is understandable that she is upset about it and he lets her get some of her frustration off while mostly staying quiet during her little rant.

"Seriously, I don’t get them. They’ve known each other for over fifteen years by now and it isn’t as if this was the first time they’d to work together but this is clearly still not enough reason for those idiots to get over their stupid little grudges," she huffs as she picks another card at which she proceeds to glower at it like it’s the source for her annoyance. "It’s ridiculous that two grown up men like them still tent to behave so damn childish as soon as they’re in the same room."

A pained expression crosses her features and she shoots him an unhappy frown as she goes on. "And they always pull me into it one way or another, as if they hadn’t been on each other’s throat before I had even known Roscoe."

Not sure what else to do, Barry gives her a sympathetic smile and briefly thinks back to when he fought the Rogues as the gems’ protector. Even now, he can still vividly remember that during their clashes with him both Len and Roscoe weren’t able to not get into each other’s hair somehow.

It seems that some things are simply not meant to change, no matter how much time passes by.
“So, you and Len are currently not on speaking terms either, hm?”

Barry tenses up and it takes him a second before he can get himself to give Lisa a reluctant and uneasy look. His throat feels dry again and he only shrugs half-heartedly.

“Don’t worry, I am certainly not going to hold it against you. My dear brother can make everybody want to get away from him at times,” she grumbles and her next words are cut off by the knocking at his door. The delivery guy must have arrived with their order and Barry can’t help but feel relieved over the disturbance.

He gets up to answer but Lisa just waves him off and tells him that it is fine.

“Don’t worry, he won’t pick up on who I am,” she smirks and gives him a wink. Barry really wants to protest as he doesn’t want to deal with the repercussions should the police find out that he has a wanted criminal in his flat but Lisa is damn quick if she puts her mind to it and is already at the door before he can even utter a word.

His body tenses up in apprehension and Barry feels a familiar sickness weigh down his stomach as he listens to her greeting the delivery guy, a young man probably in his mid-twenties. He curses her silently when she actually starts to flirt with him for a bit before she finally pays for their order.

“You look like you are going to snap in half any moment now.” Lisa gives him an exasperated look as she brings the bags over to the table. “Relax, that guy thinks I am just some average cutie, nothing more. It isn’t the first time I’ve ordered something from them, he knows me and thinks my name is Jessy.” She smirks and seems quite amused for a second. “Tricks thinks it’s hilarious.”

Barry certainly doesn’t but he isn’t surprised that James would be all for this kind of charade.

“Th-hat g-guy w-won’t f-find it odd th-that h-he m-meets y-you h-here?” he asks with audible incredulity but, again, Lisa just waves him off.

“He thinks I am a prostitute.”

Judging by the easy way she is saying this, it doesn’t seem to bother her at all that someone could think that of her. Barry can’t help but feel a bit taken aback by it, though.

She notices this and the amused smirk returns. “What? Like a quarter of all the women you meet in this area are fancy ladies. You really think I mind if some bozo who knows nothing about me assumes something like that?”

Barry doesn’t replay, he isn’t sure what he could say to that, and instead gets up to grab them some plates for their food.

The pizza turns out to be just as good as Lisa has told him and while Barry initially hasn’t had any real appetite, he ends up eating two slices, which results in him ending up feeling like he is about to explode.

“Sam’s right.” Lisa studies him with an odd expression he isn’t sure how to take. “You do eat like a bird.”

“I d-don’t,” Barry protests and thinks that two slices don’t really qualify as a bird portion.

“This pizza is as thin as air,” Lisa retorts and lifts an eyebrow as she reaches for her fourth slice. “It h-has a l-lot o-of t-t-topping,” he grumbles and reaches for his glass of coke. “A-and th-the ch-
cheese is f-filling.”

The blond woman looks about to retort before she seems to think the better of it. Instead, she turns back to her new slice of pizza and takes a bite of it.

They decide to eat their dessert a bit later, much to Barry’s relief, and decide to move over to the couch.

“I am too full to play cards.” Lisa groans and let herself drop onto the couch with a groan, her right hand rubbing her belly like it’s hurting her. Barry isn’t really surprised by that, she was able demolish five slices on her own, after all, which was quite an impressive task in his opinion.

Again, it is his guest who does the lion’s share of talking, which doesn’t seem to bother Lisa, and he listens to her as she tells him a bit more about what has happened during the Rogues’ stay in Russia and who those people are that had been after them.

Barry hasn’t heard anything about the Suicide Squad so far other for what he learned from Hartley the other day and he wonders whether his former colleagues are aware of them or not.

Then again, there is hardly anything that can pass Bruce’s attention and he guesses that they most likely are familiar with them. It is a good thing the whole spectacle didn’t lead to the JLA or any other superhero to get involved. This would have certainly caused his friends to end up in the Heights once more if not to something even worse.

“Sam’s actually talking about smudging our current bolthole and don’t asks me what that is, I have no idea,” Lisa chuckles and takes a sip of her coke before she goes on. “He’s driving Len nuts with it. My dear brother doesn’t want to have anything to do with that paranormal shit after Russia and I can’t hold it against him. He isn’t showing it, of course, but the whole thing has him pretty much spooked, not that it is any different with the rest of us.”

Her smile falls and she pulls an unhappy face.

“Seriously, that whole experience has left us all with an impressive aversion regarding anything ghost related,” she goes on and runs her pointer over the rim of her glass of coke. “I could still throttle Digger for getting us all involved into that mess.”

“B-but everyth-thing t-turned out okay?” Barry asks, still feeling somewhat worried about them despite Hartley’s reassuring words.

“Yeah, we’ve gotten away with all the important parts still attached,” Lisa agrees and grins amused, “and Sam’s convinced that he brought a little unwanted friend along with him.”

“A-ah gh-ghost?” Barry can’t help but sound a bit incredulous but Lisa doesn’t seem to take it the wrong way as she only shrugs.

“It seems like it,” she agrees. “Nobody else of us has noticed anything so far but he’s insisting that some little kid-ghost is still following him around to this day. Thus, his idea with the smudging-thingy.”

Hearing this causes Barry to get goose bumps and he can’t help but wonder whether this thing, may it be a ghost or not, has followed the other man here the other day. Thanks to his work with Zatanna and other heroes that are connected to the occult, he is well aware that such things like ghost, demons and so on do exist and can pose quite a source of danger. He really doesn’t like the notion that he could get into trouble with such a thing on top of everything else.
“Don’t look so damn worried,” Lisa laughs and rolls her eyes. “I’m pretty sure those things aren’t contagious.”

Barry doesn’t correct her even though he knows that they very well can be if you are unlucky enough...

They topic changes to how he has been doing over the last couple of months and he feels a bit caught off-guard when he notices the slightly concerned way Lisa seems to study him at times as he tells her a bit about what has been going on in his life.

She’s undoubtedly picked up on his loss of weight and seems to worry about this just as Mary, Eddy and Mrs. Ming do. He doesn’t understand why but it is quite embarrassing and he tries to stay clear of this subject as good as he can. Lisa seems to pick up on his unease and asks him how his hand is doing instead. Like the rest of the Rogue, she is aware of him being mugged a couple of months ago.

“F-fine, j-just st-still a b-bit st-stiff.”

It took nearly two months for Barry’s hand to completely heal, which hadn’t been too unexpected as his body tends to heal extremely slowly ever since he has gotten injected with the nanites. Despite kind of expecting that the bones in his arm would take longer to mend, it was still annoying as hell, though.

“You seem to move rather oddly at times,” Lisa remarks out of the blue and Barry really doesn’t understand why she has to be so damn blunt at times. “I’ve noticed it for a while now. Do you have rheumatism or something?”

“S-someth-thing l-like th-that,” he agrees quietly and turns his gaze to the small couch table in front of him.

“That sucks.”

It is a bit surprising how honestly sympathetic she sound and he shoots her a wary glance. Lisa doesn’t miss it.

“Why the hell do you seem to think the worst of me all the time?” she grumbles but adds somewhat awkwardly. “Look, I know I’ve been kind of a bitch to you at first but it really wasn’t anything personal.”

Hartley words from Barry’s first poker night over at the Rogue’s comes back to his mind, who said just about the same thing.

“I don’t really know you,” Lisa goes on and meets his eyes with a serious expression, “and people can be horrible fucks even if they don’t look like it but I really don’t get that vibe off you. I am pretty sure the whole thing with you being some deranged murderer who goes after young boys is bullshit and I don’t want you to think that I really believe that stuff. Okay?”

For a long moment, Barry just stares at her as, honestly, he would have expected her to say about anything but that. It is hard to believe that Lisa doesn’t think of him as this awful person he is made out to be, especially with the things she often throws at his head.

“You’re a really hard nut to knack, aren’t you?” She sighs and gives him a faint smile before her attention is drawn from his eyes further up and she frowns. “When was the last time you’ve gotten a haircut and I don’t mean by a blind monkey.”

His indignant look causes her to smirk and she tells him not to be so damn sensitive all the time.
“I’m not the one insulting you.” She grins and nods to his hair. “You’re the one running around like that after all.”

“N-not f-funny,” Barry remarks drily, which causes Lisa to shrug and asks him whether he is cutting his hairs himself.

“Because it does a hell of a lot look like it,” she adds with a meaningful look that is quite annoying.

Barry frowns and nods somewhat reluctantly. It isn’t as if he has the money these kind of things and, while he knows that his skill isn’t anything close to that one of an actual barber, he hasn’t really given that too much thought so far.

“Well, we will have to do something about that.”

Lisa sudden declaration catches him off-guard and he shoots her a wary look.

“What?”

“I’m going to cut you hair,” she informs him with a wide smile. “So, I guess you’ve the comb and scissors in the bathroom?”

Of course, Barry adamantly refuses to let her anywhere near his hairs. At least, at first, because Lisa is certainly not lacking when it comes to being persistent and it doesn’t take her long to wear him down. It does help to convince him when she tells him that she is the one who usually cuts her brother’s and Roscoe’s hair and that it is kind of a hobby for her.

Thus, about twenty minutes later, Barry finds himself sitting on a chair in his bathroom that is hardly big enough to give Lisa room to move as she takes his current cut in. One of his bigger towel is around his shoulders and he listens to her mutter under her breath that this is one of the worst haircutting she has ever seen. It doesn’t really bother him as he is sure that she has at least somewhat of a point. He prefers to keep his hairs short for exactly this reason but even then it often looks messier and worse off when he is done than it did before.

By now, it’s been a while since he has cut them the last time. It was shortly before his fight with Len and by now his hair have gotten long enough that his bangs actually become troublesome again, which is always a good indication that it is time for another cut.

“You’ve really thick hair,” Lisa mentions and causes Barry to return his mind to the here and now. He tenses up when she once more runs her finger through them. It is uncomfortable but he tries to keep himself as relaxed as possible.

“Don’t worry, I won’t cut you,” Lisa assures him as his reaction isn’t lost on her and he just nods stiffly.

“It’s really soft too,” she goes on and laughs. “I’m envious, mine maybe looks nice but it feels like straw to the touch.”

Barry shoots her a quick glance and can’t really imagine this to be true. The woman has really beautiful long and thick hair and while he has never really thought of it so far, it does look like it would be nice to run his fingers through. Iris hair has been incredibly soft...

The notion of his former wife causes him to freeze and he immediately forces the thought out of his mind.
Having Lisa cut his hair isn’t a pleasant experience as a lot of touching is involved, even if it is just his scalp. Still, it helps that the woman keeps talking to him despite his painfully obvious lack of active involvement in the conversation as he can concentrate on her voice. He wonders whether she’s noticed how tensed up he is.

It is likely and the notion that she would try to help him relax is nice and… unexpected.

It takes about half an hour till Lisa is satisfied with her work and Barry is just glad when he can finally get up again and get some additional distance between them.

Still, when he catches glance in the mirror of himself, he halts and can’t but marvel over his new haircut, which does indeed look much, much better than what he usually runs around with.

“I’ve told you so,” Lisa reminds him and is obviously pleased by his reaction.

She helps him clean his bathroom before they return to his living room. As neither of them really feel like sitting on his couch anymore as the thing is incredibly uncomfortable, he gets the thick spare blanket from his bedroom he usually uses when the heating isn’t working and spreads it out at the ground for them to have a place to sit.

They end up playing another rounds of Crash before she shows him how Back Jack works.

Barry is really surprised when he looks at his clock what seems to be just a bit later to him and sees that it is already ten to eight at night.

Lisa decides to leave shortly after they’ve eaten the rest of the pizza and the tiramisu for dinner and Barry is a bit sad to see her go. After all, it has turned out to be a surprisingly nice afternoon with her.

“Thanks for letting me stay.” Lisa, who has turned to him again after they made their way over to his entrance door, really seems to mean it and Barry can’t help but briefly wonder whether she is lonely at times as well.

“Th-thanks f-for th-the m-monkey-f-free h-haire-cut,” he replies and Lisa chuckles before she gives him a quick hug that catches him completely by surprise but is over too fast for it to become uncomfortable.

She leaves after that and Barry decides to sketch a little bit as he is feeling in an unusually calm and relaxed mood.

He isn’t really surprised when the sketching turns out to be one of a female ice-skater.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked the chapter!

Did anyone of you spot the brief nod to what happened to Barry's powers? :3 Don’t worry, a much more elaborate explanation will follows later on.

Also, I so love Lisa, she is just such a great character. I don’t know why I’ve come up with her liking to cut hairs as a hobby but a good friend of mine tends to do so (she says it is really relaxing) and it just sneaked into this chapters somehow.
I'm thinking about writing an Interlude for the next chapter before I go on with the actual story, from either Lisa's or Len's POV. I've decided to pep the story up a bit by introducing other people's POVs at times. It won't be something regular but I think it could be fun. :)

Len is grabbing a new can of beer when the ringing of his doorbell cuts through the comfortable quiet of his flat.

It seems that Izzy must have forgotten something again. That woman could be such an airhead at times, especially when she has drunken enough to get tipsy, which is quite a feat on her part as she could put a Viking to shame by how well she is able to hold her drinks.

Closing the door of his fridge, Len opens the can and leaves his kitchen to makes his way over to the entrance door. He picks the Cold gun up as he passes through his living room, its weight familiar and somewhat comforting in his hands as he has always prefered to be safe than sorry, and tries to remember whether he has still some aspirin laying around. The headache from this morning is still bothering him and while having sex helped to relieve some of the pain, he feels how it starts to come back already.

To have Lisa greet him from the other side of his door is, to say the least, a surprise and by the slightly disapproving frown she gives him, he isn’t sure whether it’s going to be a good one.

This is better not going to be about Dillon again, he has had enough of that idiot for a lifetime.

“What are you doing here?” he asks more gruffly than intended but, as expected, Lisa only aches an eyebrow at that.

“Nice to see you too, Lenny,” she huffs but judging by the amused and somewhat exasperated glint in her eyes, she doesn’t seem to take his standoffish demeanour the wrong way.

Good, he really doesn’t think he has the patience to deal with her right now should she lay into him again about his last fight with her boyfriend.

God, he really needs some painkillers.

Without another word, he turns around and walks back to his living room, leaving the door open for Lisa to follow. He feels her annoyed gaze in the back of his head but ignores it. It’s already past eleven at night, too late for her to have the right to expect any kind of hospitability.

“I’ve met Izzy when I entered the building.” Lisa informs him after she closed the door and turned back to him. Judging by her expression, the prostitute’s name seems to leave a foul taste in her mouth and Len, who has dropped himself onto his couch, frowns slightly but stays quiet. His sister’s dislike for the other woman isn’t exactly a secret and he doesn’t intend to have another conversation about her, not least because it tends to lead them fighting over Lisa’s relationship with Dillon and they’d already clashed with each other enough for one day.

“She told me you two spent quite an enjoyable evening together.” There is an unmissable accusation
in her tone and he really doesn’t understand why she can’t just leave this damn topic rest.

“You’re here to talk with me about my taste in women again, Lisa?”

“Taste in whores would be more like it,” Lisa replies and Len shoots her an angry glare for it. They hold each other’s gaze for a moment before his sister’s expressions softens a bit and he recognizes regret in her pretty blue eyes.

“Let it rest,” he tells her as she was about to apologize for her crass words. He takes another sip from his beer and looks down at the can with a grim look, waiting for Lisa to finally spill the beans about why she’s passing by this late.

Lisa doesn’t, though. She keeps standing next to the small couch table, studying him quietly. It annoys him but he lets her, knowing that she would inevitably tell him what is bothering her.

Whatever she wants to talk about, doesn't seem to be something she likes to breach all that much either, as she makes her way to his kitchen, instead, straight towards his fridge.

“It’s alright if I take a beer?” she asks a moment later, said beverage already in hand, and Len fights to urge to smirk as the hissing sound of it being opened cuts him off before he even has the possibility to reply.

“Mi casa e tu casa,” he tells her and turns back to his own can to take another sip.

Lisa makes her way over again, around the couch, and takes a seat next to him.

For the next couple of minutes, a comfortable quiet settles between them and they drink their beers in silence. If it weren't for his certainty that she wasn't just here to spent some time and a few drinks with him, he would actually really have enjoyed her presence.

Despite how easy it is for Lisa to make him want to go up the wall more often than not and how she knows better than anybody how to get under his skin, she is also the person who he generally feels the most comfortable around. She knows him better than anybody else and he can afford to let his guard down around her as she would always have his back, no matter what.

Like he would always have her back.

“I’ve been over at Allen’s place.”

The can of beer stops a mere inch from his lips and Len freezes for a second, not sure whether Lisa has really just said this or whether his damn mind is finally calling it a day.

He lets his hand holding the beer sink and looks over to her, his face guarded and a mixture of confusion and anger fighting for dominance in his chest.

“What?”

Why the hell would she do that? He didn’t even know that she knew where Barry lives.

Lisa shrugs, meeting his eyes firmly and there is a slight pinch to the corner of her lips that lets him know that she thinks he is behaving like an idiot again.

“I needed a place to get away from you and the others,” she explains. “There was just too much testosterone around after you and Roscoe decided to try and bash each other’s head in again.”

“And you went to Allen’s place for that?”
“I did,” Lisa agrees and aches her eyebrows at him. “You know that there aren’t that many places for me to get some peace and quiet from you and the rest.”

Right, that is something Len has been very much aware of as his sister likes to loudly bemoan this fact every other day. What is new, though, is that she seems to have some kind of interest in Barry and it doesn’t exactly sit all that well with him.

“You don’t like him,” he points out as if to remind her of that little fact.

“I didn’t like him,” she corrects him with a slight smirk. “Mostly because you do. You know me, I can be petty like that when you drive me nuts with all your bitching about Roscoe and me.”

Len frowns but doesn’t bother to correct her on that one.

“So you’d a sudden change of heart and decided to pester him?”

Lisa gives him an unimpressed look.

“What if I did?” she asks as a rather unkind smile appears on her lips. “You’ve obviously decided that you’re fed up with him, so why can’t I have him instead?”

She is making it sound dirty on purpose, he is well aware of that. He knows that Lisa would never cheat on Dillon as she is faithful to a default when it comes to that dumbass. This still doesn’t stop the rush of anger that courses through his body, though. Len forces himself to stay calm, to not show the irritation her words have caused, and instead gives her a reproachful look but refrains from saying anything.

He turns back to his beer, the throbbing in his head suddenly becomes much more noticeable again.

A loaded silence follows and he knows that Lisa is studying him.

“Take him if you want.” The words are cold and sharp and he tries not to think of Barry or how their last meeting has ended.

A tense moment passes between them and he sullenly studies the small couch table in front of him that is currently covered by blueprints and a couple of magazines Izzy had brought over before.

“… you’re such an asshole, you know that?”

Lisa lets the annoyance and disapproval bleed through this time as she speaks and Len snorts because her insults are really getting old.

“You like him, Len,” she goes on, watching him closely for any reaction and he is careful to give her none. “You took him over to our fucking hideouts, you’ve never done that with anybody else before. This is the first time in I don’t know how long you volunteered in spending any time with anyone besides us Rogues or your whores.”

It has always been a trait of his sister to be a damn nuisance whenever he really doesn’t has any patience left for it. Right now, he is very close to tell her to shut up and leave.

Len closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to will the increasing pain behind his temples and the base of his head away.

Lisa has fallen quiet again and he can feel her annoyed gaze as if it was an actual touch. The brief peace doesn’t last long.
“I don’t know what happened between you two but I’m not blind and I see how this has been bothering you for weeks now, Lenny.” She touches his shoulder and despite still being pissed at her for pushing her nose into business that has nothing to do with her, Len feels some of his anger wane at that.

“I’m fine, Lisa,” he grumbles and opens his eyes again to look to her. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

Her hand slips from his shoulder and he watches how an all too familiar exasperation settles over her pretty features.

“Stop being such an idiot, you stubborn mule,” she tells him seriously. “You’ve been in an abysmal mood since whatever happened between you two took place and I’m honestly impressed that Mick hasn’t tried to fry you yet or that Marco didn’t shoot a lightning up your ass!”

Her eyes are hard and daring him to protest and Len wonders what has her so wrought up. This is obviously not about Dillon and he still doesn’t get why she is interested in Barry all of a sudden. Is it because the other man helped Dillon by getting him meds that one time?

Whatever the reason, Len can’t say that he likes her sudden change of heart, contrary how he would have welcomed it just a couple of months ago.

“You wanna insist on this leaving you cold?” his sister goes on and he nearly rolls his eyes because she just knows how to annoy him. “Fine, but let me tell you that it’s not the same for Allen. Whatever happened between you two, it left his traces on the guy.”

Len turns to her with a frown and tries to ignore the familiar guilt that nestles into his chest.

Lisa huffs and pushes her fingers through her long hair, looking both very frustrated and unexpectedly concerned.

“Really? You’re surprised by that?” she asks and moves so that her side is leaning against the back of the couch, now fully facing him. “Why are you doing this? Getting someone actually decent into your life and then fucking it all up because of your damn daddy-issues?”

“Shut up-”

“Nobody gives a fuck about what he thinks about anything!” Lisa interrupts him, rising her voice to do so. “He is a piece of shit and hopefully rots in some hole for the rest of his miserable life! Lenny, that bastard is long gone, don’t do that to yourself. Nobody of us would bat an eye-”

The anger is so potent, so omnipresent all of a sudden, that it forces Len to get up, to just move, to do anything other than sitting still because this is his sister and while everything in him screams to make her shut up, he would never touch her. Over the years he has come to accept that he may be his father’s son in more ways than he likes to admit but he would never cross that line.

“Damn it, Len!” Lisa is up now as well, following him as he stomps to the kitchen, like the damn stubborn and stupid sister she’s always been.

“This conversation is over.” He tells her and forces himself to calm down, to at least put on a semblance of being in control over his emotions.

When he turns back to face her, he is relieved to see that she is still glowering at him, even though she must know how furious he feels right now. She’s never been scared of him and it helps. It helps him to get a grip of himself despite the anger and guilt and all the other ugly feelings that are
currently ravaging his inside.

A part of him wants to tell her that she is an idiot and that she’s gotten it all wrong. He isn’t homosexual, he’s never been interested in another guy. Maybe he was a bit curious when he was younger but he never felt the urge to act on it.

Touching upon this would open up a whole new can of worms, though, and he is not going to do so.

Trying to state his point without even being sure about it anymore would be a stupid thing to do and Lisa is way too smart to buy any of his bullshit. He may prefer not to look at his relationship to the other man but even so he is away that has no idea what Barry really is to him, he hasn’t had for a long time now.

... and, like a fucking coward, he took their last fight as a way out, as a reason to cut him off…

Damn…

Len takes a deep breath and holds it for a couple of seconds before exhaling it slowly, forcing his body to relax somewhat, to let go of the urge to fight. His headache has grown worse and he decides that he would take whatever painkiller her could find and go to bed. This day has been going on too long as it is.

Lisa, who has waited silently and patiently for him to recollect himself again, is watching him with a concerned frown when he looks back to her.

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” he tells her seriously. “This is none of your business.”

Her lips thin when she presses them together in a clear display of her dissatisfaction. It is hard to miss what she thinks of that.

They stare each other down for what feels like a couple of minutes but probably has been nothing more than a few seconds, before his sister averts her gaze and sighs heavily. It causes him to relax some more because she has obviously come to the conclusion that she wouldn’t bother him anymore, at least not tonight.

“He is a good guy,” Lisa says quietly and this time Len is the one to look away when she returns her eyes to him. “Whatever happened, I don’t think either of you deserves this.”

She steps closer to him, then, and lays her hand onto his chest, above his heart, a gesture nearly as old as herself, and it succeeds in getting him to meet her concerned and sombre gaze once more.

“You’re a clever man, Lenny, despite how stupidly stubborn you tend to be at times. Just try to remember that we left him behind us decades ago.” Her expression lightens a bit up and she gives him a slight smile. “And don’t forget that you can be as badass as you want, it still doesn't mean that you don't have to apology for being a complete twerp to someone who’s a nice person and actually willing to put up with you.”

Lisa steps back and empties her can of beer before throwing it to the trashcan next to his kitchen counter. She doesn’t appear annoyed anymore but there is still the worry from earlier when she studies him once more.

“Go to bed and get some rest. You're looking awful.”

Despite everything, Len has to smirk at that and nearly points out that she is one of the reasons he isn’t feeling all that hot right now. Instead, he gives her a small nod.
“Will do.”

Lisa smile again, faint and somewhat sad.

“Good.”

His sister leaves shortly after that and Len is left with doubts and regrets that keep circling in his mind for the majority of the remaining night.

Chapter End Notes

This is the first chapter of this story that I've written in another POV than Barry's and it was quite interesting to do so as in the initial version of Singularity you would not really get a insight in Len's (or any other person's) mind and most motives and such is mostly revealed by what Barry experiences with them.

I'm not really intending to change this all that much, I like how I did it so far and I'm not really sure how much I like giving the reader to experience other character's inner working on their own (I hope that makes sense) just yet but I thought it would be something interesting to try. There will actually be another chapter in Len's POV very soon, but after that it will probably be some time till one comes around again. Feel free to tell me what you think of this little Interludes, I would like to know. :)

And I'm currently uncertain how to post the next chapter... I've planned one more before Barry and Len finally going to interact again but I'm not sure whether I shouldn't just put them together as one. It would be crazily long, though, 9000+ words and I don't know whether this would be too long... urgh, have to think about it some more. If I put it together, you will get all of it this Sunday, otherwise, a somewhat short chapter this one and a long one next one.

Anyway, hope you liked this little experiementsal chapter! :) Let me know what you think and as always so much thanks to anybody who leaves me feedback!
41 or How Surprise Parties Can Be Awesome and Not

Chapter Summary

Barry's birthday holds a lot of surprises.

... and some Len. ;)

Chapter Notes

This chapter isn’t edited yet and it’s quite long, so please excuse any errors that creeped into it and I wasn’t able to spot.

I also wasn’t certain regarding whether to split this and make this into a two part thing because it is quite long in its current form. I decided against it in the end and hope that the length is okay with you – I myself love long chapters but I’ve by now decided that I want to put mine out in pieces you don’t need to long to finish, simply because I don’t want it to become a chore for you guys. :)

Ps.: Sorry, I deleted this chapter by accident just after uploading it moments ago because, it seems, I'm about the clumsiest person ever. -.-'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FEBRUARY 2nd YEAR

“Life isn’t fair,” Eddy huffs and eyes Barry with a dark look. “How the hell are you already 41? You don’t look anything close to 40.”

“He isn’t smoking,” Mary point out before she tells the other man to stop talking and watch the movie.

“That with smoking and looking older is total bull,” the other man grumbles. “I know people who've smoked like chimneys since they were ten and they don’t look any older than they are supposed to.”

“Good to know, Eddy. Could you please quiet down now and let me and Barry enjoy the film?” Mary seems rather irked about her friend failing to stay quiet for longer than two minutes at a time. Barry can’t say that he is surprised about it. Eddy isn’t a big fan of old movies and the couple of times he has been over to join them for one of their movie nights it has always ended up with him talking through a good part of it.

“You think it is the water? You drink an absurd amount of water every time I am around.”

Marry groans while Barry just shrugs.

“They say that drinking a lot can keep you look younger for longer,” adds Eddy and studies him thoughtfully.
“For heaven’s sake, what is it with you and your fixation on his age?” asks Mary clearly annoyed now and she turns her gaze to Barry as well. “He probably has good genes, some people are lucky like that, and it probably doesn’t hurt that he doesn’t drink or smoke like certain others of us do.”

“Yeah, you should wind down a bit when it comes to that, Marry,” agrees Eddy and laughs when the woman hits his shoulder in return. “Such a display of violence, really.”

“Just keep on talking and I won’t invite you over the next time we have movie night.”

“And miss those eighty year old flicks without colour and tone!? You are so damn heartless at times.”

Eddy’s shoulder gets another punch for this and Marry turns to Barry with a huff.

“This is your fault, you’ve introduced him to me.”

“S-sorry.”

“Hey, what the hell are you apologizing for? You should demand some money from her for it.”

Barry snorts but refrains from commenting and instead proceeds listening to them bickering while he tries to at least keep somewhat up with the movie.

***

“So, it’s your birthday today?” asks Axel and looks quite surprised about this piece of information. Mrs. Ming has asked Barry about five minutes ago whether he could stay behind for a bit after work and when the boy made fun of him for being in trouble, he explained to him that this is most likely not the reason.

“How old are you turning? Like fifty?”

Barry’s face falls slightly at this question and gives the teenager a disbelieving look that actually turns sour when he notices that the kid is dead serious.

“D-do I l-look l-life f-fifty t-to you?” he asks calmly and wonders whether Mary and Eddy have been making fun of him the whole time.

“Don’t know,” shrugs Axel and follows him to the shelves with the paper towels, “I can’t tell the age of people to save my life and you’re wearing old people clothes and are always lecturing me.”

“Old p-people c-clothes,” Barry sputters and frowns when the boy just laughs, clearly amused by his reaction. He looks down on himself and wonders what is wrong with his clothing.

“You wear grandpa pants,” Axel points out readily.

“I d-don’t, th-these are n-normal-,” he stops as he is really not going to discuss his sense of fashion with a teenager who is wearing a shirt that could rival James’ usual attire. Axel just grins but let go of Barry’s seemingly questionable sense of fashion and instead asks him whether he is going to have a birthday party.

“N-no.”

“Why not? Your birthday is just once a year, you should celebrate it.”

Barry chuckles and explains him that he is a bit too old to still have birthday parties.
“What? There is no age where you don’t have b-day parties anymore,” Axel objects and gives him a
looks as if he has turned crazy.

“W-well, once y-you s-start w-wearing g-grandp-pa p-pants, th-things s-start t-to ch-change,” Barry
points out and smiles when Axel rolls his eyes but doesn’t comment any further on it as he seems to
decide that this topic doesn’t really interest him any longer.

Instead, the teen starts to pester Barry to buy him one of the chocolate bars with the peanut butter
fillings that are his favourites.

Over the last couple of weeks, Axel has started to turn up twice or thrice a week and while Barry
doesn’t feel comfortable with a minor around, he doesn’t really see that big of an harm in it either as
Axel usually vanishes again after a couple of hours and Mrs. Ming is also aware of his presence and
doesn’t seem to mind that the young teen tends to pass by every now and then. She even has started
to bring small plates of cookies down whenever she notices that Axel is around. The boy likes her
well enough as well, most likely due to the food, and hasn’t caused any trouble at all so far.

“Wh-what d-do y-you th-think of an ap-ple instead?” asks Barry as he finished dusting the shelves
and is amused when he receives a clearly unimpressed look in response.

“You n-need t-to eat f-fruits, y-you kn-know th-that.”

“Yeah, but they taste like shit.”

“A-Axel,” he warns the boy as he really doesn’t like for him to use this language and the teen
actually has the decency to look somewhat guilty.

“But it’s true, apples taste sour.”

“If you s-stuff your f-face f-full w-with ch-chocolate all th-the time, I’m n-not r-really s-surprised that
you th-think s-so,” Barry tells him seriously and walks over to their fruit section where he picks up
one of the pears and weighs it before he offers it to the boy.

“Eat it a-and y-you c-can h-have a p-pean-n-nut b-butter b-bar afterwards.”

At Axel’s disgusted expression he rolls his eyes and explains that they are really sweet.

“I l-like th-them m-mys-self v-very m-much.”

“Yeah, because that is a shocker,” the boy mutters but reluctantly accepts the offered fruit.

Axel has to leave about twenty minutes later as Barry is about to close the store.

“Happy Birthday, Barry,” the teen wishes him as he is on his way out.

Barry smiles and thanks him.

“Well, and thanks for the peanut butter bar… and the pear.”

“Y-you’re w-welcome,” he replays warmly and watches the kid vanish into the night with a slight
feeling of worry. Axel told him the other day that he has a place to stay, though, with a couple of
other teens, and while this is not the best possible solution it qualms some of his concerns regarding
the kid. He hasn’t told Barry anything specific but that is alright, he hadn’t expect him to.

Despite it going towards mid of February it is still rather cold and especially hard for anybody
without home.
Barry pushes that thought away, as there isn’t much he could do about it, anyway. He neither has the money nor is it actually legal for him to interact with any child. As frustrating and sad as it is, he can’t really do anything the help Axel other than buying him the occasional snack and let him stay in the store to warm up or pass some time.

Mrs. Ming joins him during the closing to give him a hand. Both of them talk a bit about whether he has any plans for tonight, which he does not, about the progress of the puzzle they are still working on and about her grandson, who would come back to Central City in about a week.

“You are not going to meet up with your friends to celebrate your birthday? It is an important day,” she remarks as she finishes sweeping the floor. Barry knows that she is of the opinion that someone’s birthday is a very special occasion in one’s life and that it shouldn’t just pass by like any other one. He still remembers how unhappy she was for him when he told her that he would spend his birthday alone last year.

“I-I a-already h-have,” he tells her with a small smile. “M-Mary and Eddy a-are b-both n-not around t-tonight s-so w-we c-celeb-brated y-yesterday.”

Both, Eddy and he spent yesterday’s evening at Mary’s place, who actually baked him a really delicious Romanian chocolate sponge cake that is called Amandine. It was a very nice time they spent together and while he isn’t all that happy about them getting presents for him as he doesn’t want them to spend their money on him, it is still reassuring in a way to think that he does mean enough for them to do so in the first place.

“I am glad to hear that, Barry.” Mrs. Ming seems relieved about learning this and, once again, Barry feels grateful for her and the other people in his life, who show him that it really isn’t as bad as it can seem at times.

They go up to her apartment afterwards and he is quite taken aback when she presents him with a little cake she baked for him.

“You r-r-really d-didn’t h-have t-to.”

“But I wanted to, my dear. You are helping me so much with the store and while I may not look like it, I do get to that age where I couldn’t take care of it on my own anymore,” she tells him with a humorous twinkle in her eyes before she ushers him over to the kitchen to take a seat on the table. It is nicely set and she even put on a vase with a small flower bouquet.

“I l-like m-my w-work,” he tells her and it is important to him that she understands this, “and I kn-know th-that th-there aren’t m-many p-people wh-who w-would w-want m-me t-to w-work f-for th-them.”

It is a sad truth of who he is and he seems it would be much more fitting if he could get her a little something as a thank you than the other way around. He really appreciates her kindness and the positivity she gets into his life even when he feels so depressed that he hardly wants to face another day.

“Barry, I am blessed to have you,” she tells him in a soft voice and squeezes his hand slightly, “and it doesn’t matter what other people think, I know what a wonderful and kind man you are. So please, just sit down and let’s celebrate your birthday for a little bit.”

He knows that it would be ungrateful to protest so that he ends up nodding instead and finally taking a seat.
The cake is really good and they have some herbal tea to it that fits really nicely while she tells him a bit about Chinese birthday traditions when he asks her about it.

It is after they both are finished with their pieces of cake that she gets up and briefly leaves the room just to come back with a small wrapped box. Before Barry can protests once more, she asks him not to and just to accept it.

“It would mean a lot to me,” she tells him honestly.

He studies the gift in her hands before he looks up to her again and smiles a bit forced. “Th-thank y-you, B-Bo.”

She returns it brightly and hands him the little nicely wrapped box.

It turns out to be a small vibrantly blue stone on a thin chain, a necklace, and he isn’t too sure what to make of it at first.

At his rather puzzled look, Mrs. Ming chuckles and explains to him that it is a Kyanite. “It is a gem that is said to have the benefit to align all the chakras in your body, especially the throat charka.”

They have talked about Chinese medicine and their view of the human body and the energy within it a couple of times already and even before the concept on energy fields and charka hasn’t been new to Barry. Still, he never paid it too much mind even though he did find it an interesting topic.

“Th-throat chakra?” he asks somewhat warily and watches how Mrs. Ming expression softens a bit.

“Yes, it has calming properties and is said to help people dealing with their fears as well as with communication and self-expression.”

Barry looks back to the small gem inside the box and studies it oddly intrigued by her words. It doesn’t look garish in any way and he is pretty sure that he could wear it under his shirt without anybody noticing that he is even having it on him. He is well aware that it is most likely a silly thing to hope that this maybe could really help him with his speech but, still, even just as a simple present it is a very thoughtful and kind one.

“Th-thank y-you.”

“You are very welcome, my boy,” she assures him with a happy little smile, obviously glad that he has decided to accept it. “Do you want me to tell you a bit more about this stone?”

Barry agrees and they spend the next forty minutes talking about the Kyanite and gemmology in general, as it turns out to be an interesting topic for the older woman. He enjoys listening to her and while he is sure that it is just imagination, he thinks that the little gem, which he is now wearing around his neck, feels pleasantly warm against his skin.

***

Barry arrives home later than usually this evening due to the small birthday celebration he had with Ms Ming. It is already close to eleven but he doesn’t really feel in a hurry. Despite tomorrow being Saturday, he would not have to go to work as a pest controller would pass by the store to take care of a mice problem they have had for a couple of weeks now. It is also most likely a little additional present for him, even though his employer didn’t say so directly.
His mind is still occupied with the nice evening he spent with Mrs. Ming so that he doesn’t pick up that there is faint light coming through from under his door in the dully lit hallway.

Thus, he is very much caught off-guard by a loud cheering that welcomes him the moment he pulls the door open. It causes him to freeze as he has expected to come home to a quiet flat but before any fear can really take hold of him he realizes that the source for the ruckus are a couple of very familiar faces.

There, in his living room that is decorated with paper streamers, balloons and so much confetti that parts of the floor can’t even be made out anymore, are Hartley, James, Lisa, Sam as well as a quite uncomfortable looking Roscoe.

“Barry! Happy Birthday!!!”

James is suddenly on him and flings his arms around his neck to give him a nearly painful bear-hug. It causes Barry’s body to grow stiff in a response but to the other man’s credit, he lets go of him just a second later and makes a swift step back.

“Uh, sorry,” James apologizes with an embarrassed look but is still in visibly high spirits.

“James, calm down,” Hartley sighs as he comes up to them. He turns to Barry with a warm smile and congratulates him as well but leaves it at a handshake.

“Happy Birthday, Barry.”

Feeling slightly overwhelmed, Barry just nods and tries to return the smile while his eyes keep on looking between his friends and the decorated room.

Lisa is the next one who comes up to him and gives him a very brief hug and a kiss on his cheek, which causes him to flush slightly. She doesn’t miss it and seems quite amused by his reaction.

“Careful, or you can really pass as a prude old man,” she tells him with a wink while she squeezes his hands. She then turns around and beckons Roscoe over who does so a bit reluctantly and, like Hartley, settles for a simply handshake and a nod. Barry is rather glad for it.

“Well, he has the fitting attire,” Sam remarks as he is chewing on a corn dog and just smirks when Barry shoots him a rather dark look in return.

“Be nice, jackass,” Lisa warns her colleague, “and you are one to talk. You still stick with your stupid outfit from the nineties.”

“Hey! That’s because my outfit was the only one that didn’t suck.”

She ignores her friend and instead grabs Barry’s hand to lead him over to the table that is similar decorated as the rest of the room and holds a number of finger foods as well as a cake that is rather odd looking.

“I did the decoration,” James informs him in a very smug way when he noticed Barry eyeing the cake slightly taken aback. “Hartley baked it but I did all the rest! It looks marvellous, doesn’t it!”

At the expectant look he receives, Barry stutters his agreement, even though he isn’t sure what to think of all the little marzipan Hello Kitty, dinosaur and other random figures that stick out it in every direction or that the icing is a mixture of the very familiar colour combo of blue and yellow.

“I made the mistake to leave him alone for five minutes,” Hartley explains in a low voice and eyes
the cake and little sugar figures with a pained expression. “I still don’t even have an inkling where he could have gotten these from.”

Barry chuckles and remarks that it is a rather cheerful looking cake.

“Yes! Exactly!” James agrees before he turns to Hartley with a triumphant grin. “I told you he would like it! Not everybody wants your boring kind of cakes.”

“I prefer boring over that any time,” Sam adds under his breath but seems amused over his colleague’s creation.

Barry, who is now standing next to his table, silently watches his friends and is uncertain about how to respond. He hasn’t counted on them passing by and even less so on them going so far to throw him a surprise party. The realisation that they did that for him is a bit overwhelming.

“Th-thank y-you.”

His voice sounds breathy and he can feels his face grow hot because it has to be obvious that he is currently struggling to keep his emotions in check.

“R-really, th-thank y-you, th-this… i-it’s… y-you d-didn’t h-have t-to…”

While both Sam and Roscoe seem rather uneasy all of a sudden, Hartley and Lisa give him sympathetic looks. James grins broadly and tells him that it is fine.

“It’s the job of friends to throw awesome parties, after all,” the other blond point out.

“Indeed,” Hartley agrees before his expression becomes a bit more sombre. “And we also want to apology for not letting you know about what has been going on.”

Barry wants to protest as he is pretty sure that they had quite more persisting things to worry about than him during their time aboard but before he can do so, Sam huffs and tells Hartley to let it finally rest.

“We didn’t even have the means to write him a stupid postcard if we wanted to,” the brunette points out with a frown.

“It’s r-really ok-kay,” Barry agrees and adds a bit more quietly. “I’m s-sorry f-for as-suming th-the w-worst.”

“What are you talking about?”

Roscoe, who is standing next to Lisa, gives them a puzzled look but the blond woman only pats his arm and assures that it is nothing. His frown makes it clear that he isn’t satisfied with this answer but he lets it go. Barry is surprised that Lisa seems to know about what has happened between him and the other men and watches her a bit wary as she turns back to them again.

“So, who wants some coffee?”

Barry spends the next two hours eating, drinking and enjoying the cheerful and boisterous mood. Still, when Lisa asks him whether he would want to dance with her to one of the songs they listen to on her mobile phone, he declines and can’t be moved. He has never liked dancing much and wasn’t any good at it either.

Despite everything, he isn’t all too keen on making a fool out of himself in front of the other men and
while Lisa is rather huffy about it, she accepts it when he tells her that his joints are still acting up. Which isn’t a lie, seeing that the cold weather still isn’t doing him any favour.

The blond woman instead turns to Roscoe, who obviously doesn’t really want to join her either but gives in when she starts to pout, much to Sam’s amusement.

Hartley helps Roscoe to push Barry’s couch to the side to create a small makeshift dance floor they can use.

“That is exactly the reason why I don’t have a girlfriend,” Sam remarks and makes a slight notion to the dancing couple with his beer. “It has always to go according to their will otherwise you are fucked... or not.”

He chuckles over his own rather tasteless joke while Hartley shoots him a peeved look.

“I really don’t think that _that_ is the reason you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Screw you, Hart.” Sam grins. “You don’t know shit about girlfriends, so excuse me if I don’t really care about your opinion.”

Hartley shoots the other man a slightly annoyed look but both let that subject drop again, seemingly without any bad blood persisting between them.

The current song on the phone ends and a new one starts, which is quite quicker paced than the one before.

“Hey! I love that song!” James exclaims and turns to Hartley. “You wanna dance with me?”

Hartley smiles amused and agrees so that they end up joining Lisa and Roscoe at the dance floor.

“Well, looks like we aren’t the two most popular people around here,” Sam shoots Barry an amused glance before he grab another one of the fried cheese balls Lisa prepared for the party.

“I am,” Barry disagrees with fake earnestness and chuckles along when the other man snorts.

“Careful, or you will start to grow an ego,” Sam warns him with a broad grin.

“I’m a v-very h-humble p-person b-by n-nature.”

“No shit.”

Sam gets up to grab himself another beer from Barry’s fried and offers to get him one as well. He agrees.

Roscoe joins them just a few minutes later, while Lisa stays with Hartley and James. He has a rather strained expression on his face and hisses softly as he takes his seat again.

“Th-the ankle is s-still b-bothering y-you?”

The other man just grunts in returns and takes a long swing of his bottle while generally looking quite morosely.

“The pain you bear for true love,” Sam adds with a smirk and doesn’t seem bothered at all when his friend flips him off.

“I’ll g-get you s-some ice t-to c-cool it.”
“It’s fine, I just overdid it a bit,” Roscoe grumbles but doesn’t try to stop Barry when he still gets up.

It just takes a minute for Barry to grab a small towel and put some ice in it. He is just closing the fridge when the small orange bottle with the left-over pain killers, which he got on the day of his discharge, comes to his mind and he decides to fetch one of them as well should they not have expired by now.

Despite his initial words, Roscoe looks clearly relieved when he hands him both of.

“You sh-should c-contact D-Dr. S-Simmons again if you h-have s-still t-trouble w-with your ankle.”

“That incompetent fool doesn’t know what he is talking about half of the time,” Roscoe grouses and downs the pill with some beer, which causes Barry to reconsider whether it has been really such a good idea to give him the drug.

“Still, he is a doctor,” Sam remarks and glances at his colleague with a suddenly slightly annoyed expression. “Who knows, maybe he can bring an end to your constant whining. It would be definitively worth a shot.”

“Screw you.”

“You see, always pissy these days,” Sam points out before he seems to consider something. “Oh wait, that hasn’t really changed. Never mind. My bad.”

Both men start a small argument after that and Barry, who isn’t really interested to get involved in it, turns his attention back to the others just to notice that they seem to have had enough of dancing right now and are making their way over to them again.

“You two, no fighting. This is Barry’s party,” Lisa reminds them with a slightly exasperated frown when she picks up that both of the other criminals are currently involved in calling each other names.

“He started it,” Sam nods to Roscoe who gives him a dirty look in return.

“How mature,” the other criminal sneers before he adds with a sniff, “and I did not.”

“I really don’t care,” Lisa huffs before she notices the towel with the ice in Roscoe’s hand with which he is cooling his ankle and her expression softens. “Is it hurting again?”

“It’s fine,” he grumbles but doesn’t seem really all that bothered when Lisa lays her arms around his neck and pulls him closer to her chest before kissing the top of his head.

“I’m sorry, honey, I shouldn’t have asked you to join me.”

“It is fine, Lisa, really.”

Roscoe lays one of his arms around her waist and turns his head so that he can press a kiss against her collarbone. Barry suddenly feels extremely out of place as he watches this. A slight pain briefly flares up in his chest but he tries not to notice it.

“Come on, guys, no smooching outside your rooms,” James reminds them with a slightly disgusted look which earns him rather nasty glares from both of them and Lisa takes the seat next to her boyfriend again.

“So, what do you think of your party so far, Bear?” the blond woman asks with a wide smile and Barry is so surprised by that new nickname that he fails to answer for a moment.
“Barry-Bear! I like that,” James exclaims and turns to him. “Can I call you that from now on?”

He frowns but before he can tell the other man that he would have him rather not to do so, Roscoe call James an imbecile, which provokes another quarrel.

After Hartley has been able to calm James down again and Lisa successfully prevented Roscoe to lunge at the other man for hurling some of the cake into his face, the mood relaxes again and they end up like they usually do most of the time, playing a game of cards.

Seeing that Barry isn’t really in the mood for poker and it is his party, they settle on Crash, even though both, Sam and Roscoe are obviously not all that pleased about it.

“So, after all the dunces have settled down again,” Lisa starts and turns her attention to Barry once more. “How do you like your party so far, aside from those buffoons’ childish behaviour.”

“It’s g-great,” Barry replies easily as it really is. He has been a bit worried at first due to Sam and Roscoe being present but they don’t seem to mind having him around and haven’t been hostile towards him at all so far.

It still is hard to believe that they would do such a nice thing for him, though.

“Th-thank you, I r-really ap-pr-e-ci-a-te it.”

“Good.” Lisa smiles widens a bit, obviously happy to hear so. He wonders whether she thought that he would somehow react otherwise. When he thinks about it for a moment, he realizes that this is not really such an unfound assumption as he has reacted rather negatively to her during her last surprise visits, not that it wasn’t understandable at the time.

“Hey, Barry,” James’ voice pulls him out of his thoughts again. “Is Barry like your real name or the short form of something?”

Roscoe makes a scoffing sound at that but keeps from commenting when Lisa gives him a warning look. Thankfully, James didn’t pick up on it but keeps looking at Barry expectantly.

“I th-think it is sh-short f-for B-Barth-tholomew b-but I am n-not r-really s-s sure,” he answers somewhat hesitant but honestly and isn’t really surprised when all of the people present give him rather odd looks for it, which causes him to duck his head slightly embarrassed.

“How the hell can’t you be sure about your own name?” Sam asks with a frown as he snatches a handful of spicy nuts. “Your parents forgot to tell you?”

Barry bristles at that but forces himself to calm down just as quickly. He keeps his eyes on his cards and shrugs slightly.

“N-never h-had th-the op-port-t-t… op-portun-tty t-to ask th-them.”

An uncomfortable silence follows and he wishes with all his might that they will let this topic drop.

“So, what stands in your ID?” Hartley asks, causing Barry to briefly glance at him.

“B-Barry.”

“Well, that settles that, doesn’t it?” Sam points out before he wrinkles his nose. “Not that you would miss out on anything with Bartholomew, it is a rather stupid name.”

“If you say so, Samuel,” Lisa remarks drily and ignores the other criminal’s protest as she turns to
Barry. “I like your name, it is easy and happy. It fits your.”

“Are you calling him easy?”

“Shut up, Sam, will you?”

“You said it, not me.”

“Just turn back to the game, it’s your turn anyway.” Lisa sighs before she looks to Barry once more. “Ignore that idiot. He’s just envious because he is names after one of the arch-angels and a priest told him that is why this little ghost boy follow him around.”

“Would you shut up!” Sam tenses up nearly palpably and shoots the blond woman a dirty look. “We are not talking about this shit!”

“You mean ghosts?” Hartley asks innocently and obviously tries his best not to smirk.

“Fuck you!”

It is shortly after one in the morning when they decide they have enough of Crash and Lisa suggest to play a game of Black Jack instead. Barry agrees readily enough and it is just as she starts to shuffle the cards when a sharp knocking on the door cuts through the room.

Concerned, as Barry has no idea who could pass by at his flat at this time other than maybe a neighbour that could be bothered by them, he looks over to the door with a slight frown.

“You’re expecting someone?” Lisa asks quietly and it is then that he notices that his friends have stopped talking. They are currently eyeing the door with rather wary expressions.

“No.” Barry shakes his head and gets up, so do the others. “I’ll see who it is.”

The notion that one of his neighbours could be coming to complain about them making too much noises is ridiculous as he is most likely one of the quietest occupants around, even now with them over. Still, he isn’t able to come up with another explanation as Mary wouldn’t come back before next Tuesday and Eddie has told him that he wouldn’t be around for the weekend either.

Briefly, the notion of Jay comes to his mind and his stomach drops immediately. Then, he remembers the current time and that it is more than unlikely for the older man to pass by this late.

His mind comes to a grating halt when he finally looks through the door spy and for a long moment he can just stand there and stare in sheer disbelief.

“I can see your shadow from under the door again,” a familiar voice remarks and Barry has no idea what Len is doing here this late or, as a matter of fact, at all.

“Len?” Lisa calls out from her spot next to the table and also sounds puzzled about her brother’s appearance.

“Wonderful,” Roscoe mutters but relaxes visibly and sits back down while the blond woman makes her way over to where Barry is still standing before the closed door.

When he fails to open the door, Lisa gives him a confused look that is quickly replaced by one that holds an uncomfortable amount of understanding. He fidgets slightly as she studies him before she ushers him to step aside so that she can open the door. He doesn’t protest.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Len sounds audibly annoyed and Barry, who stands a bit behind
Lisa, tenses up when their eyes briefly meet. They hold each other’s gaze just for a second, though before the other man’s moves on to where the other men are and his expression darkens.

“I could ask you the same thing? It’s nearly one in the morning, Len.” Lisa points out and crosses her arms.

“What are you doing here, Lisa?” Len repeats, ignoring her question, and there is a slight edge to his voice that makes Barry nervous. Lisa doesn’t seem impressed by it at all, though, and instead rolls her eyes.

“What does it look like, genius?”

“You didn’t tell me about this,” Len replies and somehow he is able to make it sound as if she has done just a really asinine mistake.

“So what? I’m not allowed to celebrate the birthday of a friend without your blessing? Get your head out of your ass, Len.”

Both proceed to seemingly try and glare each other down for a long minute before Len turns to Barry.

“Can I come in?”

A bit surprised about the question, he just nods mutely and watches the other man do just that.

“Hey Len! We have cake if you want!” James waves towards the nearly half gone birthday cake that somehow looks even worse now than it did before. Len just glances at it before his eyes fix on Roscoe and he frowns.

“What is he doing here?”

“Really, Len?” Lisa asks incredulously before she huffs and rubs her forehead in an unmistakable frustrated manner.

“I am not surprised you are unable to grasp the simple concept of being invited along, Snart.” Roscoe sneers at the other Rogue and the hostility suddenly seems to skyrocket in the little apartment.

“Careful, Dillen, or you can call Simmons again and it won’t be only for your ankle.”

“You decided to come here because your whores got fed up with you?”

“Roscoe!” Lisa hisses and shoots her boyfriend a warning look while she keeps standing in front of Len so that she could try and stop him should he decide to go after the other Rogue. “You aren’t helping.”

“What are you doing here, Len?” she asks again after she turned back to her brother and studies him with a frown. “You always turn up uninvited at other peoples’ doorsteps at hours like that?”

Hearing that, Barry can’t help but look at her in disbelief seeing that this is quite a strong statement coming from her considering that she hasn’t been doing any better regarding this in the past. He doesn’t point it out, though.

“None of your business,” Len tells her coldly and causes Lisa to bristles in anger. Barry is certain that an argument is going to start between them now and he is suddenly very glad that his neighbours never call the cops when other residents fight because the siblings would probably not care about
keeping it down despite how late it currently is.

To his surprise, it doesn’t happen, though, and he watches how the blond woman’s expression turns from angry to concerned and weary.

“Stop being such a damn jackass all the time, Len. You’re making it so damn hard for yourself,” she speaks quietly enough that only her brother and Barry can hear her. “Try to keep your fucking temper in check for once, okay?”

Something crosses Len’s face, surprise and another emotion Barry isn’t able to pick up on before it is gone again.

Lisa turns around then, to the other Rogues. “I think we've bothered Barry for long enough.”

“What? No! I still wanna have cake and party!” James protest and is clearly not happy about the prospect to leave.

“You had enough sugar that we’re probably going to regret it for the next week, Tricks,” Sam says as he gets up from his seat again and stretches himself.

“I didn’t!” the blond protests with a petulant frown and crosses his arms in front of his chest. “There’s still cake left and we were just going to play Black Jack.”

Barry also doesn’t want them to go. He really doesn’t as this would mean that he is going to be left alone with Len and the notion alone causes him to nearly feel sick with apprehension.

A careful touch to his shoulder startles him and he look to his side, where Lisa meets his tensed expression with a slightly worried one.

“It has been really nice, Barry,” she tells him and squeezes his shoulder lightly.

“Y-yes, i-it w-was,” he agrees and wants to add that she should not leave him alone with her brother but can’t bring himself to. Lisa seems to pick up on it nonetheless, as she gives him an encouraging smile and steps a bit closer to hug him again.

“He feels really bad about whatever has happened between you,” she whispers and adds before she pulls back. “Don’t worry, I’ll kick his ass if he behaves like a jerk again.”

The blond woman winks at him before she turns back to give Len one last hard look but doesn’t say anything.

It doesn’t take more than a couple of minutes for his guests to vanish into his bathroom and Barry, who has followed them along to the door, watches them go with growing unease.

“Don’t worry, we will come by tomorrow to help you with the cleaning up,” Hartley assures him, which causes Sam, who is already on the other side of his cabinet mirror, to scoff. “Speak for yourself, ginger.”

The redhead ignores the other man and instead waits for Barry to nod before he follows the others into the mirror-verse. All trace of them are gone a moment later and there is nothing else to see other than the reflection of the tiles that are opposite to the mirror.

It is uncomfortably quiet after having so many people in his flat at once and Barry really doesn’t want to move and go back into his living room. He sighs softly and rest his forehead briefly against the doorframe.
Right now, the late hour is catching up with him and he considers simply keeping standing here. Len would undoubtedly come to check up on where is and why he needs so long, though.

Slowly, Barry makes his way back to his living area, where he spots Len standing next to the kitchen table, eyeing the remaining of the food they have had with a thoughtful and rather grim expression. The other man notices him just a second later and turns to him.

An uneasy and awkward silence follows and Barry, who has stopped close to his couch, crosses the arms in front of his chest and lowers his gaze, so that he is studying the colourful confetti on the ground.

“The others are gone?” Len finally asks after a minute has passed in an uneasy silence.

Barry nods but stays quiet. He doesn’t trust his voice right now and he doesn’t want to show Len how much he is still hurting.

Again, silence, and while he is not looking at the other man, he knows that he is watching him. Barry looks up slightly alarmed when Len starts moving closer to him and it is nearly impossible to keep standing still. The heavy knot of apprehension and worry in his stomach causes the queasiness to grow worse as he watches how the other man stops just a bit more than an arm’s length away. Their eyes meet briefly before Barry averts them again.

This is such an uncomfortable situation the he plays with the notion to simply turn around and bolting into his bathroom, so that he could lock the other man out and keep him away. It is a stupid and cowardly idea but nonetheless very alluring.

“Happy birthday.”

Len’s voice is even and calm and when Barry glances at him, there is nothing to take away from is expression. It is frustrating and unsettling because, like usual, he hasn’t the slightest idea what the other man’s mood is right now.

It takes Barry a couple of seconds before he realizes that he has failed to replay and nods quietly.

A slight frown appears on Len’s face but otherwise he doesn’t seem like he is angered or bothered by his lack of an actual answer.

“Your voice?” he asks knowingly and Barry doesn’t know why but this question is upsetting. Len has no right to be here, he has no right to do as if any of this matters to him. He has made it more than clear that it isn’t the case.

“Here.”

The other man’s startles him slightly and Barry warily turns back to him, a bit surprised as he notices that he is offered a white plastic bag that he hasn’t picked up on before. He eyes it a moment before he glances to Len, feeling increasingly uneasy in his own skin.

“It won’t bite,” his unwanted guest assures him and keeps offering what is most likely a present to him.

Barry swallows and makes a step back. He has no longer crossed his arms, now it is much more like he is hugging himself again and he knows how ridiculous he has to look but he can’t help himself. Having Len around is so damn unsettling, his skin is itching again and he feels too exhausted to deal with any of the emotions that are currently fighting for dominance in him.
Slowly, Len lets his hand that is holding the bag sink back to his side.

“It was bull,” he tells him in a low voice and Barry, who has been watching him warily so far, frowns in confusion. “All I said the last time, it was all bullshit.”

Len heaves a heavy sigh and pinches the bridge of his nose before he goes on. His expression is no longer void of emotions. He looks tired and tense.

“I said some pretty messed up things. I tend to become a total bastard when I feel attacked and don’t….” The other man stops and purses his lips as he turns his gaze to the ground, at which he then glares as if it has somehow personally affronted him.

Barry isn’t sure what to say or what to think of it and the anger that flares up in him at these words only last briefly before it is replaced by a tiring sadness that starts to surpass all the other emotions he is currently experiencing.

“I didn’t mean one thing I’ve said,” Len goes on with his grim gaze fixed on Barry once again. “I wanted to hurt you and I did a pretty good job there, didn’t I?”

There scorn in his voice but it is obviously aimed at himself and Barry thinks that this is supposed to make him feel better, knowing that the other man feels at least a little miserable for how he talked to him, for the ugly things he said, but it doesn’t. It only makes the lump in his throat more painful and the itching in his eyes more persisting. He has to look away.

“Barry, I know that nothing of it is true, okay?”

Len steps closer to him, he can feel it, his presence is nearly tangible and he presses his eyes shut but can’t bring himself to move. The other man stops so close to him that Barry is sure he could touch him should he lift his hand just slightly.

“This won’t happen again.” Len sounds serious, like he really means it, and Barry still can’t stop himself from scoffing at him.

“D-don’t,” he tells him in a husky voice and with a half-hearted glare.

“It won’t,” Len insists, which causes Barry to grit his teeth and averts his eyes again.

“Th-then y-you’ll j-just…” His voice gives out on him and he coughs slightly before he tries again. “D-don’t p-prom-mise s-someth-thing y-you c-can’t k-keep.”

Len doesn’t replay as he probably too knows that it would be a lie should he argue about this. Instead he stays quiet and another uncomfortable silence settles between them.

There is a nearly painful heaviness to his body Barry hasn’t noticed before and he is pretty sure that this has nothing to do with how tired he is. It is the depression of which he has hoped that he would have left it behind him by now and that crawls back into him like something cold and hard that is made up of nothing but sharp edged to cut him.

It startles him when Len suddenly steps even closer, so much that there are hardly more than four inches left between them, and looks back up to him with a wary frown.

“I won’t,” Len agrees in a low and unusual soft tone. “But I’ll try to not let this happen again.”

They both know that this is something he most likely won’t succeed in. He has a horrible temper and is rash to a fault, not a person Barry should want to have around himself.
Mary’s words come back to his mind, how some people are not healthy for one, and Len is most likely a paragon for that. He should send him away. He really should.

“Barry.” There is an unfamiliar uncertainty to how Len says his name and when Barry glances at him, he can see that his eyes are not as guarded anymore. There is guilt, worry and anger as well as reluctance. The last one confuses him for a moment till the other man speaks again and he understands.

“I’m very sorry.”

Barry closes his eyes and wonders to how many people Len has said these words so far.

Most likely not all that many.

His chest hurts as does most of the rest of his body and, for a moment, he ask himself whether he could hurt the other man just a little bit back by telling him to leave.

He doesn’t.

“Ok-kay.”

Barry is looking at the ground again but even without seeing Len he can feel how some of the tension leaves him. It is strange to think that this, whatever this is that is between them, actually could matter to the other man this much.

“But,” he goes on and forces himself to meet Len’s eyes with a hard look. “If y-you e-ever s-speak t-t-to m-me l-like th-that again, y-you’re n-no l-longer w-w-welc-come here. D-do you u-unders- strand?”

Barry doesn’t want to think back to how awful he felt for the first month after their last fight. It was torture to get up in the morning and he doesn’t want to go through something like that again, not even for Len.

Maybe, especially not for him.

“Understood,” Len agrees readily and it is hard for Barry to believe how relieved he actually sounds about this.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he notices how the other man lifts his hand so that the touch to his shoulder doesn’t come entirely unexpected but it still causes him to shudder slightly in response.

It suddenly makes Barry very uncomfortable to be this close to him and he quickly makes a step back to regain some additional distance between them. Len lets him and nods to the table behind him instead.

“Let’s sit down.”

The notion to get off his feet is more than welcome to Barry.

When they are both seated, opposite to each other, Len presents him with the white bag again.

“It really won’t bite,” he remarks with a slight smile when Barry just keeps eyeing it as if this is going to be exactly what would happen should he reach for it.

“Y-you d-didn’t h-have t-to g-get m-me anyth-thing.”
“I know.” Len meets his gaze calmly and nods to the bag. “Just take a look.”

Barry can’t help but feel a bit curious. The bag is pushed towards him some more, so that he can easily reach for it, and he does so somewhat reluctantly after another moment.

It is surprisingly heavy and he glances briefly to the other man, wondering again what he could have gotten him. It definitely isn’t take-out this time.

A very expensive looking set of oil colour brushes as well as a precious looking wooden box greets him when he finally looks inside. For a couple of seconds he just studies them, totally flabbergasted by this kind of present, which undoubtedly must have cost a little fortune.

“I c-can’t accept th-this.”

Barry closes the bag and pushes it back to the other man, who doesn’t seem to have expected this kind of reaction.

“And why is that?” Len’s expression has changed and he looks clearly annoyed once more, which causes Barry’s stomach to drop in apprehension of what is going to follow. Still, he doesn’t falter and meets his eyes firmly.

“This i-is w-way t-too exp-pensive,” he explains quietly, “and y-you b-bought it w-with th-the m-money o-of other p-people. I-I c-can’t accept i-it.”

Len studies him quietly for a long moment, which gets increasingly unsettling till Barry has to avert his eyes.

“What do you think where the money for the food we got you did came from,” the other man asks and while he tries to sound calm, he doesn’t succeed in stopping the anger to seep through. “Or for all the damn stuff you ate tonight?”

Barry doesn’t replay. He knows that Len is right, there is no reason in arguing with him about this. Living off charities that have been purchased by stolen money is something he tries not to think about if he can help it, the guilt it causes him usually makes him sick otherwise.

It is so damn ironic that he is really nothing more than a criminal these days. Maybe not in the sense other people believe him to be but he has fallen back on living off stolen money by accept the goods he has gotten from Len or Hartley more than once already.

It certainly is nothing he is proud of.

Len frown deepens and briefly he seems about say something but stops himself before he can do so. Judging by how pissed off he must be by Barry’s reaction to his present, he has most likely nothing nice to say to him and he is obviously well aware that he would say some rather nasty stuff should he not be careful.

Despite everything, it helps to see that Len actually tries to make true on his promise.

“L-Len,” Barry’s voice is very quiet as he starts to speak. “I r-really ap-preciate y-your g-gift, it i-is a v-very th-thoughtful one a-and… and I w-would l-love t-to r-receive it u-under a-any other c-circums-stances b-but I c-can’t a-accept it.”

He swallows and wishes once more that things were different. That his live were not this messed up and that the relationship he has with the other man wouldn’t be so damn difficult and confusing.
“I’m… I-d-don’t w-want t-to b-be a c-criminal a-and wh-while I ac-cept th-the f-food y-you g-give m-me, I d-do s-so b-bec-cause… b-because I n-need t-to. It’s d-different w-with th-this, th-though.” Barry lifts his hand to rub his temple behind which a familiar pain has started to spread out again. He closes his eyes. “Th-this d-doesn’t m-mean th-that I… th-that I-I d-don’t ap-preciate your h-help or h-having y-you a-around. I kn-knew f-from th-the b-beginning wh-who y-you are and I-I d-don’t k-kid m-myself into b-believing th-that y-you w-will ch-change b-but I-I… y-you are s-still important t-to m-me.”

When he didn’t hear anything from any of the Rogues it hurt so damn much, not just Len’s words but the notion that they would simply drop him like that. It is stupid and dangerous but he has grown fond of these people, they were there for him when nobody else was.

He would never forget that.

“Okay.”

Barry opens his eyes and turns to Len in surprise, not sure whether he has really just heard right.

“I get it.” The other man doesn’t sound angry anymore and the aggression from before is gone again as well. He doesn’t look particularly happy as he is watching him now but he doesn’t seem that upset anymore either.

This is not the reaction Barry has expected and he is so very grateful for it.

“Th-thank y-you.”

Len huffs and rubs a hand over his face, clearly still a bit frustrated, but he smiles slightly when he looks back at him again.

“You are such a pain in the ass, Allen.”

The air around them relaxes and Barry chuckles slightly.

“S-sorry, I-I g-guess.”

With a frown, Len looks back to the bag.

“Great, two hundred bucks out the window.”

“T-t-two h-hund-dred b-b-bucks?!” Barry sputters in a mixture of horror and disbelief that causes the other man to bark a laugh.

“That artsy stuff of yours is fucking expensive,” Len agrees and shakes his head. “And there is such a ridiculous amount of it around.” He snorts and remarks that the sales woman in the art supply shop clearly thought he is an idiot. “I had no idea that there are different kind of brushes or that there is extra stuff you need to thin these colours out.”

When Len notices that Barry is eying the bag again with newly found curiosity, he pushes it back towards him. “Take a damn look before your eyes fall out.”

Barry knows that he probably shouldn’t but still accepting the offer.

Before, he didn’t paid too much attention to any details and only picked up that both, the oil colours and brushes are from Winsor&Newton, which is a very high quality brand when it comes to art supplies. He studies it a bit closer now and while he wouldn’t change his mind, he can’t help but feel
disappointed at the prospect of not being able to accept the surprisingly thoughtful gift.

The heavy wooden box contains a range of 76 oil colours while the brushes are made of weasel hair, which makes his heart ache a bit as he has read about how great they are to paint with. They don’t look anything like the handful of brushes he has gotten from the one dollar store close to Mrs. Ming’s shop and he picks one of them up to feel the softness of its tip.

Damn it, he really would love keep at least one of them.

“You could still accept it,” Len points out and seems slightly amused by how taken Barry is by the art utensils.

Barry shoots him a small smile before he turns back to the brush is currently studying. The notion of his friend standing rather helplessly in an art shop, not being able to make head or tail of anything he sees there, is quite funny. It is nice to think that Len put such an effort into getting him this present.

He puts everything back into the bag and, with one last wistful look, pushes it back towards the other man.

“Th-thank you, L-Len. It’s a g-great g-gift,” he tells him earnestly. “I ap-preciate it v-very m-much.”

“You aren’t keeping it,” Len reminds him but doesn’t seem all that irked about it anymore. Instead, he seems rather pleased about Barry’s words.

“S-still, I c-can a-appreciate th-the th-thoughtf-fullness.”

Their eyes meet and they watch each other for a bit in a comfortable silence, relieved that there is no real tension left between them anymore.

“Y-you w-want s-some c-coffee?” Barry offers, no longer feeling as exhausted as before and no longer really that keen on the idea to have the other man leaving again this soon.

Len gives him a relaxed smile and nods.

“I’d like to.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god, I’m so happy that this is finally out and I really hope that you liked it, it is one of those chapters I really enjoy and mean a lot to me but were a little sh*** to edit.

I’ve initially written this about one and a half years ago and a lot of the story has changed by now so that I had to change it a couple of times accordingly, especially because of Len – believe it or not, this version of Len is way more open and communicative than he initially was (that closed-up derp).

And I don’t know whether any of you picked up on it but I put Barry’s birthday in February, even though it actually is in March – I did so because he more or less got that birth date after he moved to his first foster home, they needed one for him due to school application and such and he didn’t know it himself as he was really young back when he lost his parents. Everything will make more sense later, I promise. ;)
Also, please let me know what you think! X) I’m really curious how you see his and Len’s reunion – I’m really happy all that bad blood between them finally starts to thin out and things can go back more or less to normal again.

Next chapter will be a Len POV again, the one after that will introduce a shady character and the one after that will shine some light on what was up with the Rogues’ whole Russia business. :)}
A comfortable quiet has settled over the little apartment in the early morning hours and Len, who has picked himself another beer from Barry’s fridge, closes its door with more care than usual as to not cut through the rare peacefulness the rundown building only seems able to provide at a time this late.

The bottle opens with a soft hiss and he takes a sip of the cool beer as he leans back against the kitchen sink. The taste is earthy and bitter and a welcome change to the two cups of coffee he had so far.

He lets his eyes wander through the sparse living room for a moment and can’t help but feel a certain disdain for this place once more.

It’s old and seedy and even though Barry obviously takes good care of it, he doesn’t seem able to make it look any less rundown and uninviting. Even the ton of confetti that is currently resting on nearly every surface the living room doesn’t help much there.

Len’s isn’t picky when it comes to his living accommodations as growing up in a seedy camping trailer that was definitely too small for four people taught him early on that one should be glad to live someplace that provides the basic standards of running water and electricity.

Despite that, he doesn’t like Barry’s place, hasn’t from the first time he passed by. It’s too depressing looking and there is a hopelessness that clings to it which doesn’t sit well with him because he isn’t sure whether it stem from the former owners or the other man. The other residents, who mostly consists of the breed of people who are at least partly the reason for why the Keys are this criminal ridden dump, or the fucking landlady, who thinks it’s appropriate to cut off the heat in the beginning of February, aren’t exactly helping to lift his low opinion of this place.

Calling a trailer park his home during the his childhood and early teenage years and always at the
mercy of a choleric drunk as a father, Len knows what it is like to feel helpless, unable to change anything about one’s living condition, and afraid that only one wrong move could mean another hell of pain.

It was a part of his childhood he gladly left behind and seeing how Barry has to live a life that is in a way so similar to that one makes him want to hit something.

Len frowns and turns his gaze to the brown glass bottle that feels cold enough to the touch that it slightly stings.

Another uncomfortable thought tries to push its way to the forefront of his mind, one that causes something cold and heavy to settle in the pit of his stomach.

It isn’t exactly hard to guess that Barry had a shitty life so far with his wife murdered, his former family and friends turning from him and being put into prison for something he didn’t commit. Beyond that, there is more, though, and Len has known so for a long time by now.

After learning the former Flash’s identity, he looked the person up who was such a thorn in the side of him and the other Rogues and what he learned wasn’t what he had expected.

Len takes another pull from his beer before he rubs his tired eyes and tries to bite down on a frustrated sigh.

Sometimes, hell, most of the time, he really wishes he hadn’t. Some things irreversibly change the way you look at someone, you just can’t help it, and Len is pretty sure that, if the whole fucked-up business with Barry’s imprisonment hadn’t happened soon after him finding out who the scarlet speedster really was, this knowledge would probably have started to mess things up for the Rogues in one way or another.

Despite what anybody may think, Len’s heart isn’t made of ice and the abuse of a child… he always hated that kind of stuff.

Barry had been livid after realizing his betrayal and Len still remembers vividly how close he seemed to actually kill him that night.

Never before he had seen the man so enraged or scared.

Back then he thought it was worth it, though.

He felt somewhat guilty about how he had obtained the knowledge of his secret identity but not enough to not use it to his advantage.

This was, at least, until he learned more about who the Flash actually was, more about who Barry Allen was, and he nearly found it amusing in a twisted way how ridiculous fate could be at times, how similar the lives of sworn enemies could turn out to be and how they could still end up on opposite sides of the law.

Len briefly turns his attention to the blond man, who is sitting at the couch, head still resting at the back of it, and who hasn’t moved at all over the last couple of minutes.

They both grew up with it, grew up in broken homes and at the mercy of abusive drunks with nobody there to protect them. Len remembers those years of his childhood, no matter how much he tries to get rid of them, they are a part of him, burned into him, and this awful rotten part of his past still sometimes succeeds to haunt him at nights even now.
Despite how bad having to live with such a father, a helpless drunk of a mother and a little sister he had to look out for, he still is grateful that he never had to put up with foster homes on top of that. He knew from other kids, from friends and others at that time, how messed up those places could be and that child service was not above placing siblings in different homes.

To this day, he isn’t sure what he would have done if they had ever tried to take Lisa away from him.

Seeing that his father was a cop, even if it was a miserable one, this never happened to them. Instead of being handed around, Len and Lisa were stuck with that nightmare of a man, but they were in there together, at least.

Barry, on the other hand, hadn’t been that lucky.

Len’s gaze turns back down to the bottle in his hand and he absentmindedly studies it for a second before taking another pull from it.

He remembers the photos, the medical reports, and he has utterly no idea how one kid could have so much rotten luck.

Parents vanish out of the blue when he is six, which leads to him becoming a charge of the state and being put into an orphanages for the first two months before a circle of what can only be described as misery started for the little boy.

Len pushes the memory of what he had learned about Barry’s early life away, unwilling to think about any of it right now, and instead tries to stir his mind away from the other man’s or his own past.

It settles on the surprise party Lisa and some of the Rogue’s threw Barry and how the relationship between them and the blonde seems to have grown far more than Len would have anticipated.

Lisa’s concern for Barry caught him off-guard a couple of weeks ago as she had made it quite clear before that she didn’t like him. He still has no idea what caused it as his sister can be annoying tight-lipped if she chooses to be but he is grateful for her change of heart nonetheless. Her uncalled hostile behaviour towards Barry bothered him from the start and it is good to know that he wouldn’t have to worry about this anymore.

His gaze moves over all the confetti and paper streamers and he can’t help but feel slightly amused by how absurd this makes the little apartment look that stubbornly seems to refuse to let go of its plain and rather dreary looking appearance.

Lisa and the others really went all out with the cake, the food and this absurd amount of party decoration. Judging by how nearly every inch of the apartment is covered by brightly coloured paper, Len is pretty sure the others share his opinion on how shady this place actually looks like.

His sister probably thinks that he feels right at home here seeing that she never liked the places he picked for himself or understood why he would not make any better use of the money they stole than wasting it on getting drunk, whores and improving his weapon.

“You could keep a less sordid apartment, at least,” she told him with a wrinkled nose just a couple of months ago after she came over with some pizza for a movie night. She didn’t bother to keep her disdain off her face as she looked around his place. “This hole is just plain depressing to just visit, Lenny.”

“It’s a roof over the head,” he replied with a shrug and ignored the annoyed frown he got in return.
“One’s home should be more than just that,” Lisa pointed out and Len, now standing in Barry’s kitchenette, still has to smile at the memory because that is just such a typical thing for her to say.

In another life, in one where they both had been luckier and chosen a different path for themselves, he is certain that his sister would have ended up owning a home that is just like the ones in those magazines Hartley and she like to read. Clean, tasteful, warm and welcoming, someplace to settle down and have a family…

Len brings that train of thought to a halt, cuts it off before it could go any further and cause a very familiar and just as unwanted guilt to rise that has already started to stir in his guts.

He takes another pull of the cool beer and decides to move back to his former spot on the couch.

The muscles in his shoulders and neck started to tense up due to how uncomfortable the piece of junk furniture is and the notion of spending any more time on it isn’t exactly thrilling but he had worse before and Barry is there.

His gaze moves to the other man’s face as he sits back down next to him and he can’t help but notice how relaxed the blonde looks for once with all the tension from earlier tonight seemingly gone.

Barry’s cheek is resting on the back of the couch with his eyes closed and lips slightly parted. He looks like he has fallen asleep but Len is pretty sure that it isn’t the case yet. It probably wouldn’t take long for it to happen, though, not with how utterly exhausted he seems.

Len’s eyes flicker to the living room clock and it shows him that he has been here for more than three hours already, which is a bit unexpected as it really hasn’t felt all that long to him. They’ve spent most of it talking about the last couple of months they missed from each other’s life, too relieved and glad that they were finally able do so again to pay the passing time any mind.

He can’t remember the last time it felt this good to make up with anybody other than maybe Lisa but with her he never has to fear that things between them would really break apart enough that they would go their separate ways for good.

Len takes a sip from the beer and returns his attention back to the other man. It isn’t lost on him how much closer they are sitting now compared to how they’ve started out just a couple of hours ago.

It is a welcomed change to how distant Barry was at first but even with how quickly his initial reluctance to get close to Len has started to wane after he accepted the offer of coffee, it still doesn’t sit well with him that it has been there in the first place.

When Len came here, he knew how unlikely it would be for Barry to outright welcome him. He also expected him to shy away, like he tends to do with people he is wary of, and Len is well aware that he deserved this status in the other man’s mind as he pretty much earned it.

This doesn’t change the fact that was frustrating and worrying how unwilling Barry was to get near him.

After how comfortable the blonde has gotten in his company over time, this felt and still feels like a setback, like a failure on his part, and Len hates it.

He doesn’t do rash things, not since he left his early teenage years behind him, and throwing his cool out the window like this just can’t happen.

This isn’t business, though, which means that he doesn’t have to keep such a strict grip on his emotions. His rare bursts of bad temper are usually hardly a problem in this regard, the people he
tends frequents with outside a job generally don’t matter enough to him that he would even care if they tell him off and leave.

Damn, in Amunet’s case he would pay her actual money to do just that but that stubborn obsessive woman has made it more than clear that-

Len scowls down at the bottle in his hand and shoves the notion of that woman away again as he is not willing to waste anymore on her than he already has to.

Especially not here.

He turns his gaze back to Barry, instead.

With him things are different and, of course, more complicated. Len doesn’t want to scare him off by not being able to keep his damn temper in check.

This is probably why it feels so good to see Barry like this again, calm and relaxed and not worried of having him around. In a way, this willingness to let his guard down in his presence is probably a more promising sign that things between them are going to be alright than anything else could be.

Even so, Len is somewhat wary of how well things have gone tonight, despite with Barry not accepting his present, which he hadn’t really expect him to do in the first place. Initially, it seemed much more likely to him that his visit would just result in another fight between them and it is still difficult for him to trust how easily things between them seem to have smoothed out again.

Lisa’s words have been gnawing away at him for a while now, though. So has his guilt and, in the end, both succeeded in urging him to come here tonight. Now, he is glad that he did, and thankful that he decided against wussing out after arriving at the front of the apartment building.

Next to Len, Barry starts to move a bit, likely to adjust his position as he is obviously not immune to how rundown his couch is either. Once again, he notices how utterly exhausted his friend looks.

“You should go to bed.”

Barry is startled by his words despite the low and calm tone he used, which means that he must have been close enough to drifting off to forget that he still has company.

Len doubts that he is able to relax like this around many people and it is oddly pleasing to think that he is one of these few he trusts enough to do so.

Barry seems a bit disorientated for a second, which, as usual, comes hand in hand with fear. The tension leaves his body as soon as he is able to focus his eyes again and spots Len, though.

“S-sorry, d-didn’t m-mean t-to f-fall as-sleep on y-you,” he mumbles but doesn’t move. He seems completely spent and not for the first time tonight, Len feels concerned over his health.

It would be hard to miss that their fight and the following months have left traces on Barry, no doubt mentally but also in a more visible way. He has always been slender, even back when he still ran around as the twin’s protector, but after his time in prison he has lost nearly all of his muscle mass and generally enough weight that it would have concerned any decent doctor.

Now, he looks even worse.

The fifteen pounds or so Barry had been able to gain over the last year are clearly gone again and with them some additional ones, which leaves him gaunt and tired looking and Len with the bitter
guilt of knowing that he is the reason for this.

“Your neck is going to kill you later on if you fall asleep like this,” he points out and despite his concern, he can’t help but smile when Barry only hums in agreement, obviously too close to falling asleep to really be able pick up on what he has just said.

It is a relief that the other man doesn’t has to work tomorrow because Len doubts that he would call in sick for a day even if he was half-dead on his feet.

Contrary to what most of the public thinks, many people who went to prison and are no career criminals tend to do about anything to not get sent back to a place like the Heights. They let others run all over them, let themselves be exploited and worked into the ground, just to not return to the horror that some penitentiaries hold ready for them.

In his numerous stays in different prisons, Len learned that there aren’t exactly different types of inmates and the personalities one can meet in these places are as different as they can get.

What can be found in every single prison there is, though, are groups.

People in these places tend to group. Find strength in numbers, so to say. A rule he learned early on, and still has the scare to keep this memory fresh even these days.

If one is able to find a place amid others, the time spent in prison doesn’t have to be as bad as it would likely be otherwise.

It is simply a necessity to find a group to stick with, even if people have to offer things they would never be willing to do or give in the real world. Letting go of one’s pride is still a preferable option to being on your own because anybody who doesn’t find someone to run with is fair game and this will always end badly.

An uneasy heaviness settle in his guts as he studies Barry’s relaxed features.

The sort of prisoners Len actually tends to see as their own class are usually the ones with the highest suicide and death rate in most penitentiaries. They are made up of people nobody wants to acquaintance with but everybody loves to take apart if the possibility presents itself – like, for example, child abusers or murderers, corrupt pigs and anybody else who was somehow connected to the police outside the walls.

It doesn’t come as a surprise that Barry had been marked from the second he entered the prison as he was committed for not only being a child abuser but was also quickly outed as a former forensic scientist.

The time the other man spent behind the high grey walls of Iron Heights had been hell for him, Len knows that, probably any inmate during his stay there does. The Rogues hadn’t been around that much at first but words tend to spread fast in closed spaces and even in a place like the Heights it wasn’t commonplace for an inmate to fall victim to so much cruelty…

“Everyth-thing alright?”

Len is startled out of his thoughts and realizes that his mind has taken off its own path without him noticing. His gaze refocuses on Barry, who is watching him now with a slightly worried expression.

“Yeah, just thinking.” He straightens himself a bit and hisses softly when a sharp pain shoots through his neck and shoulders in response as the couch hasn’t gotten any less uncomfortable with time.
Len should have bought him a new couch for the couple hundreds of bucks instead of a box full of oil paints, he would definitively have gotten more use out of it.

“Y-you d-don’t n-need to s-stay around.” Barry’s quiet voice cause Len to turn back to him and he doesn’t miss how unhappy he looks despite the smile he tries to give him.

It occurred to him before that Barry doesn’t want him to leave and while it is hard for him to grasp how forgiving this man can be, he can’t say that he is really surprised.

“Don’t you wanna go to bed? You look spent,” he replies and immediately notices how the other man’s face falls a bit before he turns away to look down to the cup of by now cold tea in his lap.

“R-right,” Barry murmurs and Len fights the urge to frown.

“I can stay, if you want me to. I don’t have anywhere to be tomorrow anyway,” he says.

“Y-you d-don’t have t-to.” Barry keeps looking down at his lap, the corner of his lips slightly pulled down and once again a picture of wariness and disappointment.

God, Len would give a lot to not always be the cause for the other man to feel like shit. The most frustrating part is, that, in moments like this, he doesn’t even understand what he did wrong in the first place.

“Do you want me to?” he asks bluntly and watches how Barry glances at him with a uncertain look before he turns to study the small and mostly empty coffee table in front of them.

“Y-you d-don-”

“Barry,” he cuts him off and it is something he hardly ever does because he knows how easily the other man could take it the wrong way and grow flustered and uncomfortable due to it. Right now he doesn’t want to keep going on with this to and fro, though, because he can see that his friend is exhausted. “I don’t mind but I’m not going to force myself upon you if you rather want me gone.”

He watches how Barry starts to gnaw on his lip, nearly oozing nervousness, and not for the first time Len wonders what the other man really sees when he looks at him.

A friend or a criminal?

Both?

… or maybe more?

It has always been difficult to label himself when it comes to their relationship, not only due to his own feeling and how he preferred to push them away and not face them if he could help it, but also because of how Barry seems to cling to him and trust him but shy away from him at the same time.

Len has no major in psychology but it is hardly necessary in this case. He gets it that Barry is scarred from all the shit he had been put through but there is something else to it as well and if he could take a guess he would say that it is probably guilt.

Despite how Barry seems to consider him and the other Rogues his friends, Len is certain that this doesn’t come without any troubles for him.

One doesn’t change being a hero just overnight. To be part of this kind of business one needs a kind of dedication most people would likely never really get, and a person like Barry will likely stick to
his belief of right and wrong even if circumstances force him to change. He hasn’t let go of this part of himself, even after years and years of abuse that would have causes any other person to turn hateful towards the world around them, he still tries to do the right thing, live a good life.

As Len watches him now, looking so worried and uncertain, he asks himself once more what is going on in the other man’s head.

“I can leave,” he finally says when a couple of tense minutes ticked by in silence and Barry doesn’t seem to have come any closer to a decision.

This seem to shake the blonde out of his thoughts as he turn to Len with a frown and studies him briefly with the same wary frown as before.

“If y-you l-leave…” Barry breaks off and purses his lips slightly, giving his expression something very unhappy but also defeated that doesn’t sit well with Len.

“I won’t start avoiding you again.”

It isn’t hard to guess what the other man is probably worrying about and, well, Len certainly feels like a bastard all over again.

Go figures.

Some of the tension seem to leave Barry at that and he shoots him a look that is wary but also hopeful.

Len feels the urge to reach out and touch him then, just grasp his wrist, like he has done so often before, like it has become nearly commonplace between them. A clear sign of the other man’s trust and he can’t bring himself to because he knows that it is very likely that Barry would tense up and pull away.

“So, w-we’re r-really ok-kay ag-gain?” Barry asks and while this is what Len hoped for, having the other man forgive him and allow him back in, it still doesn’t sit well with him that he is the one asking this.

“Don’t you think I should be the one asking?” It comes out harsher than he intends to but, to his relief, Barry only gives him a faint and weary smile before he lowers his head to the side again, so that it is resting on the back of the couch.

“D-does it m-mater?”

Len feels a familiar anger rise in his chest, something cold and slick and nasty that always rears its head when he notices how much the other man has been messed with, how much they’ve beaten him down that he has this little self-worth.

What is even worse, is that he knows how he is also one of these people responsible for this and it makes the urge to break something nearly irresistible.

“I’m n-not m-mad anym-more, L-Len.” Barry meets his angry look with surprising ease, which is probably mostly due to how close he is to falling asleep. “I’m j-just g-glad y-you… th-that w-we are ok-kay ag-gain.”

It is nearly surreal how bad this makes Len feel as he knows that Barry isn’t pretending or anything like that. He really has forgiven him just like that.
Len did want them to get back to whatever they were before their fight, whether it be friends or something else, but he expected Barry to hold at least some grudge for a while.

It would have been understandable, Len himself can be a pissy and resentful fuck when he feels wronged or betrayed, and while it is not one of his finest character traits, it is the reason why he wouldn’t have hold it against Barry should he have decided to not forgive him right away. He didn’t really expect him to do so, anyway, as the blonde was just not the person to harbour ill feelings towards others this but he would have thought that he would stay somewhat angry at him for little a while at least.

This is clearly not the case, though, and this can’t exactly be good for Barry.

“You know that you’ve the right to be pissed at me,” he tells him seriously.

It isn’t a question, at least it shouldn’t have to be.

Barry, whose eyes has started to drift close again, blinks at his words as if in surprise and gives him a questioning look.

“Yes, I kn-know,” he agrees somewhat puzzled.

“But you aren’t?”

The anger is still there, Len tries to keep it out of his voice but Barry obviously doesn’t miss it this time around as he tenses up again before he forces himself to straighten up.

The wariness with which he is now studying Len is rubbing him the wrong way and he nearly snaps at him for it, for being so damn timid nearly all the fucking time. He doesn’t and he bites down on the words, instead, because he promised the other man he wouldn’t hurt him like this again.

And it isn’t really like Len is actually angry at Barry anyway or that any of this is his fault.

Barry seems confused and concerned and suddenly very much aware of how close they actually are and how little space is left between them. Len nearly curses himself for how he is seemingly unable to not mess things up where the blonde is involved.

“You w-wan’t m-me t-to b-be ang-gry?” Barry asks tentatively and starts to fidget with the cup of tea that he is still holding.

Len isn’t sure how to answer this.

He doesn’t want Barry to be angry at him but he also doesn’t want him to forgive him this easily just because the other man thinks that he would bolt otherwise.

“No.” Len takes a moment to think about how to touch upon what is bothering him before he goes on. “But I also don’t want you not to be angry at me because you’re scared that I will leave again.”

Barry looks away and he doesn’t miss the slight flush that cross his cheek as he does so or how uncomfortable he looks for a moment.

“Look, I messed up, I said a lot of horrible stuff and-”

“I kn-know,” Barry cuts Len off with an unhappy frown that is directed at his couch table again as he is still not looking at him. “And I t-told y-you b-bef-fore th-that I w-won’t s-stand f-for s-something l-like th-this ag-gain. S-so, w-what else d-do you w-want f-from m-me?”
Once more, Len seems to prove his ability to say just the wrong things when it comes to the other man. He really didn’t mean to hurt or upset him again.

“I want you to understand that this isn’t going to happen again.”

Despite how asinine this must sound to the other man, Len has no intention to repeat such a stupid stunt. Just looking at Barry makes him want to kick himself for how he simply shut him out so carelessly and unwilling to really think about the consequences of this.

Lisa’s words caused the nagging worry to become nearly unbearable but he didn’t expect…

No, this would be a lie, he did expect Barry to react this badly but he hoped that he wouldn’t.

“D-don’t p-promise th-things l-like th-that,” Barry replies and there is a slight tremble to his voice that is painful to listen to.

“It won’t.” Len repeats earnestly, even though he knows that the blonde is likely right to be sceptical. Still, even if Barry doesn’t believe it, this is something he is dead-serious about.

There would be many other ways in which he would end up hurting Barry, he doesn’t kid himself about what kind of person he is, but he wouldn’t let himself do this to him again.

Being abandoned is probably its own little hell for him and Len is still furious at himself to not think of this when he decided to prove again what kind of an idiot he could be if he put his mind behind it.

“I won’t just leave like this again,” he states firmly and watches how Barry closes his eyes with a nearly pained expression, which causes a couple of tears to run down his once again pale cheeks.

The blonde brushes them away and shoots Len an uneasy glance before he looks away again.

“Y-you aren’t ex-xactly m-making it easy f-for m-me t-to b-believ-ve y-you.”

“I know.”

Barry huffs in response but it doesn’t sound angry.

“I d-don’t… y-you l-left b-before.”

It doesn’t need much elaboration on what he means for Len to understand.

Of course Barry wouldn’t completely buy his excuse with Russia, not that being hunted by a group of deranged head-hunters didn’t make it difficult to keep in contact with anybody.

Still, even without Digger’s past catching up on that dumbass and therewith the rest of them, Len would have kept his distance from Barry anyway, at least for a time.

“I won’t leave again,” he repeats firmly and doesn’t like how the other man’s shoulders seem to tense up at this or how he wraps one of his arms around himself as if he was trying to hug himself. It is hard to watch and the urge to reach out and somehow offer comfort is so strong that it causes his fingers to twitch.

“I kn-know wh-why y-you g-got a-angry at m-me l-last t-time,” Barry says quietly and still isn’t looking at him. “I… I s-said s-some th-things… I… I sh-shouldn’t h-have b-but… wh-what d-did I d-do th-then? I… I j-just d-don’t unders-stand it…”

It is unexpected.
Len hasn’t thought that this is still bothering Barry, at least not this much.

And what is he supposed to say?

That he is sorry but he got cold feet because he realized how fucking close they’ve actually become? That he chickened out because he realized that there seems to be more than just friendship between them, at least when it comes to him, to what he feels for the other man? That just the prospect of this is fucking terrifying to him?

It is rather simple, really, no matter how hard Len tries to push this topic away and wants to make himself believe that it is just too complex to handle.

In the end, it always runs down to the same damn reason.

He is a coward, who is still haunted by the shadow of a man long gone from his life.

How sad is that?

“You didn’t do anything,” Len finally answers when the silence between them has become too uncomfortable, despite how little he wants to touch upon any of this. He owns at least some honesty to the other man.

“But y-you l-left,” Barry points out and start to sound frustrated. “Wh-why? D-did… w-was I t-too… c-c-clingy?”

Len closes his eyes for a moment and tries not to feel so damn helpless or angry.

“No,” he replies and it is hard to keep his voice even as he does. “You weren’t.”

A silence settles between them again and it would probably be a good idea to elaborate, to explain himself a bit better than with just these few words, but he can’t, even though he knows how much he is hurting Barry this way all over again.

It seems he is unable to keep his promise from the very start…

Len frowns down at the brown glass bottle in his hand but turns his gaze back to Barry when he notices him shifting next to him.

Blue eyes meet his.

“I…” Barry licks his lips nervously, briefly glancing to the side before reluctantly focusing back on him. “I kn-know th-that… I-I c-can b-be… h-hard t-to b-be ar-round at t-t-times… n-not j-just… y-you kn-know, b-bec-cause I’m… b-because of w-what h-happened a-and… b-but b-because… o-of wh-who I w-was…”

The blonde’s expression hold so much resignation but no accusation and Len feels like strangling someone because why can’t this man understand that this wasn’t his fault!?

“Barry-”

Barry cuts him off, obviously unwilling to let himself be interrupted again.

“I d-don’t… I-I… L-Len, I d-don’t l-like wh-what y-you and th-the others d-do f-f-for a l-living b-but I-I… wh-when I s-said b-bef-fore th-that y-you m-mean a l-lot t-to m-me I m-mea nt it a-and y-you h-have n-no id-dea h-how…” He breaks off and a familiar unease settles over Len as he watches how close to tears he seems once more.
Barry watches him with too shiny eyes for a long moment, seemingly uncertain how or whether to go on before he takes a calming breath and forces himself to do just that.

“Y-you p-probab-bly d-don’t unders-stand h-how i-import-tant y-you are t-to m-me.” A slight flush spreads over Barry’s cheeks and Len feels an unexpected warmth settle in his stomach as he watches this. “Y-you’ve b-been th-there f-for m-me wh-when n-nob-body else w-was a-and I w-will n-never f-forget th-that. It m-made m-me unders-stand th-that I’ve m-misj-judged y-you b-before, y-you and th-the others. I d-don’t m-mean t-to s-say th-that I ap-prove of wh-what y-you are d-doing b-but… y-you a-aren’t a b-bad p-person, L-Len. N-None of y-you is. Y-you h-have f-fault b-but y-you aren’t b-bad o-oor c-cruel a-and I… I th-think y-you g-give y-yourself t-too l-little c-credit f-for th-this.”

Len isn’t sure how to response to that.

This is certainly not what he has expected Barry to say.

The other man isn’t finished just yet, though.

“I kn-know th-that I’m n-not m-much b-better i-in th-this r-regard.” Barry swallows as his voice has started to sound rough and somewhat brittle and he coughs lightly. It isn’t hard to see how difficult it is for him to meet Len’s gaze right now. “I s-said s-some h-horrible s-stuff t-to y-you b-back wh-when… I’m s-sorry ab-bout it. I-I… i-it’s… I’m r-r-rid-diculous, r-really, I-I’m in n-no p-place t-to j-judge b-but… b-but I… I f-felt s-so g-guilty ab-bout wh-what h-happened t-to th-that s-secur-it-ty g-guard…”

The blonde closes his eyes, a pained expression of his face, and Len suddenly is unable to fight the urge to reach for him any longer.

Barry’s wrist is slim compared to his own, hardly more than skin and bones, and his hand closes so easy around it. He has expected the flinch and talks hold of the cup of tea before it could cause a mess while meeting the other man’s wide and slightly alarmed eyes with a hopefully reassuring and calm expression.

“It’s alright,” Len says as he puts the cup on the small couch table next to them. “I won’t hurt you.”

The flush from before returns on Barry’s cheeks and he averts his eyes, likely ashamed by his own reaction to the unexpected contact.

Len would give a lot to take his discomfort away from him. He has never been good with words of comfort though, Lisa can certainly attest to that, so that he settles on a very light squeezes of the other man’s wrist instead.

“I get why you were angry back then and you didn’t overstep by telling me that that guy’s life would be on me should he die. We both know that it was the truth.”

People dying is just a part of this business and while Len insists on the Rogues to follow his no killing rule, he is well aware that some unlucky bastards will get killed by what they are doing, whether it be other criminals or innocent bystanders who are unlucky enough to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. He doesn’t like it, but he made his peace with this part of his life a long time ago.

Barry hasn’t and likely never will, though. Even without his powers, he is still a hero at heart and his need to believe in people, in something good that may be hiding away deep down in them, is about as big as his need to help others.
Years in prison weren’t able to beat this out of him…

As a Rogue, Len mostly had to deal with speedsters in his long run as a criminal so far as he and the others are quite territorial and prefer to stick to the Twins when it comes to doing business. But even so, he had his handful of run-ins with other heroes and while he realized soon enough that, in regard of powers, the Flash was up front with likely the strongest of them, he always thought him lacking due to how unwilling he seemed to accept that some people are just evil, maybe not unable but certainly unwilling to reform.

The Rogues themselves took advantage of his seemingly gullibility once towards the beginning of their hero-villain relationship, agreeing to a temporary truce neither of them every intended to actually keep, and, for the longest time, Len found it just as hilarious as the other how easily it was for them to play that scarlet idiot of a goody two-shoes.

He doesn’t anymore.

Len watches the pale tired looking face of the other man and wishes that he could be that man he still seems to believe him to be.

A better person.

“I can’t promise you that this won’t happen again,” he tells him instead because he is not willing to lie to him about this.

“I kn-know,” Barry agrees and there is such an profound sadness to him that Len starts to worry that the blonde could actually decide that he can’t live like this, with *him* being a part of his life any longer, and would ask him to leave.

And while it most certainly would be the better choice for Barry to make, the one that would mean less pain in any case, the selfish side of Len, the one that wants to be close to the other man, urges him to not to let this happen-

He startles slightly when Barry moves the hand in his grasp so that he can take hold of his wrist in return.

It is a light touch, nearly hesitantly so, but still very much there.

A surprised silence settles between them and Len watches Barry, somewhat taken aback by his unexpected action but also very pleased by it.

The blonde looks tense, though, and Len doesn’t doubt that he would pull back at the slightest indication that this was a mistake.

“I m-missed y-you.”

Barry’s voice is very faint, enough so that, for a moment, Len isn’t sure whether he has really said anything in the first place.

“I m-missed you, L-Len.” Barry closes his eyes and ducks his head, once again giving off the impression as if he is actually hurting. “I m-missed you s-so m-much…”

He is crying, tears start to run down his cheeks and Len nearly feels sick with guilt and self-loath.

If he was a better man he would end this here, stop whatever this between them is because there is no doubt in his mind that this will only end up in more pain for Barry, for *both* of them.
The sad truth is, that he is just as unable to push him away as the blonde is to pull away, though.

There aren’t many good things in his life, not many good people who actually want to be part of it, and if Len is anything, then it is a very selfish man, who takes what he wants…

Barry whimpers when he cups his neck with his free hand and he makes a low shushing sound, trying to calm any stirring fear before it could cause him to pull away.

“It’s fine,” he murmurs and slowly pulls him closer, mindful to not make it feel like he is forcing him to move along and scaring him away by accident.

Barry shudders and briefly baulks but relaxes again when Len halts as well before he lets himself be urged on, so that he ends up with his head resting on his shoulder.

“It’s alright,” Len repeats as he rubs the other man’s back who is clearly fighting to get a grip of himself again. “We’re alright.”

It isn’t a lie, at least not right now.

Just for a bit, for a couple of hours, he needs to have this.

Len turns his head so that his lips brush against Barry’s temple, a faint contact that cause them both to shudder in response.

“I won’t leave you,” he says and means it with every fibre of his body.

He couldn’t do this to either of them again.

Barry tenses up in response and grows utterly still for a moment before his body starts to tremble like a leaf under Len’s hands.

“P-please,” he whimpers and buries his face in the crook of his neck. “Y-you c-c-can’t d-do th-this t-to m-me a-again…”

Len hates how desperate and scared he sounds.

“I won’t.”

Making promises like this is dangerous, they both know that, but Len can’t help himself right now. He just wants Barry to calm down and not to feel so miserable anymore.

“I won’t,” he repeats and feels how another tremble goes through the blonde’s body as he sobs in response, obviously not able to keep the grasp on his emotions any longer.

They stay like this for a long while, Len holding Barry in his arms as he cries and offering silent comfort.

Drawing soothing circles at the back of the other man, Len notices again how much weigh the other man has lost over the last couple of months. He can feel the bumps of his spline even through the thick shirt he is wearing and it is an unsettling notion but by now Barry can hardly weigh more than 130 lbs.

Len would have to make sure that Barry has enough to eat, he knows that Hartley has helped him out with food a couple of times so far but it has obviously not been enough.

Barry grows still in his arms and it takes him a moment to realize that it is likely a response to how he
himself has tensed up without noticing it.

Len forces himself to relax and starts to draw soothing circles on the other man’s back once more. The blonde stays quiet though and it quickly starts to worry him.

“S-sorry.” Barry’s voice is raspy from the crying and he coughs slightly.

“It’s fine.” Len gives his neck a light squeeze with his other hand, relieved that he seems to do a bit better now. “You deserved a good cry.”

Barry chuckles tiredly and sniffs before he moves his head slightly so that he can press his forehead against Len’s jaw.

“Thank you,” he sounds wobbly like he is still fighting against tears, which probably is the case.

Len hums and briefly thinks about pointing out that it would probably a good idea for Barry to move to his bedroom and finally rest. His exhaustion is nearly palpable by now and he himself is starting to feel the late hour as well, not to mention that is back is currently declaring war on him for deciding to spend this much time on this piece of shit furniture.

It really shouldn’t come as a surprise that he feels Barry to start relaxing then, not just some of the tension easing away from him, but his body growing slack and his breathe evening out.

He sighs as he resigns himself to the fact that he would spend at least the next couple of hours on this couch and adjusts his position a bit, so that his back wouldn’t kill him right away, at least.

“Definitely should have bought you a new couch,” Len mutters and lets his cheek rest on Barry’s head before he closes his eyes and pulls him a bit closer.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took quite a bit longer to finish than I thought it would and while it wasn’t exactly “not fun” to write it definitely felt more bothersome at parts than it is usually the case.

Tbh, I’m not sure how happy I’m with it just yet, as I’ve just finished going over the ‘final’ version the second time and still changed something at every second passage or so while doing so. Still, I actually put quite a bit into it I wanted to touch upon but I hope it isn’t too much or has become too scattered.

I missed to update last Sunday as I was just starting it after uploading the last chapter of Anomaly and while I did mention before that I will probably not be able to keep up with a weekly schedule, I still feel a bit bad about it and decided to give you a longer chapter for the longer wait. ;)

Anyway, I hope you liked it and your feedback is as always very welcome! :3
It is about a week after Barry’s birthday that Jay passes by at his apartment.

“Happy Birthday, Barry,” the older man wishes him with a warm smile as he enters the apartment. “I’m sorry for not coming by earlier, but I had business to tend to in San Francisco.”

Seeing that Barry is surprised that Jay has taken the time to pass by at all, he assures him that it is fine. He does know that the JSA had been involved in some incident down at the West Coast a couple of days ago but he hadn’t thought that this was the reason the older man didn’t shown up on his birthday.

He didn’t think that there had been any reason for it, if he was honest.

“Did you celebrate?”

Barry, who has just reached the kitchenette to start preparing some coffee for his guest, freezes for second before he forces himself to relax again and hopes that Jay hasn’t noticed.

“Yes, m-my f-friends c-came over and w-we had a n-nice evening,” he answers and tries not to sound as nervous or as guilty as he feels. It is a good thing that he can busy himself with filling up the pot with water and avoid to look at Jay because, otherwise, there is probably no way that the other man wouldn’t notice how uneasy this question has made him.

Thinking about the consequences it would have should Jay learn about him and the Rogues causes his stomach to cramp up painfully. He doesn’t doubt that there would be hell to pay for him and he is still angry at himself about how careless he has been that night.

It was in the morning after the little surprise party while he made breakfast for Len and himself that he really thought about it and realized into what a mess this could have actually turned into and that he is damn lucky that the party hasn’t had any bad repercussions for him so far. If any of his
neighbours had come by to complain and recognized one of the Rogues he would likely be already back at the Heights again.

That thought alone is sickening.

“Mary and Edward?” Jay asks and, oddly enough, seems rather pleased by that notion. Barry just nods; he has always been a rather awful liar and this hasn’t changed over the years.

Jay doesn’t seem to pick up on anything not being alright, though, and instead tells him that he is glad that Barry did spend his birthday with his friends.

“Mary seems like a really nice young lady.” he remarks before his smile vanes and a frown takes its place. Barry is pretty sure that he thinks about Edward and he can’t really hold it against the other man.

Both of them hadn’t really talked much during Jay’s brief visit on Christmas and while Eddy is a really neat guy when you know him, he can also appear like anything but if he puts his mind to it. Barry can completely understand why Jay would not exactly consider his friend as a good influence on him as Eddy kept being rather rude towards him during his whole stay, much to Mary’s and his annoyance.

“Barry.” Jay’s tone of voice makes it clear that he doesn’t really want to touch upon whatever he is going to say now but that he sees it as necessary to do so anyway. This causes Barry’s stomach to drop a bit as it is rather obvious what this is going to be about. He keeps his gaze firmly on the box of coffee in his hand and can’t bring himself to turn around and face the other man.

“I am really glad that you have found friends and I don’t want to interfere with that.” Jay says and the frown is audible in his voice. He pauses for a second before he goes on. “But you should be very careful with whom you are interacting these days. I don’t want to see you to get in trouble again.”

These words cause Barry to bristle even though he has expected them and, for a brief moment, he feels a familiar anger flare up in him, mixed with betrayal and hurt, but he forces the emotions down, knowing that acting on it would only make things worse for himself.

It also wouldn’t be fair toward Jay should he get angry. The older man only means well and is looking out for him and while it is still hard for Barry to deal with the fact that his former friend could believe these awful things about him, he still appreciates that he cares enough to worry.

“I w-won’t,” Barry answers curtly and swallows with some difficulty as his throat starts to close up on him again.

Jay studies him quietly and his gaze is like an uncomfortable pressure at the back of Barry’s head. He is obviously pondering whether he should leave this topic alone for now or go on.

“I know you won’t.” There is this sadness again, so very plain in Jay’s voice, and Barry has to close his eyes for a moment because the sudden pain in his chest is nearly overwhelming.

He wonders whether the older man really thinks so but as he doesn’t want to talk about any of this, he stays quiet and is just glad when Jay changes the subject back to his actual birthday.

His former friend stays for about an hour that mostly consists of uneasy small talk before he has to leave again and while Barry is kind of glad about it, he can’t help but feel somewhat sad to see him go as well.
Despite what has happened, he knows that Jay still cares about him.

… he just doesn’t understand why.

After both of them have gotten up from their seats but before Jay turned to make his way over to the door, the older man reaches into the pocket of his jacket and pulls a white envelope out.

“Again, Happy Birthday, Barry,” he says and hands it to him.

Barry hesitates a second before he reluctantly accepts it with a quiet thanks. He fears that he already knows what he will find in there.

It is a typical birthday card, a simple but nice looking one with a mostly white cover other than for the big bold letters that say “Happy Birthday” as well as a couple of colourful balloons above them. His stomach drops again when he opens it and, besides the neat handwriting that is undoubtedly Joan’s, there is a fifty dollar note greeting him.

“I-I c-c-”

“Barry,” Jay interrupts him and meets his distressed expression with a very serious but also concerned one. “I know that you don’t like to receive financial help from me and I can understand and respect that but this is for your birthday. It doesn’t mean that I don’t think you are capable of taking care of yourself or that you are now somehow in my debt. I am not blind, I can see how hard you work to live a somewhat normal life even after everything that happened and I can only recommend you on that. I don’t give you the money because I pity you or because I have any bad intentions on mind but because I know how much effort you put into making this work and because I see how difficult it is.”

Jay’s expression has become sombre and Barry has to look away because he suddenly feels so damn ashamed.

He didn’t kill Iris or hurt Wally, he would have never done that, but it doesn’t matter because nearly everybody else thinks he did.

It is their truth.

It is *Jay’s* truth.

The older man wants to help him, despite thinking of him as a sick and twisted person. It is so damn confusing, it makes Barry’s head hurt.

“I don’t want you to stop trying because you break under the burden you have to carry,” Jay goes on and his voice is so damn empathetic and warm that it causes Barry’s eyes to sting again. “You are not alone, Barry.”

Barry hates him a little bit for saying so. If this was true, where has Jay been during his time in the Heights? Where has anybody been while he was a child? Why did he end up all alone again and again and again?

Barry shoves those questions away. It isn’t Jay’s fault, it is nobody’s fault, not even his own. It is just his rotten luck, it has always been just that.

The throbbing behind his temples grows worse and he lifts a hand to rub it his right temple in an attempt to ease a bit the discomfort away. He feels sick again and tired and very much looks forward to being left alone once more.
“Th-thanks, J-Jay,” he answers quietly and glances briefly at the other man with a vain attempt of a
smile. “I-I ap-preciate i-it. P-please, t-tell J-Joan s-so as w-w-well.”

“Barry-”

“I d-don’t f-feel s-so w-well, I-I w-would l-like t-to l-lay d-down a b-bit. C-could y-you l-leave n-
now, p-p-please?”

Jay watches him clearly concerned and Barry fears that he would insist on staying.

Thankfully, he doesn’t.

“Okay,” Jay agrees quietly.

Barry has his gaze directed towards the mostly empty cup of coffee in front of him and can’t bring
himself to meet the other man’s eyes again. They keep standing there for an uncomfortable moment
before Jay speaks once more, in a very quiet and tired sounding voice.

“I am very sorry for everything that has happened.”

Barry swallows and closes his eyes as he nods.

“Y-yes, m-me t-t-too.”

***

“You don’t look like a walking heap of misery anymore,” Eddy remarks and keeps on studying
Barry curiously. “You made up with your boyfriend?”

Barry, who has just been about to let himself be lured off to sleep by the rumbling and slight
movement of the bus’ around him, tenses up and shoots the other man a disbelieving and slightly
mortified look.

“God, stop looking at me like that, there is hardly another soul around,” Eddy chuckles and nods
towards the rest of the bus which is nearly completely empty other than for his friend, Mary, Barry
himself and two other people, who sit close to the front while the three of them are sitting in the last
row. Neither of the other two passengers seem to pay them any attention.

“Could you at least attempt to use your mind before blurring nonsense like this out,” Mary, who sits
at Eddy’s other side, asks in annoyance.

“What? It was just a question,” the other man huffs but, judging by the slight grin that is pulling on
the corners of his lips, he knows exactly what has rubbed the young woman the wrong way.

“No, it is just another sign of your ongoing lack of tact.”

Barry, who has slumped a bit lower into his seat, isn’t certain whether he wants to kick the man next
to him or just pretend that he hasn’t opened his big mouth to begin with. He really doesn’t feel up to
have this conversation, not this late at night and definitely not in a public bus.

“You two are way too touchy,” Eddie remarks with a familiar smirk and shrugs. “I’m just glad he’s
been in a better mood these days. That’s all. If he doesn’t want to talk about it, that’s fine.”

“You are unbelievable.” Marry gives the other man a disapproving look before she looks over to
Barry. “Don’t feel bad because of that imbecile, Barry.”
“Why should he feel bad? I didn’t do anything other than ask a question.”

“Yes, a very private one, in the middle of a bus with other people around. And what is that stupid remark about a boyfriend? Do you really think that is funny to him?”

“So touchy…”

Barry slumps a bit lower and covers his face with one of his hands, wishing they would have already arrived at their destination.

He jumps slightly when the other man lightly bumps their shoulders and meets his irked and unsettled look with his usual amused one.

“I didn’t mean any harm, Bar. I am just glad that you are not so downtrodden anymore.”

Even though Barry wishes Eddy would at least attempt not to be so damn direct all the time, he can appreciate his sentiment.

“Th-thanks.”

“Sure.” The other man grins. “So, no troubles with your better half anymore?”

“For Pete’s sake,” Mary hisses, which causes Eddy to smirk in satisfaction like he has aimed for just this kind of reaction from her.

Barry, who notices how the old lady closest to them has turned around to give them a slightly annoyed look, turns towards the dark window and tries to appear like he doesn’t know the man next to him.

Thankfully, Eddy leaves him be after that.

They arrive at the bus stop closest to their apartment building not ten minutes later and Barry is immensely relieved to finally get off the bus again. Eddy grabs his bag with the couple of art utensils he purchased at the flea market they spent most of today’s evening at and just winks at him when he tries to protest. Feeling too exhausted to really be bothered by it, Barry lets the other man proceed and just follows his friends.

Mary gives both of them a hug when they reach Eddy’s and his floor and wishes them a good night before she proceeds up the stairs to her own flat.

“I am just ribbing you a bit,” the other man remarks as he hands him the bag back after they stopped in front of Barry’s door. “You know that, right?”

Barry frowns slightly but nods in agreement. He does know that his friend doesn’t mean any harm with his stupid sense of humour, no matter how frustrating it can be at times.

“Thanks for coming along today,” Eddy goes on, who had been the actual mastermind behind the idea to make a trip to the small late-night flea market in Central City. Both Mary and he have surprised Barry at work and asked him whether he would like to join them. Seeing that it was Saturday, he agreed and while the weather had been just lousy, it still turned into a very nice night.

“Sure, th-thanks for inviting m-me along.”

“Because we could have spent an enjoyable evening without you around?” his friend asks with an amused grin before he wishes him a good night and takes his leave.
Barry watches him for a moment longer as he makes his way over to his own flat, a faint smile on his lips as well. Eddy may be a dumbass at times but he is a good guy when it comes down to it.

With a small yawn, Barry turns to unlock his own door and enters into his dark living room.

Before he has the opportunity to reach for the lightening switch, a hand grabs his throat with a grip strong enough to prevent any tone to pass his lips.

The door is pressed shut behind him and he finds himself in the darkness of his flat, all alone with an intruder he can’t make out. The bag in his hand drops the floor with a soft thump and he reaches for the hand that is holding him in a painfully strong grip.

“Don’t make a sound,” a deep and unfamiliar voice says that he can hardly make out over the rushing of his own blood in his ears.

“Tell Snart that Blacksmith is starting to lose her patience and that she will make sure to remember him where his obligations lie should he keep this little hard-to-get game up.”

Barry has no idea who this person is or whom he is talking about but before he has any possibility to really form a coherent thought, something hard and blunt hits the side of his head and everything turns dark.

***

Barry wakes up with a splitting headache and for a disorientating and frightening moment he has no idea where he is.

He lays on something hard and it is pitch-black around him.

Briefly, he thinks that he is back in the isolation cell in the Heights and he instinctively curls up in a small ball and tries to stay as quiet as possible.

Then, he notices that ground he is laying on hasn’t the same feeling to it and it isn’t as cold. Reluctantly, he reaches with a hand for it and notices that it is wood. This confuses him till he realizes that his surrounding isn’t completely dark either and that there is actually light falling through a window.

His kitchen window.

He is at home.

His confusion increases and he flinches when he is stupid enough to actually frown despite how much his whole skull is hurting.

What has happened? What is he doing on his living room floor?

The intruder comes back to his mind like a punch to his stomach and he freezes once again.

There is no noise around him, he listens intently but he can’t make anything out other than his own breathing that sounds way too loud and quick.

He still waits a couple of minutes more before he tries to sit up. It causes him to grow disorientated again and briefly he is certain that he will throw up.

The sickness passes, though, and he keeps sitting there on the ground for a while, confused and unsure what to do next.
The notion that the stranger could still be around is frightening to him but he knows that, should that person really wanted to harm him, he would have done so already. It seems that Barry has been unlucky enough to be picked as a messenger and it makes him sick to his stomach to think that anybody could be aware of his friendship to Len and the other Rogues.

What if Jay and the rest do so too?

He quickly realizes that it is more than unlikely, though, seeing that he hasn’t been sent back to prison yet, after all.

When about another five minutes have passed, Barry crawls over to the wall next to his door and attempts to get up. It is difficult but he is able to do so on his second attempt. The world around him is spinning, though, and he needs to keep standing there till his sense of equilibrium is able to regain its footing.

God, he really hopes he hasn't gotten another concussion. He hates those…

The way to his bathroom takes him forever and he has no idea how late it is but he feels tired enough that he would bet that he couldn’t have had unconscious for all that long.

It is after he has splashed some cool water onto his face that he remembers the small mirror in his pocket but he hesitates to reach for it. This could very well be a trap for his friends if someone already knows about his connection to them.

The throbbing in his head grows worse, though, and it is hard to think. He looks over his shoulder out the door and tries to listen for any sound that would be a sign for anybody to be still around.

There is nothing.

Not that this has to mean much if he is dealing with someone who understands his craft.

Turning back to study the small mirror in his hand, he waits for another couple of minutes before it becomes nearly impossible to keep standing upright and he decides to contact the others, despite knowing that this could possibly a very stupid mistake.

Even so, he is in pain and scared and while he tries ignore it, a part of him is convinced that things would be alright if just Len were with him.

Hesitantly, Barry calls for Sam and a slight panic starts to raise in him when a long moment passes by without the other man answer. The notion that something could have happen to them causes him to feel sick and he calls again, this time a bit louder as he grows increasingly worried with each passing second.

What if his attacker got to them? Or this Blacksmith? What if-

Sam’s face turns up in the small reflective surface and Barry immediately feels like such a damn idiot because as soon as he sees that the other man is wearing his familiar Mirror Master mask, he remembers that the Rogues are actually doing a job tonight.

Judging by Sam’s annoyed expression, he has bothered him most likely in the middle of it.

“For fuck’s sake, you are better dying or I am going to kick your-”

His friend breaks off as soon as he seems to have finally notices in what state he actually is in and a mixture of concern and frustration crosses his face.
“Really? What the hell? You are like a fucking magnet for trouble, man!”

“S-s-or-r-ry,” Barry stammers and suddenly feels really sick.

“Allen, if you have not already, sit down, you look like you are going to keel over any moment.” Sam huffs in exasperation and thinks for a moment before he goes on. “You think you can wait for another hour or so or is it serious enough that you need immediately help?”

“N-n-no… a-another h-hour i-is f-fine.”

“Yeah, fine my ass,” Sam grumbles and frowns. “Look, we will be done in a bit. Just try not to move too much, alright?”

“S-s-sure…”

“Fucking perfect,” the other man mutters before he vanishes again and Barry’s own reflection looks back to him.

Exhausted and still a bit frightened by what has happened, he staggers the couple of steps back to the wall behind him and let’s himself slid down so that he ends up sitting on the floor again. His head is throbbing like hell and he remembers that he has still a couple of painkillers left in the little bottle behind his cabinet mirror.

Looking up to it, he decides that it would be way too much of an effort to get them, though, especially with how disorientated he starts to feel again, and he settles for closing his eyes to shut the bright light of his bathroom out instead.

The next thing he knows is that someone shakes his shoulder slightly. The touch freaks him out badly enough that he recoils so that he ends up hitting the back of his head on the tiled wall behind him. He nearly loses his conscious again due to the awful pain that flashes through him due to that.

“Idiot, you wanna end up breaking your damn skull for good?” hisses a familiar voice and even through the thick vail of pain he is able to recognize Len. The relief he feels then is nearly smothering and without thinking of what he is doing, he reaches a hand for the one that is still cupping his shoulder.

“L-Len…”

His vision is slightly blurry due to the tears of pain in his eyes and he can’t make out any specific features of his friend or anything else around them. The hand on his shoulder shifts a bit, so that he is cupping his neck and Barry shudders lightly when the other man’s thumb starts to draw small calming circles behind his ear.

“Let’s get him out of here, Len. The ground’s hardly a good place for him to rest, right now.”

It is Lisa and Barry, who has briefly closes his eyes, opens them again and is able to make her familiar form out behind her brother.

Len hums in agreement before he tells Barry to stay calm. He doesn’t understand what the man means till he is suddenly picked up in bride style and carried back to his living room. His protests fall on deaf ears but he is placed onto the couch just a moment later anyway, so that he tries not to feel too mortified by what has just happened.

“I c-could h-have w-walked.”
Both, Len and Lisa ignore this little piece of very doubtful information.

“What happened?” asks Len instead and carefully presses Barry’s chin to the side so that he would turn his head. His frown deepens when he studies the spot where he has been hit before. “Who the fuck did this?”

“I d-d-don’t kn-know,” Barry answers truthfully and doesn’t notice how his hand once more reaches for Len’s wrist.

“Don’t freak out, Hon, I am just putting a cool cloth onto your temple to help with the swelling and pain a bit,” Lisa tells him in a soothing voice and Barry realizes that he hasn’t even noticed that she made a small trip to his kitchenette. He shudders when a damp and cool cloth is put onto his right temple a moment later and for a second the pain grows even worse before the cool starts to help.

“Barry, what has happened? Who hit you? Was it another mugging?” Lisa sounds honestly concerned and he tries to focus enough that he can meet her eyes and give her a reassuring smile. He isn’t very successful with either.

“N-no… I c-came h-home and s-someone w-was h-here.”

“Someone broke into your flat?” the blond woman asks and again sounds worried but also angry.

“Y-yes, h-he d-didn’t w-want any of m-my th-things, th-though, I… I-I th-think...”

“What do you mean?” Len sounds gruff but doesn’t pull his hand away that is currently resting on Barry’s right upper arm.

“Th-the m-m-man… h-he w-wanted m-me t-to g-give y-you a m-message...”

It is then that Barry realize once again that his friends could be in danger.

What if that person wanted him to contact them and get them here?

His stomach sinks at the notion, before he can tell Len about his worries, though, the other man cuts him off.

“A message?”

His voice sounds eerily cold again and Barry can’t help but tense up in response.

“What message, Barry?” asks Lisa and he doesn’t miss how she shares a brief look with her brother.

“That... th-that B-Blachs-smith is g-growing imp-patient and th-that sh-she w-will m-make s-sure t-to r-remind y-you of y-your o-oblig-gations...” he explains and frowns slightly. “I d-don’t kn-know wh-who it w-was, i-it w-was d-dark and I c-couldn’t m-make out anyth-thing.”

“That is fine, honey,” Lisa assures him and sits down on his small couch table before she reaches for his right shoulder to give it a light squeeze. She then turns to her brother again and both share another look that Barry doesn’t understand.

“M-maybe y-you sh-should l-leave, wh-what if h-he i-is s-still around?”

His concern is palpable and he watches how Lisa’s grim expression softens a bit as she meets his eyes again.

“Don’t worry, sweetie, he isn’t.”
“H-how d-d-do y-you kn-know th-that?” he asks and can’t help but grows a bit frustrated over their obvious lack of concern regarding their own safety.

“He wanted to threaten me, nothing more,” replies Len in Lisa’s stead with a grim expression. “Not yet, at least.”

“Wh-who i-is h-he?” Barry inquires as he fights to keep his eyes open. His head is still hurting horribly but now an intense drowsiness has joined the pain as well.

Neither of the siblings answers before Len suddenly gets up and makes his way over to the bathroom again.

“L-Len-”

“Take care of him, Lisa, I will get Simmons.”

With that, the other man is gone.

“L-Lisa, wh-what’s g-going on?”

The blond woman, who has watched her brother go with an annoyed frown, turns back to him and doesn’t seem all too keen on answering him anymore than Len has before.

“P-please, wh-who w-was th-that m-man?” he asks again and watches how Lisa frowns down at him for a moment, obviously considering whether to tell him anything or not. She seemingly comes to the decision to indulge him as she heaves a sigh and rubs the bridge of her nose as she turns towards his kitchen window. She studies the dark for a bit before she sighs again, softer than before, and turns back to him.

“Kenneth, that jackass’ name is Kenneth. He is a middleman for an underground organisation we have had some trouble for a while now.”

“Wh-what organisation?”

Barry frowns again and immediately regrets it when another hot pain shoots through his head.

“Keep still,” Lisa admonishes him softly before she goes on. “Barry, all of this is a rather complicated story and I really don’t think that it would be a good idea to tell you about it in your current state.”

“B-but y-you w-will t-tell m-me about it l-later?”

She seems a bit surprised about his insistence before she chuckles. “We’ll see.”

Barry wants to protest and tell her that he does have a right to know what is going on after being attacked by someone because he knows them. His mind starts to drift off, though, and it becomes increasingly difficult to keep his eyes open.

“Stay with me, honey, you can’t rest just now,” tells him Lisa.

Barry hopes the doctor wouldn’t take as long as last time around. It is difficult not to give in to the tiredness but he makes an effort to answer the questions Lisa starts to ask him for the next ten minutes before Len returns with the old grumpy man.
And cue in Blacksmith&Co!

Len, what the heck did you get yourself into? Well, something that means quite some trouble, that's for sure. ;)

I hope you liked this chapter, it isn't very Barry/Len centric but this and the next one will help to progress the story, the one after that will introduce one of my absolute favs in the whole Flash series and also have a more private Barry/Len scene again, which I still have to write.

With the last chapter, I changed some of the B/L dynamic to how I've initially written it in the story, which is completely fine as I like how things are progressing now but it also means some more re-writes and changes and thus probably some more time in-between chapters being uploaded. I will make sure to make the chapters longer in return, though. :)

I also have two other on-going stories I'm working on, which will also take up some of my time and work and studying keeps me busy in RL as well, so please don't think ill of me for needing some more time to finish the chapters of Singularity. This story is really, really dear to my heart and I work on it as quickly as I can, not only because I want to provide you with new chapters but also because I immensly enjoy doing so. :)
March 2\textsuperscript{nd} year

“So,” Axel starts and gives him a curious look,” someone decked you?”

Barry frowns but tries to look as nonchalantly as possible when he answers.

“Yes.”

A moment passes by and while he isn’t looking at the boy he can imagine just too well how he starts to grow impatient.

“So?” asks Axel again after he has failed to come forth with any actual explanation. “What happened? You got into a fight with someone?”

Barry gives the boy a slightly annoyed look.

“D-do you r-really th-think th-that’s any o-of your b-business?”

“Why not? You’re ashamed of being beaten up?” Axel scoffs and shrugs. “Shit like that happens.”

That is really not something he likes to hear from the young teen and he studies him a concerned look.

“D-does th-this h-happen t-to you a l-lot?” Barry asks carefully as he doesn’t want the kid to become upset again. To his surprise, Axel doesn’t seem all that bothered by that question, though.

“Nah, don’t worry, I’m pretty quick and know where to hit so that it hurts.”

It is a bit unsettling to think that a thirteen year old boy would know how to stand up for himself in a physical fight. Barry has never been good at that when he was Axel’s age and he usually just tried to avoid such situations, but with the kid’s temper it is most likely the opposite case for him. The
teenager has made it more than obvious by now that he is someone who would go all up into another person’s face should he not like what they have to says.

It is a rather troubling notion.

“Cheeze, don’t look so worried.” Axel huffs and Barry realizes that he has kept studying him for the last minute with what must be a rather concerned expression. “I can look out for myself, you know? And me and my friends watch each other’s back, so it isn’t as if it is me against the world, alright?”

The teens seems a bit annoyed by the thought that Barry could think that he isn’t able to take care of himself and adds with some bite. “I’m not the one who looks like he has been helping out as a punching bag.”

Barry ignores the little quip and instead wants to ask him about his friends with whom he seems to stay but before he can do so, a customer comes to the counter with his purchases and he has to turn his attention to him.

The man gives him an odd look, most likely due to his swollen right cheekbone that has turned dark purple by now. He doesn’t comment on it, though, for which Barry is really glad as about every other of the customers he has had today so far tried to ask about it in one way or another or made some stupid remark.

“You want my help with restocking the shelves again?

Barry, who has watched their customer leave, turns to Axel next to him and smiles in surprised by the nice offer.

“If you’ve t-time.”

The teen shrugs.

“Sure.”

It is a bit later, about another hour till closing, when the boy tries his luck once more and asks him again what has happened.

“Wh-why are you s-so interest-ted in m-me g-getting p-punched?”

Barry give the kid a curious look but doesn’t really feel bothered by the question anymore.

“I’m not,” huffs Axel and shrugs again. “It’s just obvious that something has happened, that’s all.”

Seeing no danger telling the teen a bit about what occurred, he explains to him that someone broke into his flat and he caught him by accident. He doesn’t mention that this person wasn’t there to steal from him, though.

“Dude! You’re so fucking lucky that you’re still breathing,” Axel tells him and much to Barry’s surprise, he actually seems really concerned by what he has just learned. “I know a guy who caught a burglar by surprise as well and got beaten to death by them.”

The thought alone causes Barry to feel slightly sick but he is well aware that this could have happened to him as well. He has trouble finding any sleep at all again due to how every noise in his apartment kept him awake as his mind provided him with images of what could possibly lurk in the dark.
Also, it doesn’t exactly calm his nerves hearing Axel tell him that and he can’t help but feel concerned over the upbringing the boy has once again.

“W-watch y-you l-language,” he reminds him half-heartedly, not really sure what else to say as there isn’t really much he could do to help the kid. Axel rolls his eyes and declare that he has had enough of old people for today.

“Don’t let yourself get shot, alright?”

The teenager obviously tries to make it sound like a joke but there is this unexpected worry in his eyes again of which Barry isn’t sure what to make of. He tries not to think too much about it, though and instead gives Axel a fond smile.

“Of c-curse, wh-who w-would b-buy you your p-peanut b-bars if n-not m-me?”

“Don’t forget all that disgusting healthy stuff.” The boy gives him a cheeky grin before he takes his leave for tonight.

Barry watches Axel go and vanish into the night through the front windows of the store, as he does quite often these days.

A part of him points out that he is being extremely careless and stupid by allowing the kid to stay around seeing that it could mean a one-way ticket back to the Heights should the wrong people pick up on it and that is something he doesn’t even want to think about.

His attention is drawn back to the here and now when a young woman comes to the counter to pay and he is quite glad for the distraction.

A couple of other customers later, the store is mostly deserted other than for an older lady who seems hell-bent on memorizing all the expiring dates on their canned tuna. He goes over to offer her his assistance but she assures him that she is fine. When she notices his bruised cheek, she frowns and tells him in a very severe tone that it doesn’t pay off to be in a gang. Barry agrees and has difficulties not to chuckle over her odd piece of advice.

After the older woman is gone, the store is left empty other than for himself and Barry decides to start with the closing.

Now, with nothing else around to occupy his mind, he can’t but think back to the incident two days ago. The memory alone makes him increasingly uneasy to be all alone in the shop and he briefly feels for the little mirror in his pants pocket without thinking.

Barry knows that Sam is checking up on him, Len told him so much this morning before he left for work, and even though this calms his nerves quite a bit, he doesn’t particularly like the notion of another person following him around, especially because he doesn’t want his friends to think that he can’t take care of himself.

Still, he didn’t protest too much either as he isn’t keen on a repetition of what happened last Saturday night either and he still hasn’t learned what all of this is actually about just yet.

Point eleven o’clock he locks the doors and makes another round through the store, to make sure that everything is at its place before he grabs the cash drawer to count the money he took in today.

After finishing this, the last thing Barry does is to bring the trash out before locking the backdoor and makes his way over to the small restroom downstairs. Mrs. Ming already bid him goodnight about two hours ago but he still tries to be as quiet as possible as to not accidently alert her to how he is
leaving tonight.

“Finally,” Sam greets him with a rather annoyed expression as soon as he steps in front of the mirror. “Do you’ve any idea how boring it is to watch you at work? I had to check up on you ever thirty minutes or Len would have kicked my face in and I have lost five rounds due to that. You owe me two hundred bucks, just so you know.”

Barry frowns but refrains from pointing out that he isn’t exactly ecstatic about being monitored either. He can understand that Sam isn’t happy about having to play his babysitter and he is grateful that he had someone watch his back today as it calmed his nerves quite a bit.

“Come on,” Sam says and motions him to finally start moving. “I’m in the middle of a game again and I know that Digger isn’t able to keep is damn fingers to himself with my cards around.”

“Is it ok-kay if I j-join you t-to th-the h-hideout instead of y-you g-getting m-me h-home?”

The other man gives him a slightly surprised look before he shrugs. “Sure, why not, but be warned, most of the others are on the best way to be shitfaced.”

They arrive at the hideout a moment later and while Sam makes his way back to the others to go on with his game, Barry chooses to seek out Len’s room. The headache that has followed him around for the most part of today has grown worse again and he is pretty sure that the other man wouldn’t mind if he uses his bed to rest a bit. He just needs someplace dark and quiet right now and where he knows that nobody would ambush him.

The air in the other man’s room is stuffy and Barry decides to tilt the window before he takes his coat and shoes off and lays down. He is gone in seconds.

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“So, th-that g-guy is an a-assassin?”

The notion that he had an actual professional killer in his flat just a couple of days ago is quite unsettling and Barry tries not to think about what could have happened if this man had decided to give the Rogues another kind of message to make his point clear, one that would have certainly left no doubt in how serious he is.

“Well…” Lisa hesitates and glances to Len, who is leaning next to the entrance of his room, arms crossed and a rather dark expression on his face. The other man made it quite clear what he thinks of her telling Barry anything about this and it isn’t only frustrating but also quite hurtful as he hates to think that Len does trust him this little.

Lisa shoots her brother a dirty look when he keeps his silence and turns back to Barry. “Kenneth’s definitely a killer but it’s not his main occupation.”

“M-main occup-pation,” Barry repeats with a confused frown. “Wh-what is h-his m-main oc-cupation, th-then?”

The blond woman seems to think for a moment how to answer this question, tapping her index finger against her chin, before she sighs softly and leans back into the chair she is currently sitting on.

“He is a middleman for a criminal organisation,” she explains. “One we’ve had troubles for a while now. A rather nasty bunch that’s pretty hard to deal with.”
“W-what c-crimin-nal org-ganisation?”

The first person that crosses Barry’s mind is the Candyman but he has the feeling that this probably isn’t about them. Jack Monteleone has never seemed interested in starting any troubles with the Rogues in all the years he has been the Twin’s drug kingpin and instead prefers to kind of coexisted with them. Seeing that Len and the others usually keep out of his way, things have always been kind of relaxed between both parties as far as Barry can say.

Someone like the Candyman would be a dangerous enemy to have and certainly could pose quite a threat to the Rogues but seeing that both cities offer enough place for more than just a handful of criminals to make a living, there has never been any clashes, at least from what Barry is aware of, which, to be honest, isn’t that much anymore.

“The Blue Velvet,” Lisa explains with a rather dark expression that makes it quite clear what she thinks of them and Barry has utterly no idea who that could be. The only thing his brain provides him with is the memory of a movie of the same title he watched with Mary a while ago.

“Wh-who’re th-they?”

“That’s a good question,” Lisa replies with a faint smirk that seems more concerned than amused. “One we would love to know the answer to as well, believe me. They’ve been causing us trouble for over a year now and we still know next to nothing about them other that they seem to have pretty much spread through all of the Northwest.”

“So, th-they aren’t c-city b-based l-like M-Mont-teleone?”

Lisa chuckles even though it is obvious that she doesn’t find his question particularly funny. “It’s said through the grapevine that our dear Candyman has trouble with those jackasses as well and I’ve honestly no problems believing that.”

This is kind of unsettling, seeing that Monteleone has been able to claim the Twins as his own for more than three decades now and is usually quite successful at keeping other organisations out the cities’ borders. It was rumoured at the CCPD that he has pretty tight connections to a handful of very powerful crime families but it could never be proven while Barry still worked there.

The Rogues’ misfortunate trip to Russia crosses to his mind.

“D-did th-they send th-the S-suicide Squad after y-you?”

“We don’t think so.” Lisa’s expression turns sour at that memory. “This has probably really been just thanks to Digger.”

The Australian has made himself rare over the last month as Barry hasn’t seen him much around the last couple of times he came over. He never really wanted to ask about it, though, as Len still seems pretty pissed about the whole Russia thing.

“Th-they d-don’t w-want you around, th-though.”

It is a statement, not a question, and Lisa gives him an amused smirk before she nods.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Wh-why? C-Central C-City is b-big.”

The blond woman snorts and shrugs. “Yeah, the Twins are big and we’ve been able to share our turf
with a number of bigger and smaller fishes over the years, as long as they were clever enough to not try and pick a fight with us.”

“B-but th-the B-blue B-velvet d-did?”

Her smirk vanes and her expression becomes sour once more.

“Yeah, they aren’t really keen on the idea of sharing.”

“Th-they w-want you g-gone?” Barry starts to feel slightly uneasy at the notion that a criminal organisation that is obviously powerful and dangerous enough to mess with the local kingpin tries to go after his friends.

“Not initially.” Lisa reaches up and starts to twirl a streak of her hair absentmindedly as she glances at her brother with a rather terse expression. Noticing Barry’s confused expression, she goes on. “They wanted to hire us but we told them no.”

“P-probably n-not in th-the n-nicest w-way?”

She grins and shrugs again.

“We don’t like it when others try to boss us around.”

“S-so th-they s-sent you a w-warn-ning w-with K-Kenneth?”

Oddly enough, Lisa shakes her head at that.

“No, this was a courtesy of Blacksmith.”

Confused, Barry asked who that is as he has heard this name a number of times now but still has no idea who that actually is.

“An ugly *whore*.” Lisa hisses and he is slightly taken aback by how venomous she sounds as she does so. His surprise is not lost on her and she explains with a slight scowl. “She runs the blackmarket around here and is a lying, backstabbing bitch you definitively don’t want to cross ways with.”

“Th-the b-blackm-market?” This piece of information is certainly not what he has expected. He hasn’t heard of any local blackmarket before now and it isn’t for the first time that he wonders how much things have changed since he stopped being the Twins’ protector.

The smile Lisa gives him in response doesn’t sit well with him, it’s both amused and slightly indulgent.

“How do you think we turn our loot into money?” she inquires. “Someone has to buy it from us.”

Well, that makes sense but he has always assumed that the Rogues would mostly sell their stolen goods outside the Twins’ borders or, in case of other criminals, go to smaller dealers for this as there is certainly no shortage of those around here.

“H-how l-long have y-you already b-been d-doing b-business w-with her?” Barry asks and tries to think of ever having heard anything of a blackmarket within the Gem Cities’ borders before but his mind comes up completely blank. He wonders whether this is one of Wally’s new rogues the younger man has to deal with these days.

“Pretty much forever,” Lisa explains and shoots her brother a glance as if for him to confirm it.
“Well, long before I started with this, anyway.”

This catches Barry off-guard and he can’t help but turn his gaze to Len as well.

The other man smirks when he notices his confusion.

“There’s a lot the police and others don’t know anything about,” Len informs him. “We’re pretty good at keeping tight about stuff that isn’t any of their business.”

Lisa gives her brother an odd look as she hasn’t expect him to suddenly break his silence before she seems to remembers than Barry indeed has been a cop once.

“Don’t feel bad about it, Barry,” she tells him and appears just as amused at his costs as her brother is, which is quite annoying even though he knows that this jibe really shouldn’t be a surprise. Lisa probably doesn’t mean anything by it but Len has been in a piss poor mood since the incident with Kenneth and the man can be a bastard when needs to get some of his frustration off.

“You cops like to believe that you actually know what’s going on in the Twins when you really have no idea,” the blond woman chuckles and Barry can feel his stomach sink at these words and his mood turn slightly depressed once again.

The notion that he didn’t really knowing his own city even back then, as he was still the Flash, doesn’t sit well with him at all.

It is a blow he hasn’t expected.

While Lisa has no idea about him having been the cities’ protector once, Len does, and he hates that that the other man steered her in this direction as it is still humiliating and painful to be reminded of what a failure he was even back then.

Still, Barry knows that it was probably supposed to be just a small jab and that Len most likely didn’t intend for it to really sting, he is just still pissed about him learning any of this.

Pity that this doesn’t make it any less hurtful…

“I’m n-not a c-cop anym-more,” he remembers Lisa quietly and he is glad to see how her amusement vanes nearly instantly.

For an uncomfortable moment, neither of them speaks.

“Well, that’s a good thing, otherwise I would have to kick your ass,” Lisa chuckles and while her smile seems a bit forced, Barry still appreciated her attempt to lift his mood.

“R-right,” he agrees and clears his voice before he tries to change the topic back to what they have initially been talking about. “H-how c-come th-that th-this B-Blacks-smith s-sent th-this K-Kenneth t-to w-warn you if h-he w-works f-for th-the B-Blue V-Velvet?”

“The Blue Velvet and Blacksmith are pretty tight these days. You trouble one and the other one will come after you as well.”

“You t-troubled th-them?” Barry watches how Lisa huffs in annoyance while she runs her fingers through her long hair before she start to twirl a strand of it around her index finger once more. He noticed by now that she seems to do this a lot when she is nervous, bored or agitated.

“It depends what you define as trouble,” she goes on with a frown. “That bitch has wanted us to join
her for a couple of months now and we’ve always declined her generous offer.”

The sneer with which Lisa says that makes Barry wonder what happened between his friends and that Blacksmith person. The Rogues are generally made up of people who don’t let anybody try and push them around and should this woman have tried to do just that, he isn’t surprised that there is nothing but animosity left between them.

“Sh-she d-didn’t l-like th-that.”

“No, she didn’t,” Lisa agrees and purses her lips as she crosses her arms. “Amunet always had a delusion of grandeur and while she never liked us, she played nice because we were good for business. Now, with those jackasses of the Blue Velvet backing her up, she’s totally lost it and thinks that anybody who wants to have any place in either of the cities has to do her every bidding. Damn bitch.”

Lisa looks very much like she wants to punch someone and it isn’t hard to imagine whom she is currently picturing in her mind. When it comes to dealing with her anger, she is really a lot like her brother.

Everything of what Barry has just learned is quiet concerning as neither Len nor the other Rogues would ever back down in such a situation even if it would be the sensible thing to do. They are just too stubborn and too proud to even consider it.

Briefly, Jay comes to his mind and he wonders whether the older man knows about Blacksmith or the Blue Velvet. There is really no way that Barry could ask him or give him any information regarding this, though, as Jay would likely assume that he is somehow involved.

It is so damn frustrating…

He pushes those thoughts away and turns back to Lisa with a concerned look.

“D-do you th-think B-B-Blacksmith c-could h-harm y-you?”

It has become rather obvious that the blond woman, while she doesn’t seem to like this Blacksmith very much, seems to recognize her as a possible threat and, considering who his friends are, this is not very reassuring.

“Don’t worry, Barry, we know how to take care of ourselves.” Lisa smiles and leans forward so that she can take hold of his hand that had been resting on his knee. “I may not have been a Rogue for as long as the others are but in the years I’ve been with them we’d some rather nasty conflicts and we always were able to come out on top.”

This does calm Barry’s worries a little bit but, at the same time, he isn’t sure what she is talking about and the notion that they actually have to put up with assassins and stuff like that on a seemingly regular basis is both upsetting and concerning.

“Don’t worry your damn head off.” Len interjects in a rather gruff voice and causes Barry to look over to him. “We’re one of the biggest players in the twins, there aren’t that many who’re stupid enough to try and mess with us.”

The other man shoots Lisa a dark and warning glare as if to dare her to say otherwise. His sister rolls her eyes and gives him an annoyed look in return.

“Yes, and I didn’t mean to indicate that we’ve to deal with that shit every day but we do have to every once in a while,” she remarks drily and turns back to Barry, which causes her expression to
soften a bit once more. “But he’s right, you really don’t have to worry about that. This just comes with the job and usually idiots who try to pick a fight with us are quite quick to grasp what a stupid idea that actually is.”

“But th-this w-won’t b-be th-the c-case w-with B-Blacks-smith.”

Barry watches how Lisa’s expression loses some of its warmth and while she is pretty good at covering her emotions, she is not like her brother, and he doesn’t miss the concern that briefly crosses her face.

“No,” she agrees seriously,” probably not.”

His stomach sinks at these words and Barry realizes what an idiot he has been to let himself forget about all the trouble the Rogues have to deal with that doesn’t include speedsters.

Neither Central City nor Keystone City are anything like Gotham or Chicago but they too do have a distinct criminal body. Most people don’t really realize that, though, due to how bright the cities generally seem and with the speedsters around to protect them.

A big part is probably also that most criminals prefer to stay under the radar and the media thus mostly only picks up on people like the Rogues or Rainbow Raider or anyone else who decides to dawn a sometimes pretty gaudy looking costume.

Barry, while not unaware of this, has always assumed that Len and the others are mostly left alone by the general criminal population as they do provide a very good distraction and, despite what they may look like at the first glance, are damn dangerous to mess with.

“Barry, you really don’t have to worry about us, we can take care of us but it isn’t the same for you,” Lisa points out seriously and while he knows that she is just saying the obvious, he can’t help but feel a bit insulted by it.

He tries to ignore his hurt ego, though, as should Kenneth turn up in his doorway again, there is probably nothing he can do to protect himself. With how messed up his body is right now, he could hardly stand his own against anybody, let alone a huge buff guy like that who looks like he could squash his head with his bare hands.

“I kn-know,” he agrees quietly,” b-but th-there isn’t m-much I c-can d-do about th-that.”

His speed is gone and while he knows how to fight, he is in no shape to do so. It is both, humiliating and depressing.

“Don’t look so damn crestfallen.” Lisa sounds annoyed and gives him a slightly irked glare. “We’ll look out for you, stupid. You really think we’ll let those jackasses get to you?”

Her words are both surprising and touching and he isn’t sure how to reply to this so that he stays quiet instead.

Len, who has been watching them quietly so far, steps away from the wall and makes his way over to his bed, where Barry is currently sitting.

Barry watches him with a mixture of confusion and slight apprehension as the other man still seems tensed and in a bad mood and he isn’t sure what to expect.

“Here.” Len offers him a small round mirror that isn’t even the size of his palm and it looks very similar to the one Barry has gotten from him months ago.
“Ano-th-er m-mirror?” He frowns and turns his eyes back to Len in confusion. The other man only nods.

“Yes, an upgraded version of the one you’ve now.”

“Up-g-grad-ed?” Barry moves his attention back to the small object that is still offered to him and he has failed to accept so far. He frowns and can’t say that he likes the sound of that. “In wh-what w-way?”

It doesn’t surprise him when Len makes a rather exasperated noise and grumbles under his breath that he is always so damn suspicious.

“It can get you to our current hideout in an instant without Sam needing to pick you up.”

“Wh-what? H-how?”

“How the hell should I know? Ask Scudder if you want a lecture on it,” Len tells him sharply and his agitation is nearly palpable for a moment, so much so that it causes Barry to cringe.

A tense moment passes in which he keeps his eyes focus on the ground and tries to not to feel so damn intimidated by Len’s presence alone.

“Really?” Lisa asks in exasperation and while he isn’t looking at her, he knows that she is talking to her brother.

“Just take the mirror,” Len tells him once again and this time there is no anger left in his voice, only weariness. “It’s safe.”

Barry very much doubts that but he holds his tongue and instead turns his gaze to the mirror that is still offered to him. Without looking at Len, he takes it and mutters a small thanks.

“You just have to grab it and say mirror, spiegel, speculum. That should do the job,” the other man explains before he abruptly turns around and leaves the room without another word.

Confused and slightly hurt, Barry watches him go.

“Don’t take it personal.” Lisa gives him a faint but comforting smile. “He may act though and all but the whole situation with Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet has him very much on edge. Especially after Kenneth has turned up at your place like that.”

She touches the back of his hand again.

“He’s horrible at showing it but he’s really worried about you. He didn’t want to tell you anything because he thought that this would somehow protect you.” Lisa scoffs at that notion and pulls her hand back to rub her forehead.

“He’s such an idiot at times.” With a soft sigh, she gets up. “But it’s hard to stay angry with him for too long when you realize that he actually tries to do the right thing. Even if it is in his little awry way.”

Barry stays quiet as he understands what she is saying but it still doesn’t sit well with him. Len can be so damn complicated at times, making him feel safe and just plain good at one moment and hitting him over the head with what a jerk he can be the next.

It is confusing and exhausting.
“I think you should rest a bit more, you still look like a raccoon with those dark shadows under your eyes,” Lisa suggests and Barry nods in agreement even though he doesn’t really want to be left alone with his thought right now. She seems to notice as she steps close to him again and meets his concerned gaze. “Len isn’t angry at you and he’s probably already feeling like an ass for how he’s behaved just now. I know it sounds like I’m making excuses for him but he really is under a lot of stress and the one thing that worries him the most is that you could get somehow hurt due to this messed up situation.”

Barry purses his lips, still not really happy with the situation, but nods and tries to find some comfort in knowing that Lisa is probably right.

“Ok-kay.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! :)

It is very heavy on the talking part but there was a lot to touch upon and I hope that it was still enjoyable for you.

There will be another interlude between next chapter and the one after that as it has been pointed out to me that Barry really never gets a break and I want to do something about it. ;) It will be Len heavy again as well and he can hopefully make up for how he has behaved towards Barry in this one.

Also, next chapter will introduce another big character from the comics. So looking forward to that one. :3 Though, it will be a rather sad and emotional one again, just so you’re warned. ;)


Bonus Chapter: Barry’s Past – A Brief (?) Overview

Chapter Summary

Barry's life before Singularity.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: There are lots of possible triggers in this chapter like brief mentions of rape, severe physical and psychological abuse, depression and suicidal thoughts! Please do not read if any of this could be harmful to you in any way!

AN (please read this as you’ll probably end up confused otherwise):

I’ve decided to change the order in which I’m going to upload the next couple of chapters a bit by working this one in. It’s kind of an overview of what had happened in Barry’s life before Singularity started.

Also, this chapter is not written in the same style as the rest of this story!

It’s actually a revision of my latest version of plot layouts I use/used for this story. I dismissed my initial idea of starting this story sometime before Barry gets out of prison but everything in this chapter still took place in his life before Singularity, just not everything is going to be reverenced later on, so you can see is as a source for some bonus information. :)

As this is a revision of plot outlines, it mostly consists of shorter passages and sentences with no direct speeches, as it summarized what occurred in Barry’s life in about 33 years in one (long) chapter.

I’m not going into great detail with every plot point I touch upon and not all of them are really that important as some were just meant to help me organize the timeline. I will go into more detail with the ones that are important for the story in future chapters, this here is really just to give you a rough idea of what took place before Singularity.

I hope that this will give you a better sense of what’s going on and help you to understand some things form the chapters so far that may still are unclear to you.

Also, some things you read here may seem a bit confusing and/or odd but there is a reason behind everything that’s happened to Barry and how people interact with him and it will be explained in future.

Anyway, I thought you could like this little bonus chapter and next up will be the chapter I’ve initially intended to upload today. :)

I’m sorry for this longwinded introduction but I will leave you go on to the story in just a moment, I just still need to mention that this chapter hasn’t been edited but I hope there aren’t too many glaring error left despite of that.
Barry’s parent vanish when he is six.

*+*

He’s put into Central City’s Little Flowers’ Aid orphanage after the authorities aren’t able to find any recordings of the his parents by the names he provides and thus no other relatives who could possibly take him in.

Barry spends most of his days there alone, missing his parents and feeling overwhelmed by suddenly being put into such an alien environment with so many other kids of whom many are older than him. The other children quickly start to avoid him seeing that they’re convinced that he makes bad things happen.

He stays there for three months, his only companion and source of comfort is his little plush bunny Mr. Bunny he got from his mother.

*+*

Barry is put into his first foster home that consists of a family with two other foster kids. He quickly learns to miss the orphanages as he starts to get beaten on a regular basis by the mother who doesn’t seem to have any love or patience left for any of her foster children. The father is next to never around and Barry talks to him only a handful of times.

He stays there for four months before he is sent back to the orphanage, not knowing what he did wrong.

*+*

In his second foster family, he is the only foster kid there but they have two biological children, two girls, who are already in their teens and mostly ignore him.

The foster father, John, is very nice to him, though, and spends a lot of his free time playing with him and doing fun stuff, while his foster mother doesn’t seem to like him very much, even though he tries his best to be good.

After the first two weeks, his foster father starts to join him in the tub during his bath times, which Barry finds great at first as they play pirates and other funny games with the handful of toy figures one of the older girls has handed down to him.

Then, one night, John tells Barry that he wants to teach him a very special and secret game, which he isn’t allowed to tell the others about because this would cause them to get envious. Barry isn’t sure what to think of the new game, it’s confusing and scares him a bit, especially because he doesn’t like the taste or being touched in that way but the notion of going back to the orphanage and being put into another host family like his first one scares him even more and he tries to be good and doesn’t complain.

He starts to dread the times alone with his foster father.

This goes on for nearly a year before his foster mother catches them playing the secret game one night.

He is sent back to the orphanage once again.
Barry goes through a number of foster families over the next couple of years and his streak of bad luck holds on over that time as he’s either physically or sexually abused and sometimes both. He doesn’t like being touched by others any longer and starts to develop a bad stammer, which makes school another source of misery for him as his classmates keep making fun of his odd way of speaking and how poor he looks.

When Barry is nine, he confesses to a very nice young teacher about what is happening to him at home. She has always been very kind to him, letting him stay inside during the breaks so that he wouldn’t get bullied and even sharing her lunch with him on occasion. He secretly wishes that she would decide to be his new foster mother.

The teacher promises to help him and for a very short while Barry is convinced that things would get better.

She *does nothing* in the end, though, and she *avoids* him from then on till she transfers to another school a month later.

Barry doesn’t talk to other people about his home life after that.

At eleven, Barry is put into the care of a couple who are already looking after four other foster children. He has a very difficult time there as he is once again abused by the father while the mother keeps verbally abusing him and ridicules him for his stammer and the fact that he still wets his bed at nights when his nightmares are especially bad.

Most of the older foster children don’t seem to like him much either, as they are put to look after him for most of the time but after the first two months there, he actually befriends the family’s oldest foster son, Albert.

He stays there for about two years before he has to leave again.

Finally he ends up with his last foster family, which consists of a Keystone City cop as his new dad, who tends to drink too much and generally has a horrible temper, a foster mother that seems to live in her own word for most of the time and hardly seems to take notice of him or the two younger foster children. It isn’t exactly perfect there but while Barry still gets regularly beaten, he is no longer sexually abused.

He ends up being the one who takes care of his younger foster siblings when he realizes that his new foster mother couldn’t care less whether there is something to eat for them on the table or whether their clothes are clean.

He endures the rest of his early teenage years in this finally last of a long series of broken homes and despite everything going on at home, he is able to keep his grades up in in school as he is desperate to get a scholarship and finally be able to move out.

In the end, he finish high school as the top of his class.
The older Barry gets, the more time he spends out of the house, often staying at nearby trailer park overnight when his foster father becomes too much to bear, which is nearly all the time now that his wife has left, and only really just comes home anymore to look after his foster siblings.

Barry is offered a scholarship for the CCU, which he gladly accepts and moves onto campus.

His stutter starts to get better with time and while he keeps mostly to himself, he is generally friendly to the other students of his house.

Barry is still bewildered when it doesn’t take long for him to find a group of people he feels comfortable with and, which is even more difficult for him to grasp, seem to like having him around. He thinks that it’s probably mainly due to his roommate Simon, who is a few years older than him and studies psychology.

The kind older teenager seems to suspect that his shyness and constant jumpiness is connected to something bad that occurred to him in his past and tries to talk about it a couple of times. Barry always blocks him off, not willing to go back there even if it was just in his mind.

It is towards the end of his first year of university that Barry meets Len for the first time.

His friends drag him to a party in one of the more shabby areas that Central City has to offer so that they can celebrate that they successfully survived their first two semesters. While he takes a break outdoors from the too crowded place with his eyes stinging from all the smoke and his head hurting from the too loud music, he witnesses how a young man, who’d later become the infamous Captain Cold, is beaten up by some thugs in a nearby alley.

Barry comes up to him after the other men left to ask him whether he’s alright or needs any help. Len is in an understandably bad mood and brusquely tells Barry to fuck off before limping off into the night.

Barry meets another boy in his late teens during an excursion to Gotham when someone tries to mug him in the afternoon during which he and the other students got time off to go and explore the City for themselves. He was unlucky enough to lose his group in a nearby mall despite their professors warning, ending up in this unlucky situation.

The mugging does end with a bloody nose for the thug, who threatened him with a knife, before the man takes off, cursing both of them in quite a colourful language.

Barry is left with the strange teenager who likely saved him from being stabbed to death.

The dark-haired young man, who is wearing plain washed-out jeans, a grey hoody and dark sunglasses, asks him whether is alright but he feels so flabbergasted by what has just happened, that he can only nod.

Before his nameless saviour can take off, Barry is able to find his voice again, though, and thanks
him before introducing himself. The other boy hesitates before he does the same, giving him the name Matches Malone, which, Barry thinks, is quite an unusual sounding name, more fitting for a gangster in some old mob movie than a person in real life.

Barry, who isn’t really that good with new people under the best of circumstances, is uncertain about how to thank the other man for his help. Matches is about to move on when Barry forces himself to speak and asks him to wait a second. He rips a piece of paper off his notebook to scribble down his email address before he hands it to the other man and tells him to contact him should he ever pass by the Twins.

It is on his way back to Central City as he looks through one the other student’s gossip magazines they’ve picked up in Gotham that he realizes whom he’s actually met that day.

*+*

Against his expectations, he receives a mail a couple of days later from Matches, asking him something related his studies, which creeps him out a bit as he’s never mentioned to the man what he’s doing.

*+*

Despite Barry’s initial wariness, they stay in sporadic contact over the following years.

*+*

Barry develops an interest in forensic science and decides to major in it.

*+*

His stammering finally subsides enough that it hardly bothers him anymore these days.

*+*

Simon invites him along to a trip to an air show in Coast City, where he meets a young man while he and his friends are talking about one of the jets.

The stranger, a recruit of the Airforce judging by his clothes, more or less butts into their conversation and starts to tell them all the pros and cons of the model they are currently looking at.

Simon and the guy, who introduces himself as Hal, hit it right off, while Barry stays back, feeling a bit intimidated by the rather loud fellow and soon takes his leave to look around alone.

*+*

During his last semester at university, Barry meets Iris while attending a police ball he got dragged to by Simon. There is an instant connected between them and he agrees to meet her again for coffee next Saturday.

*+*

After graduating with honours, Barry is hired as a forensic scientist for the CCPD.

*+*

Simon moves to Canada.
Barry doesn’t stay the newest CSI for long as a young woman, Patty Spivot, joins their team just a couple of months later. The both of them become very good friends in next to no time.

Barry is invited along to a dinner at Iris’ brother’s home, where he meets Wally for the first time. He immediately takes a liking to the small shy boy. Unfortunately, he can’t say as much about the kid’s father.

Barry and Iris engage.

Barry is 24.

Wally is 11.

A freak accident happens in the laboratory late one night as Barry works over a Cold Case when he is hit by lightning and showered in a shelves full of deadly chemicals.

The second Flash is born.

His new powers freak him out to no end and he calls in sick for the next two weeks.

Iris comes over when she has enough of him telling her that he has a really bad flue and she should stay away from him for six days straight as she senses that he is lying and in trouble.

He confides in her what has happened.

His fear of her reacting as badly to his powers as he did turns out to be unfounded and he can’t help but adore her for how understandable and comforting she is.

Barry starts to try and help people at nights after work, still very unconvinced that he could ever really be a hero like the Flash even with having powers like his.

Barry and Iris marry.

He confronts his first real villain, a man who calls himself the Turtle Man and whose powers are just outright bizarre. Iris finds his narration of the whole event quite funny, though.
His relationship with Patty starts to become strained, mostly due to her being aware that he is hiding something from her as he still isn’t certain whether he should tell her about him being the Flash or not.

*+*

Barry meets Captain Cold for the first time. His initial impression is that the other man is a damn annoyance with his odd sense of humour and his seemingly compulsive need to make stupid puns.

*+*

Barry and Iris start trying for a baby.

It quickly becomes palpable that he has problems to sleep with her on a more regular basis, which worries and embarrasses him to no end but he feels a bit better when Iris stays patient and kind and doesn’t get angry over it like he feared she would.

*+*

Barry meets Jay Garrick for the first time during one of his fights as the Flash. He can’t help but feel awed by meeting his favourite childhood hero and quickly starts to look up to the actual man even more.

*+*

Barry is 25.

Wally is 12.

*+*

Barry starts to get concerned about his nephew’s home life. He doesn’t like his brother in law very much and sees the typical signs of abuse whenever he is around either Wally or his mother.

He tries to talk to Iris about it but she asks him to let it be for now and promises that Rudolf is already working on it. She suggests to get Wally over more often, though.

*+*

Barry and Patty go to a conference in Chicago. A bombing happens there and Patty finds out that Barry is the Flash. She is quite pissed about having been lied to for so long but agrees to keep his secret.

Their relationship starts to warm up again.

*+*

Mirror Master appears for the first time, robbing a bank and Barry is glad when Jay joins them a bit into their fights as he can seriously use his help to beat this guy.

After delivering the criminal at the police station, Jay invites Barry over for some coffee. Barry hopes that he doesn’t look as giddy as he feels when he accepts.

*+*

Barry goes to Gotham to assist one of his seniors with a case, apparently as some favour the old man
is doing a friend at the GCPD.

During a hostage situation at a nearby children’s hospital, he meets the Batman for the first time and it doesn’t even take five minutes for either of them to realize who’s under the other’s mask.

*+*

Barry meets Ralph Dibney, the Elongated Man, while working on a murder case. They become good friends over the next couple of months as they start to assist each other whenever the opportunity presents itself.

*+*

Heat Wave appears for the first time.

Barry can’t help but notice a theme there when it comes to his villains, which is both bizarrely amusing and quite worrying.

*+*

Barry and Rudolf get into a heated argument during the Christmas party at the West’s, which results in Wally being no longer allowed to stay at his uncle’s and aunt’s house.

Iris is angry but doesn’t really blame Barry.

He still feels horrible about the whole situation.

*+*

Barry has some more encounters with Captain Cold. The confrontations become more challenging as the other man has started to improve his Cold Gun but, even so, Barry can’t help but notice that he actually starts to enjoy their confrontations despite the criminal’s rather lame sense of humour.

*+*

Barry meets Green Lantern when Dr Polaris turns up in Central City and they’ve to team up to defeat him.

*+*

Ralph and Sue come over for dinner.

Barry and Iris befriends the other couple and they start to meet up more often.

*+*

Barry is 26.

Wally is 13.

*+*

The Pied Piper has his debut.

*+*

A few months after the disastrous Christmas dinner, Wally calls Barry late one night.
He sounds terrified and is hardly able to get a word out as he doesn’t seem able to stop crying.

Barry runs over to the Wests’ home and finds the boy in a really badly beaten state with his nose broken and his whole face badly bruised. He can’t find either of his parents and decides to bring the kid to the hospital.

Iris horrified by what happened to Wally but she is still concerned about her brother and her sister in law and asks Barry to look for them. He does so, looking all over the Twins, but comes up with nothing.

It seems to him as if they’ve simply vanished, which is nearly like an earie repetition of what happens to him as a child. He doesn’t mention this to his wife when he returns to the hospital an hour later.

Wally can’t clear up the mystery around the disappearance of his parents either as his father seemed to have suddenly gone crazy and beaten him badly enough that he lost conscious for a short period of time.

*+*

Wally is taken to child service. Barry and Iris immediately decide that they would take him in.

*+*

The Justice League of America is born when Barry and a handful of other heroes team up to defeat the white Martian Blanx.

*+*

Barry and Iris get custody over Wally.

*+*

Barry and Iris go to a gynaecologist as their trial for getting pregnant has stayed unsuccessfully so far.

The doctor can find no medical reason and suggest to give it time and for them to concentrate on Wally in the meantime, which both of them agree to be probably the best thing to do.

*+*

He starts to work together with the other superheroes on a more regular basis over the next month, which results in him getting to know many of them pretty well and becoming very good friends with Hal of all people.

*+*

Gorilla Grodd turns up in Central City for the first time and even with Jay at Barry’s side it is difficult for both of them to keep that crazy ape from hurting civilians. His ankle is broken severely enough that he is forced to take a short break from crime fighting business.

*+*

Wally has problems to connect with other children in his new school. Barry spent a lot of his free time with the kid, working with him on smaller science projects or visiting the comic book store close to the CCPD.
They also spend quite some time at the Garricks’ home as Wally likes the nice old couple and enjoys it greatly when Jay and he do some smaller experiments in the basement laboratory.

*+*

**Barry is 27.**

**Wally is 14.**

*+*

A year goes by.

*+*

**Barry is 28.**

**Wally is 15.**

*+*

Barry enjoys working with the JLA and other heroes in general and ends up becoming good friends with Black Canary. Unfortunately it isn’t the same for him and Green Arrow and he mostly stays away from the Star City hero.

*+*

Wally meets Dick for the first time during a short holiday break the three of them spend in Gotham.

*+*

Barry starts to get the impression Iris is distancing herself from him.

The fights between them start to become something frequent in their home.

*+*

Wally gets his powers by a repetition of the *freak accident* that gave Barry his own.

*+*

A few months later, Wally becomes *Kid Flash.*

*+*

Barry and Patty start spending more time with each other.

*+*

Barry gets accused of *slouching* during his investigations at work.

Director Singh and he start to clash with each other on a regular basis regarding this.

Barry doesn’t understand how these *mistakes* during his investigations can happen as he’s working as attentively as ever.

*+*
Barry encounters *Captain Boomerang* for the first time.

*+*

Wally starts to behave *strange*. Barry gets concerned about it but the boy does not want to talk with him about whatever is troubling him.

*+*

Barry and Iris relationship starts to become increasingly tenser over time.

Iris seems to be angry with him and while he can’t be sure, he thinks that she starts to give him the fault for them still not having kids of their own yet as, while he loves to be with her and cuddle, it has started to become more difficult for him to have sex with her due to the nearly constant fighting that is going on between them these days.

Her seemingly thinning patience only makes it more difficult, though, and in turn lets her grow more *frustrated*.

*+*

Both Joan and Jay notices that something is wrong the next time Barry comes over to the Garricks’ for some coffee. They ask him about it but thankfully leave it be when it becomes apparent how little he wants to talk about it.

Before he leaves, Jay reminds him that he could come talk to him whenever he needs an open ear. It is a kind offer but Barry knows that he couldn’t bring himself to do so. He trusts the other man but some things he simply can’t share.

*+*

The Flash and Kid Flash fight *the Top*.

*+*

Barry goes on a number of missions with the Justice League and enjoys having people around he can really connect to and something to take his mind off the problems he has in his private life at for a while.

*+*

*Barry turns 29.*

*Wally is 16.*

*+*

His relationship with his colleagues in the lab becomes tenser when the mistakes he supposedly makes grow in number and become more frequent, finally resulting in a rapist and murderer getting on free foot.

He is suspended from work for two weeks.

Patty supports him through this and believes him when he tells her that he isn’t responsible for this.

*+*
Barry confesses to Bruce about the problems in his private and working life.

He starts to spend more time in Gotham, helping with patrolling.

*+*

Barry and Iris have a bad fight after she accuses him of not taking their marriage serious enough. She leaves for the night and stays at a friend’s place.

Wally doesn’t take the fight well and runs off to Gotham to stay with Dick at Wayne Manor.

Barry and Iris have a long talk the next day and while the tension doesn’t entirely leave, things calm down again after he promised to invest more time in them.

*+*

Barry gets back to work and things seem to look up again.

*+*

The Rouges team up and pull their first heist.

Barry, not prepared to face off against all of them at once, is able to catch the Pied Piper and Heat Wave but the rest is able to escape with their loot.

He feels like an idiot.

*+*

His work with the JLA takes some setback due to him wanting to spend more time with his family.

*+*

Iris and he start to work out at least some of the problems of their relationship and she confesses that she’s just frustrated because she’s still not pregnant regardless their efforts but assures him that she doesn’t hold it against him.

She encourages Barry to spend some more time with the League and at work.

*+*

Wally becomes a member of the Teen Titans.

He starts to avoid staying at home and instead spends more time at the Teen Titans’ base, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Barry.

*+*

Barry tries to confront Wally about his odd behaviour, growing increasingly worried about him, and while the boy reacts with an unsettling aggression towards him, he is able to get him to agree that he will spend more time with him and Iris again, in the end.

Barry believes Wally’s strange behaviour is due to him still not being over his parents’ disappearance.

*+*
For a time things return to something close to normal.

*+*

_Barry turns 30 years._

_Wally is 17._

*+*

Barry helps Batman with developing a new operating system for their headquarters at the Watchtower. During a break, they start to throw different ideas for ways to deal with future villains around and while doing so touch upon the topic of his own powers and possible ways to stop them.

*+*

Once again, Barry and Iris start to grow farther and farther apart over the following months, which causes a nagging concern to nestle and stay in the back of his mind.

*+*

Wally’s problems at in school increase and he starts to distant himself from Barry again as well.

*+*

The Justice League fight the Injustice League. Vandal Savage gets involved and Barry is hit with some kind of tranquilizer that represses his speed.

It does take nearly two weeks before he is able to access the speed fore again without feeling pain doing so.

*+*

Bruce and he start to look into the nanotechnology that has been used to supress his speed.

*+*

During another fight with the Rogues, Captain Cold and he smash through one of Mirror Master’s portals by accident and land somewhere on the Keystone City docks.

Barry has still not completely recovered from his fight with the Injustice League and has problems maintaining his speed. He and Captain Cold end up grappling at the ground and not for the first time he picks up that there is an odd new kind of tension between them he doesn’t understand and that doesn’t seem purely hero-villain based anymore.

This realisation unsettles him enough that he lets Cold get away without putting up much of a fight as he is just glad to have the other man no longer so close.

*+*

Troubles arise at work again and he gets suspended for the second time.

*+*

Barry joins Hal to fight an alien crime lord. Hal gets too cocky and is put under the alien’s spell, causing him to attack Barry and thus giving the criminal an opportunity to escape.
Frustrated, Barry accuses Hal of taking his position as Green Lantern not series enough, which clearly angers the other man, who in return reminds Barry of his own problems at work and home. Both of them part ways in anger.

*+*

Barry comes home earlier from work than usual, as he wants to try and talk to Iris about how rocky their relationship has become once again and maybe take her out to dinner afterwards. 

He finds her having sex with another man in their bedroom.

Barry is deeply hurt and furious and just needs to run.

He has an odd experience while in the speed force and afterwards…

*+*

Patty stands up for him in front of the department when he is once again chewed out by Singh, which end in a heated confrontation between both.

Barry is temporary transferred from the forensic team. His new task is to clear out the attic and transfer the old paper folders into digital form.

*+*

Barry feels that he is losing Iris but can’t bring himself to tell her that he knows about her having sex with another man. He doesn’t think that he has the right to complain or even feel hurt after what he did.

She doesn’t spent much time at home anymore, pinning it on work.

*+*

They stop arguing, they hardly interact at all anymore and Barry feels a still faintly familiar depression slowly take hold of him again.

*+*

Wally starts to outright rebel against Barry, disobeying his orders during their fights against villains, not coming home after school and staying out till long after his curfew.

It worries Barry and he doesn’t know what to do as trying to talk to the teen seems to only make it worse.

*+*

Barry confides to Bruce about it as he hopes the other man would maybe know more seeing that his nephew spends most of his free time in the manor these days.

Bruce appears strangely distant to Barry but does not seem overly concerned by Wally’s behaviour.

*+*

Barry turns 31 years.
Barry confronts Iris about her affair after one of his colleges made a few crude comments about having seen her with another man the other evening.

They have another fight and Barry leaves angry and hurt.

He runs to…

…

… Len finds out about his secret identity.

Barry threatens to break every bone in his body should he ever use this knowledge against any of the people who are dear to him.

Barry tries to talk to Iris the next day but she seems scared of him and does not want to talk to him.

Barry has a strange encounter with Black Canary and Green Arrow. Both seem hostile towards him.

He and Patty meet that night and he confesses to her that he does not know what is happening to him anymore.

Everything in his life seems to turn out horribly wrong and he has no idea why.

She hugs him and assures him that things will turn out alright.

After the meeting with Patty, Barry runs through the city for a while, trying to clear his head before he returns home to find that someone’s broken into his house.

A feeling of numbing terror overcomes him as he enters and finds Iris dead in the kitchen.

The police arrives and he is arrest.

Barry learns that the other Justice League members actually believe that he has murdered his wife and, to his utter horror, also sexually abused Wally. They also accuse him of giving crucial information about them away to criminals.

It is ridiculous and he doesn’t understand how they could ever even consider this to be true.

Wonder Women uses the lasso on him and he is unable to answer the questions about his connections to the crimes truthfully, instead confesses his own guilty. It’s the same when J’onn reads his mind.
He desperately begs the others to believe him that *he is innocent* and while both Hal and Ralph stand up for him, they cannot convince any of the other heroes.

*+*

He is stripped of his powers by the nanotechnology he has been working on with Bruce before he is sent to Iron Heights.

*+*+*

Barry doesn’t fit in with the other prisoners and ends up being used as a punching bag by most of them due to being a former cop and an alleged child abuser.

The guards turn a blind eye on this.

*+*

One of these guards, Michael Cadwell, takes an interest in Barry and it isn’t long before he takes him to separated holding cells for the first time. There he slaps him around for a bit, talking down on him in a demeaning manner before he forces him to strip while watching.

It creeps Barry out how much this man seems to enjoy scaring and humiliating him.

*+*

Barry is in constant pain due to the nanobots in his system supressing his connection to the speed force. It hinders his movement and makes it next to impossible for him to defend himself, which is used by the other inmates to have their fun with him.

*+*

Ralph visits and promise to look into Barry’s case. He tells him that he and Sue believe in him and that Hal would have come as well but that he had to leave earth because of some urgent business with the Green Lanterns.

*+*

Wally becomes the Flash.

*+*

Captain Cold, Captain Boomerang and the Trickster are put into Iron Heights.

*+*

Len avoids Barry.

*+*

Ralph’s visits become less over the next couple of months and they stays in contact mostly via letters.

*+*

The Rogues break out.
Barry turns 32 years.

Wally turns 19 years.

*+*

Barry starts to work in the laundry rooms.

*+*

The other prisoners bully him and cause him a number of stays in the infirmary over the next months. The guards are not much better due to him being an ex-cop who supposedly did horrible things to his wife and nephew.

*+*

Captain Cold, Heatwave and Weather Wizard are put back into the Heights again.

*+*

Barry has no more visitors.

*+*

One evening during his laundry duty a group of inmates are ganging up on him. They want his sexual service but before it can go too far they are stopped by Len, who is working there as well this evening.

He threatens them, making it clear that they would regret it shouldn’t they leave Barry alone. Due to Mick and Marco also being present, the men back off without putting up much of a fight but tell Barry that his \textit{bodyguards} cannot be around all the time.

Len and the other Rogues go back to work without another word to Barry.

*+*

The Rouges break out of Iron Heights again.

*+*

Ralph’s letters stop.

*+*

A year goes by like painfully slow flowing morass.

For Barry it’s a time filled with pain, humiliation, depression, loneliness and the waning hope of ever getting out of here again. His stutter returns with full force.

*+*

Barry tries to contact some of his former friends and family as he grows increasingly desperate after…

*+*
Jay visits.

He seems angry but also doubtful about the whole situation.

They talk for a bit but Barry cannot explain what happened that evening when Iris got murdered or how the Wonder Woman’s lasso could have forced him to lie or why J’onn thought he read in his mind that he’s guilty.

Jay becomes concerned during their talk and asks him whether he is treated alright.

Barry does not want to tell him about his abuse and before he can really answer anything a guard appears to get him back to his cell.

Jay tells Barry he will come by again.

*+*

Michael brings another guard along for the first time while raping and abusing Barry. His name is Charles Puckett and Barry quickly learns that he is just as cruel as the other guard is.

They start to fetch him nearly every time either of them is around, making it impossible for him to properly rest due to either actively keeping in up at night or due to the nightmares their little sessions cause him.

*+*

*+*

Barry turns 34.

*+*

The Pied Piper is put into the Heights.

*+*

Barry befriends Hartley after he saves him from getting his head smashed in with a chair by another inmate during a small riot.

*+*

Hartley gets out again with the help of the other Rogues just few days later.

*+*

Barry feels very isolated and alone.

*+*

He learns that Hal died and becomes so depressed that he can’t eat anything for days afterwards.

*+*

His third year in prison starts.

*+*

Barry is put to work in the kitchen, which is something he is very grateful for as it is an area where other inmates couldn’t abuse him as easily.
A fight breaks out during a baseball match and he gets badly hurt by Jeremy Tell, *Double Down*.

It takes him a while to recover as his wounds heal extraordinarily slow these days.

*+*

**Barry turns 35.**

*+*

Ralph and Sue visit for the first time in over two years.

They both are extremely worried by his gaunt appearance and how scared he seem. They apologize for not having come by earlier and promise him that they would get him out.

Barry notices how guilty and oddly tense both of them seem.

*+*

The Trickster, Heat Wave and Mirror Master are sent back to prison again.

*+*

To Barry’s surprise and suspicions, James starts to try and *befriend* him.

*+*

His forth year starts.

*+*

Barry’s cooking gets quite popular with the other inmates and he is allowed to keep his shifts in the kitchen.

*+*

The bullying of the other inmates decreases over the next weeks and Barry thinks this is due to the Rogues being present but when he finally brings himself to ask James about it, the other blonde does as if he has no idea what he’s talking about.

Barry starts to like the younger man after having initially been wary of him.

*+*

The Top joins the other Rogues in prison.

*+*

Due to his growing friendship with James, Barry starts to spend more time with the other Rogues. Next to the Trickster, he gets along surprisingly well with Sam of all people.

*+*

The Rogues break out while Barry is having one of his *sessions* with Michael.
The other prisoners start to *increase* their bullying again.

Ralph visits again. He tries not to show it but Barry understands that there is probably nothing that would prove him to be innocent. They part with his friend telling him not to give up.

Barry gets a surprise visit from Simon.

His old friend believes in Barry’s innocent and promises to look into it.

Barry does not want Simon to get involved. He thinks that someone very *dangerous* has to cause this if they were able to manipulate both J’onn’s telepathy and Wonder Woman’s lasso of truth.

Barry turns 36.

Wally appears as the Flash in his cell one afternoon after bringing Murmur into the prison.

He *punches* Barry before shoving him up against the wall, clearly *furious*. He warns him to *stay away from him and his family* and to write *no more letters*.

Barry, who has no idea what Wally is talking about and, desperate for the abuse he has to endure to finally end, begs him to believe him and help him. He does not say outright that he is abused but Wally seems to understand because he tells him coldly he *deserves every minutes he gets* before disappearing again.

His fifth year starts.

A few months go by.

Sue Dibney dies.

Barry is not allowed to attend the funeral.

Wonder Woman comes to interrogate him about his potential involvement in what will later be dubbed as the *Identity Crisis* by the news.

She treats him like any other criminal.
Ralph Dibney dies.

*+*

Barry starts to consider suicide.

It has been a long time since that thought came to his mind last but has still the same bitter allure as back then.

*+*

Captain Cold, Mirror Master, Weather Wizard and the Top are brought in.

*+*

Barry problems with sleeping grow worse and he’s hardly able to catch more than two to three hours a night.

*+*

Barry is beckoned by Sam to join them at their table during meals.

Seeing that neither James nor Hartley are around, he hesitates but as he usually sits alone and is shut out by the other inmates, he agrees somewhat warily after a moment.

Len watches him the whole time but does not take part of the conversation. It’s unsettling and sets Barry’s teeth on edge.

Roscoe seems to appreciate his knowledge when it comes to science but is also reserved due to Barry’s past as a cop and his crimes.

*+*

Barry is mostly left alone by the other inmates.

*+*

Michael’s and Puckett’s treatments of him grow worse and he starts to get panic attacks while being abused.

It results in his perception to change at times when he is under a lot of stress. It’s like he starts to be able to think faster than be people around him again, which causes seconds to turn into what feels like minutes or even hours.

*+*

Barry spends most of his time with the Rouge whenever they’re around as the other inmates leave him alone in their presence. He is surprised that he gets along with them so well and starts to feel guilty for it. He tries not to think about the fact that they regularly fight Wally.

*+*

Len finds him one evening during laundry duty.

They talk for a while and Len tells him that he doesn’t believe that Barry could have done those crimes. He offers to take him with them the next time they break out.
Barry thinks about it but declines in the end.

The Rogues break out.

Barry turns 37 years.

Barry is left mostly alone as the other criminals seem to prefer to avoid him these days.

Simon passes by again. He tells Barry that he has a friend who has looked into his case and thinks that he can help him to possibly get an amnesty due to the lack of any actual evidence and Barry’s good behaviour or, in the very least, reduce the verdict from second degree murder to manslaughter, which would reduce the length of his sentences considerably and make a parole possible.

Barry thanks him but doubts the possibility of it.

The sixth year starts.

Michael and Puckett to bring a couple of other guards along when humiliating Barry these days.

Michael in particular has also started to take a liking to marking his territory, as he calls it, enjoying to cut Barry or burn him with cigarettes during their little sessions.

Piper and Captain Boomerang are put back into prison.

Hartley realizes, that he is being abused when he notices the fresh scars while they are in the showers. Barry denies everything and gets so worked up about this that he isn’t able to talk at all. Piper promises him to leave it alone and to not tell anybody about it, probably knowing as much as Barry does that this would hardly help much as anybody who shared the shower room with him will notice them.

The Trickster joins them.

Barry starts to realize that James is also treated very badly by the guards but mostly in a psychological way.

They tend to lock him into one of the small dark isolation cells for the smallest things, especially
when the blonde disturbs them during the night due to having nightmares. This, unfortunately, happens on a rather regular basis as he is afraid of the dark and they don’t allow any lights on in his cells after ten pm.

*++*

Barry talks to Hartley about this and the other man explains to him that James has actually been put on medications a while ago due to hypomania but the doctors didn’t give him anything that could make it easier for him to deal with his fear of the dark.

The other man remarks that being in prison usually makes the effect of the drugs next to obsolete anyway.

*++*

Barry remembers that one of his former foster brothers had also been very afraid of being left alone in the dark at night and how one an older girl who lived with them back then, had helped him to overcome this fear by using the younger boy’s imagination.

He isn’t really sure whether this would work with James as the other man isn’t a child anymore but a grown adult. Barry hasn’t missed how childlike the other man behaves at times, though, and a couple of days later, on their way to lunch, he ask James to step aside with him for a second during an unsupervised moment.

The other man gives him a confused look when he hands him an old looking button but Barry quickly explains that it is special once as it helps him to sleep whenever he is afraid of what lurks in the dark. He feels pretty silly while saying this but still goes on to explain that James would be completely safe during nights as long as he keeps this button with him.

A heavy silence follows and Barry expects the other man to either laugh outright into his face or call him an idiot.

James does neither but studies the button visibly doubtful before agreeing to try it.

*++*

The button does its magic.

*++*

The Rogues break out again. Barry is offered to join them but declines once more.

*++*

Simon visits with another man, Theodor Seaberg, the lawyer whom he mentioned before and over the run of the following conversation it becomes quickly obvious that Seaberg really seems to believe there to be a chance for him to get out of here.

Despite his best efforts, Barry can’t help but start to feel faintly hopeful again, knowing full well that he is likely just setting himself up for getting disappointed again.

*++*

Months pass by.

*++*
Jay visits.

He has talked to Simon and Seaberg and admits that he too thinks that the way the League handled the whole business with him hasn’t been right. They don’t talk much but Barry learns that Wally is getting married.

*+*

*Barry turns 38.*

*+*

Enduring the guard’s abuse gets harder and harder as Barry’s accelerated cognition forces him to live through hours of pain and humiliation nearly every single day.

He starts to withdraw into his own mind.

*+*

Simon visits him and tells him they’ve decided to review his case.

Barry starts crying hearing that.

*+*

He learns that his hearing is set for October, seven months from then.

*+*

His seventh year starts.

*+*

Barry spends nearly all of his free time with the Rogues whenever they’re around these days.

*+*

Months go by slowly and both Simon and Theodor visit him regularly to prepare Barry for his upcoming hearing.

*+*

Sam is put back into prison and Barry becomes kind of his shadow as he feels safer with him around. The other man lets him.

*+*

In the last week of September, Barry has his fingers broken in the pantry by Michael as a warning to keep silent about any of this in his upcoming hearing. Sam is watching this unnoticed by either of them.

*+*

Director Wolfe calls Barry to his office a week before his hearing, where he reminds him that he is in no position to make any accusations against the penitentiary and that, in the eye of the public, he is nothing more than a paedophile murderer who deserves what happened to him during his stay.
Barry is intimidated by the man as he is well aware of how much pain he can conflict on others and how he can make one’s stay in here even worse if he chooses to. He promises not to tell anybody about the raping and physical abuse.

*+*

Sam tells Barry that the Flash is getting more and more violent with time. Barry faults himself for that.

*+*

Sam escapes unnoticed one night.

*+*

The day of Barry’s hearing comes around. He is extremely nervous, throwing up two times in the hour that leads up to it, but thinks that it goes rather well afterwards.

Simon assures him that he is as good as a free man.

*+*

A week goes by and Barry learns that the verdict of his case has been reduce to voluntary manslaughter but that his request to parole got declined.

He knows that this is a good thing but he still feels devastated about the prospect that he would still have to stay in here for at least another ten to twenty-five years without a parole.

*+*

The date for another hearing is set in another six months. Simon consoles and reassures him that the next hearing will get the desired outcome.

Barry doubts it.

*+*

Michael and a few other guard celebrate the refusal of his parole by abusing him for hours on end the following nights. For the first time, Barry is forced to come as well during those sessions.

*+*

Barry turns Jay away the next time he tries to visit.

*+*

He loses his appetite and starts to withdraw from the world around him.

*+*

Barry turns 39.

*+*

Weeks go by.

*+*
Bruce, disguised as Matches Malone, visits. Barry does not want to see him but is more or less forced to go.

Bruce is taken aback by seeing Barry in such a bad state but still proceeds to ask him questions regarding Iris’ death and Wally’s abuse. Barry becomes confused a couple of times during their conversation as it is hard for him to think clearly these days and he starts to cry when Bruce just goes on probing about his involvement.

The meeting is ended by Michael getting Barry to bring him back to his cell.

*+*

The eight year starts.

*+*

Barry learns that his hearing is postponed for another three months, which causes him to let go of any hope that he will every actually leave this place again.

*+*

Captain Cold, Trickster, the Top and Captain Boomerang are brought in.

*+*

Barry tries to stay away from them.

*+*

Len tries to talk to him but Barry avoids him.

*+*

It’s about another month till Barry’s second review and he gets so extremely nervous that he’s hardly able to eat anything at all.

*+*

His lawyer does repeatedly rehearse the hearing with him and is clearly dissatisfied with Barry’s performance.

It is probably partly it’s due to how outright uncomfortable Barry suddenly feels around the other man and he isn’t sure whether this is because Simon has suddenly stopped his visits and he is forced to be alone with Theodor or not.

When he asks the other man about his friend’s whereabouts, Theodor curtly reminds him that it would do them both good if he could keep concentrating on getting ready for the next hearing.

*+*

Barry has an extraordinary horrible nightmare and his screaming causes the guards to come to his cell.

They abuse him right there.

*+*
James snatches Barry the next morning and pretty much forces him to join them at the Rogues table. Barry is too ashamed to meet anybody’s eyes and he gives up trying to talk after it becomes apparent that his stammer is too bad for any of what he says to be understandable. James tries to lift his friend’s spirit by making silly jokes and telling stories about their last few coups.

None of the others becomes involved as they are clearly uncertain how to deal with him after what happened last night.

*+*

A few days go by and Barry starts to stay with the Rogues again.

*+*

Len breaks another inmate’s femur after he’s ridiculed Barry about being sexually abused.

*+*

Barry is hardly able to talk whole sentences due to his stammer. Theodor is palpably frustrated about it but increasing his effort to help Barry to pass the hearing.

When he asked about Simon again, his lawyer just tells him that the other man has more important business to attend to and that he should stop wasting either of their time.

*+*

James gives Barry the wooden button back the day before he has his review so that he will be able to sleep the night.

Barry is surprised the other man still has it and even more touched by this kind act. It is visible hard for him not to cry and he promises James to give it back to him afterwards.

*+*

The hearing is a horrible experience for Barry. His stammer is so bad that he is not able to answer most questions without needing an eternity to do so.

The referees treat him kindly enough, though, more lenient than during the last time but Barry is too nervous to really notice it.

*+*

He’s devastated after the hearing. James tries to console him but Barry is convinced that they will decline his request again. He asks James to leave him alone for a time and goes to the far back of the laundry room.

Len finds him there and tells him that they will take him with them the next time they break out. Barry still doesn’t like the notion of this but cannot imagine to live through this much longer.

He agrees.

*+*

Three days later his lawyer comes by to tell him that the request for amnesty was granted.
While Barry is still shocked by this news, he goes on to inform him that Simon has gone missing a couple of months ago and that nobody seems to know anything about the man’s whereabouts.

The other man says that he’s sorry that he didn’t tell him so earlier but he wanted him to stay focused on the hearing.

He advises Barry to concentrate on the future ahead of him and wishes him good luck before leaving.

*+*

Barry’s abuse increases over the next couple days. He is reminded that he cannot tell anybody anything about what’s happened to him.

*+*

Len gives him an address where he can find him should he want to pass by. Barry doesn’t know what to think of Len trusting him this much and he accepts the little piece of paper with a mixture of confusion and gratefulness.

*+*

The Rogues break out again.

*+*

Two weeks later Barry is getting out of prison for the first time in over half a decade.

Chapter End Notes

So, there you have it, lots and lots of information has just been shoved your way! ;P

I went over it a couple of times to make sure that nothing of it is actually spoiling or hurting the story that is still to come and I hope it was somewhat interesting to you. :) Nonetheless, if you didn’t like it, don’t worry, next chapter will be about the actual story again! I’ve the next chapter already finished and the one after that is also already half done.

Both of those chapters are rather long and I’m not really sure how you’d prefer it for me to post them as I will get very busy with the beginning of October, which will force me to upload less regularly. Would you prefer for me to upload them on the next two Sundays and then maybe wait a couple of weeks for the next one or would you rather have a week break in between them but therefore not have to wait so long for the one after them?

And, before I finally leave you be, I just want to thank all of you who’ve left me feedback so far. <3 I really enjoyed it and I know I say this every time but it really means so much to me! So thank you and many, many hugs in return! :D
Barry is in the middle of eating supper, exhausted from a long day at work and not really thinking of anything but his bed, when a young boy, who can’t be any older than twelve, suddenly appears in his living room.

He is so utterly caught off-guard by this that he freezes and just stares at the kid for a second. It is when he realizes that the boy is actually wearing a costume that the alarms in his head start to get off but, as he tries to get up, he suddenly finds himself in a bear hug.

“Grandpa!”

His body tenses up nearly painfully in response and a sudden intense panic overcomes him as the first thought that crosses is his parole restrictions and the fact that this is a young child.

There is no time for him to protest, though, because suddenly there is the Flash standing in his living room, close to his entrance door, and Barry feels like someone has pushed him into ice-water.

This is Wally, he hasn’t seen nor spoken to the young man in years and it is like a damn nightmare as he has no doubts that he would completely misunderstand the whole situations. Barry starts to feel sick with fear.

While Wally’s mask isn’t allowing for him to see his eyes, he still knows that the younger man has his gaze on him and the way his already pursed lips start to turn down farther and his whole demeanour becomes grimmer, is extremely frightening and disconcerting.

This can’t be happening…

Barry feels his throat closes up once again, not that it really bothers him right now as he wouldn’t have known what to say to his nephew anyway.

The strange kid is suddenly no longer hugging but standing in front of him. He moves so fast that the feeling of the embrace is lingering a moment on before Barry’s body catches up that his presence is gone.
He is a speedster.

The child is a speedster.

Barry is surprised he hasn’t picked up on it before but, then again, his mind is quite overwhelmed with what is happening just now.

“I’m not going with you! You are all crazy!” the kid cries angrily and is upset enough that he actually starts vibrating on the spot, with his fists clenched and seemingly ready to lunge at Wally, who, on the other hand, hasn’t moved at all over the last couple of seconds, which is never a good sign with a speedster.

“He would never do that!” the boy goes on and throws a surprisingly distressed glance over his shoulder to Barry, who is still sitting and has utterly no idea of what is going on or what this is about.

The auburn haired kid turns back to Wally and points an accusing finger at him. The anger that is coming off him is nearly tangible.

“You are a damn liar, grandpa is a her-”

The boy is cut off when Wally is suddenly at him. He has grabbed the kid’s throat in a painfully looking grip and hisses at him to shut up. This action causes Barry to be shaken out of his stupor and he quickly gets up to his feet with a mixture of fear of what is going to happen now and concern for the child.

He steps past the boy, closer to Wally, who immediately fixes his attention to him, and tries to reason with him.

“D-don’t, h-he’s a k-kid, y-you h-hurt-”

A punch cuts him off and breaks his nose with an audible Crack. It has enough force to knock him off his feet so that he topples to the ground with his back and head hitting the chair he has been sitting on a second before on his way down. The kid cries something in protest and anger but Barry hardly pays attention to it for now, as his head is searing in pain.

Despite that, he feels the ridiculous urge to laugh at himself and his own stupidity because he really should have expected this. He such a damn idiot.

“What’s going on here!?”

It is Jay, who seems to have suddenly found his way into his living room as well, and when Barry is finally able to focus his vision again, he notices that the other man is also wearing his costume.

Their gazes briefly meet and he watches how worry and disapproval crosses Jay’s face before he turns to Wally and the kid, who seem both ready to get at each other’s throat.

“What’s happened here?”

The older man sounds harsh and Barry notices how unusually tensed up and agitated he seems.

“He attacked grandpa!” the kid tells Jay without taking his furious glare off Wally. “He wanted to help me because Wal-”

“No actual names!” reminds Jay the boy sharply and causes him to flinch a bit. The kid looks a bit embarrassed for a seconds before his expression becomes once again dark.
“He just wanted to help me!”

Barry gives the young boy an odd look and isn’t sure what the heck he is supposed to make of him calling him his *grandfather*. Briefly, he wonders whether he fell asleep during supper and this is a really, really strange dream.

Then, he notices the pain again, and realizes with a sinking feeling that this can’t be the case.

“Help you?” asks Jay and Barry, who has been able to sit up by now again, notices how he glances at Wally with a wary look.

“He attacked me,” the young speedster explains and turns the Flash, who is once again eerily quiet. “I told him that you have gotten it all wrong—”

“Enough of that,” Wally cuts him off with a hard but eerily calm voice and makes a step closer to him. “I don’t want to hear anything of your nonsense anymore.”

“It isn’t nonsense!!! It is the truth, my grandfather is a *hero*!”

“Shut up, boy!”

Jay gets between both of them and pushes them slightly apart.

“We’re not going to discuss this matter any further while here,” he tells them and gives the kid a warning look, who seems about to say something else, before he turns to Wally. “Flash, you should head back and tell the others that we have found the child, I’ll follow with him after I’ve made sure that Barry’s alright.”

Wally clenches his fists but doesn’t show in any other way what he thinks of that. He simply nods and is gone a second later.

“Grandpa, are y-”

The boy, who has suddenly turned up next to Barry, is pulled back by Jay again, who meets his confused and angry look with a very stern expression.

“You will go to the door and wait there.”

“What!? No! Grand-”

“Enough. You’ve already caused enough trouble for one night.”

The kid glares at Jay for a long moment, as if trying to make him change his mind by sheer willpower, before he finally subsides with a defiant huff and does as he was told. Barry doesn’t miss the look he gives him before he walks over to the entrance of his flat. The concern and longing he can see in those eyes unsettle him quite a bit and he feels bad about it but he is glad that the strange boy is no longer this close.

“Barry?”

He turns his attention to Jay, who studies him with a worried frown as he steps closer to him.

“Come, let’s get you up from the ground,” the older man says kindly and gives him a faint smile.

Barry accepts the offered hand gingerly and realizes once again that his head isn’t the only part of him that has received an injury as his back protests immediately as soon as he tries to stand straight
up. He winces and swiftly decides that it would be much better for him to sit for now. It is most likely just bruised, he knows how this feels, and it doesn’t really worry him, even though this would make work tomorrow quite a bit more difficult.

Jay, on the other hand, looks clearly concerned as he watches him.

“I’ll get the kid back to the others and then I’ll get you to the hospital, alright?”

“N-no, i-it’s f-f-fine, I-I’m ok-kay.”

“Barry, you are clearly not okay,” Jay disagrees and sounds unusually strained as he does so, which causes Barry to grow more uneasy again.

“Your nose is broken and your back seem to have been injured as well—”

“I-it’s j-j-just a-a b-bruise,” he cuts the other man off and gives him a stubborn look while he fights to urge to cross his arms in front of his chest.

“You still need to see a doctor,” Jay argues firmly. “You have been hit by a speedster, you have most likely received a concussion from it.”

Which would be fabulous as it would be the third one for him in not even half a year and the second one in just three weeks. Barry grows frustrated just by the notion of it.

“I-I j-just n-need t-to s-sleep i-it off, J-Jay, r-really.”

He gives Jay a pleading look and watches how his stern expression softens a bit.

“Barry, I’m not doing this because I want to harm you or make you feel miserable, but you could have been very seriously injured without noticing it just yet.”

For a brief moment, Barry really wants to point out that he most likely is well versed enough in the subject of being beaten up that he can discern between when he has to be worried about it and when not. He swallows the words down, though, as he doesn’t feel up for anymore of this right now.

Seeing Wally again after all this time and without any warning has him left pretty shaken up and weary. Then, there is still the whole odd situation with the kid he knows nothing about but has the inkling that this would be something else to haunt him from now on.

His gaze moves to where the child is standing and he notices how he is watching him again, with such an intensity that it makes him slightly uncomfortable.

“Barry,” Jay goes on after he has failed to answer and he again speaks in that calm and nearly soothing voice of his that causes Barry’s eyes to start itching. “Just lay down a bit and rest. I’ll be back soon, alright?”

There isn’t really much he can say to change the other man’s mind and he grows more tired by the minute, so that he simply nods his okay. He is just glad that neither Len nor anybody else has been over because that would have turned this whole situation into a real nightmare.

This is going to be another long night for him, he’s already sure of it.

***

When Eddy opens the door to him the next evening, he does a double-take and doesn’t seem able to decide whether he should make do with a disbelieving frown or an amused grin.
“You’re really one of the unluckiest bastards I’ve ever met. Someone else broke into your flat or were you just mugged again?”

Barry gives him a dark look before he averts his eyes and mutters that it was just an accident.

“An accident?” asks the other man, clearly not believing him. “Really?”

“Y-yes,” he answers tersely before he glances at Eddy again. “C-can I s-stay f-for a-a b-bit?”

His friend seems surprised about the request but nods and makes space for him to enter.

“Sure, mi casa es tu casa, man.”

Barry gives him a grateful smile and makes his way over to his couch. Unlike Mary, Eddy’s and his flat’s layout are more or less the same, which means that they both have no small lobby that separates their living area from their entrance.

The place is as clean and tidy as ever, which is a character trade Barry has always liked about the other man as he himself is a little bit of a neat-freak as well.

“Y-yeah, p-please.”

Eddy is walking over to his fridge and shoots him a questioning look.

“It is a usual answer coming from him as Barry mostly prefers tea or water over any alcoholic drink but today he feels like he could use one. After what he has learned about two hours ago, he thinks he could even go for some harder stuff.

For split second, the notion that Jay probably wouldn’t think too much of him drinking beer while still having a slight concussion and being on light pain meds comes to his mind. It is oddly amusing and he decides that he is not going to worry about this now.

Eddy joins him on the couch, mindful enough to keep some extra distance between them, and hands him the cool bottle.

“A-a b-boy p-passed b-b-by m-my f-flat l-last n-night.”

His voice is low but mostly steady as he tries to concentrate of the cold glass in his hands and keep his focus on it.

“H-he s-s-said… h-he th-thought I-I’m a-a r-relat-tive o-of h-his.”

Eddy hums but doesn’t interrupt him, for which Barry is glad as he doesn’t want to talk about it in the first place but, at the same time, what he has learned is just too bizarre to not talk about it with somebody.
Mary is not home tonight and the Rogue’s have made themselves rather scarce all week as they are having a heist tomorrow. They also don’t really have any easy mean to contact him right now as Sam has caught himself a rather nasty flue in the beginning of this week and Len ordered him to rest as he would be their way in and out the coming night.

They still communicated with him via mirror but Barry did so yesterday shortly before Bart arrived and today he just told Len that he is fine but that Jay is around without actually gazing into the little reflective surface as he knew that the other man would demand to learn about what has happened.

It isn’t just that Barry doesn’t want to talk about it but that he also doesn’t want Len’s mind to be occupied with this while he should keep his attention on not getting killed or caught.

“Is he a relative of yours?” Eddy’s voice startles him out of this thoughts. Barry gives his friend a rather embarrassed and apologizing look before he turns back to the brown bottle in his hands.

“I-it seems so,” he answers quietly and remembers what Jay has told him this late afternoon, after he has come back from work.

“His name is Bart and he claims that he is your grandson from the far future,” the older man told him with a serious but not unkind expression after they’ve both settled at Barry’s kitchen table. Jay had already been waiting for him in front of his door when he arrived home, looking tired and a lot more his age than he usually does.

“Your son?” Eddy asks and shrugs when he gives him a glare in response. “What? Stranger things have happened.”

“N-no, n-not my s-son… i-it’s c-complicated.”

“Yeah, things with family usually are.”

Barry initially thought that the boy was mistaken, that he was maybe confused or simply lying but Jay told him that it doesn’t seem to be the case.

“J’onn read his mind,” he explained and quickly added when he noticed Barry’s look. “The boy offered it and he also agreed to talk to Bruce and Dinah. They all think he says the truth or at least believes that he does so.”

“How i-is that p-possible?” Barry asked and felt still as confused as the evening before.

“Time traveling,” Jay explained and sighed while he rubbed his temple lightly as if it was bothering him. “It seems that he got sent back but that he can’t really remember why or how. According to J’onn, his mind is oddly jumbled when it comes to this part.”

“H-he c-can’t r-rem-member?”

“No, or hardly at best, but he is certain that he came back for something important, most likely to give us a message,” the older man went on and took a sip of his coffee. “Unfortunately, he can’t say for sure.”

“What happened, I mean, after the kid arrived at your doorstep?” Eddy asks and Barry feels how his face falls as he thinks back to it.

“Hey, you’re alright?” Eddy seems concerned by his reaction and he forces himself to nod.

“Y-yeah, f-fine… i-it’s j-just th-that… m-my n-nephew c-came b-by a-as w-well sh-shortly a-
afterwards,” Barry explains quietly and tries to ignore how his throat starts to hurt again at the notion of Wally.

His friend makes a surprised and troubled noise and it is oddly touching that he seems to understand what this really means to him.

“Shit, man.”

“Y-yeah…”

Jay gave him a very grim as he focused his gaze back to him. For a split-second he seemed to hesitate before he finally spoke.

“The kid’s confused about the circumstances that brought him here and has trouble remembering the future he says he’s coming from,” he explained and Barry noticed how tensed up he suddenly seemed. “He hardly seems to remember his own parents but he remembers you… and Iris.”

There hadn’t been anything Barry could say to that for a long moment. A sickening feeling had overcome him as soon as he realized what he had just been told, along with a nearly mind-numbingly awful pain in his chest.

“W-what?”

“The boy, Bart,” Jay went on and his gaze is nearly uncomfortably intense as he does so, “He told us that Iris and you are his grandparents and that you are a hero in his future. It seems that you saved the world and Iris never died.”

Barry jumps slightly when someone bumps his shoulders slightly and he realizes, that he drifted off into his own mind once again.

“Your nephew is the accident you’ve mentioned before?” Eddy asks but doesn’t make it sound like he is mocking or reproaching him.

Not really trusting his voice, Barry simply nods. It catches him off-guard once more when his friend touches his shoulder then and he is taken aback by the sympathy he can pick up on in his gaze.

“That’s really horrible. I’m sorry that this keeps happening to you.”

A brief silence follow as Barry isn’t sure how to reply.

“You aren’t in trouble, though, are you?” Eddy probes when he failed to say something for about a minute.

“N-no, I-I… I-I d-don’t th-th-think s-so.”

Jay assured him that he doesn’t have any reason to worry about when he picked up on how pale he had grown.

“None of this is your fault, Barry.”

This wasn’t true, not by far, not if the child is really his grandson, but Barry didn’t protest. Instead, he asked the older man what was going to happen to Bart now.

“He will stay with Max Mercury for now,” Jay answers but didn’t give him any more information than that, which hadn’t been surprising. Still, an odd sense of longing and sadness had latched onto Barry at that moment as he knew that he would most likely never have the opportunity to get to know
He felt rather bad for how stiff and tense he had reacted to him, then, and that he actually had been relieved as soon as Jay and the boy were gone again. This had likely been his only chance to really talk to the child, his grandson from a different future, one where Iris never died and he never were convicted for some hideous crimes he had never done.

Fate is really a strange thing…

“Hey.” Barry shakes the memories off and turns his attention back to Eddy, who is gingerly cupping his shoulder again. “This isn’t your fault, what happened has been done to you. You’re as much of a victim as your former wife or your nephew are.”

It is odd hearing this, especially in such a direct manner.

“I-it’s ok-k-”

“No, it is really not,” the other man cuts him off without raising his voice but there is a certainty and firmness to it that causes Barry to stop nonetheless.

For a couple of seconds, they just hold each other’s gaze and he gets the feeling that Eddy really wants him to understand how serious he is about this.

“You aren’t responsible for what was done to you and your family.”

An awful pain, similar to the one he has experienced hours before, shoots through Barry’s chest and he has to avert his eyes. Hearing this hurts and makes him angry while, at the same time, it is like a balm, soothing.

It is so damn confusing, he doesn’t know how to feel anymore and he is just too tired to deal with any of this right now.

“You wanna watch a movie?”

Surprised, he turns back to Eddy, who gives him a small smile and realizes that his friend must have picked up on how weary he is of everything that has happened in just the last twenty-four hours.

It is a very nice offer and while Barry still isn’t sure why he has come over, he thinks forgetting everything for just a couple of hours is just fine with him.

He smiles faintly and agrees.

***

It is close to one in the morning when Barry decides to leave for his own apartment, feeling tired but also much more relaxed and in a better mood than before.

He realized a while ago that there is nothing more hilarious than sitting through one of the *Die Hard* movies with Eddy and listening to his stupid but funny commentary and how he is constantly talking smack about anybody who is on screen, whether it be the good or the bad guys. Like usual, it succeeded in getting his mind off what is currently bothering him for at least a couple of hours and he is incredibly grateful for it.

“You know that you can come over whenever you feel down, right?” Eddy asks him after Barry thanked him for the nice evening. “I haven’t exactly been spoon-fed when it comes to sensitivity but
that doesn’t mean that I can’t listen or that we can’t just hang out.”

There is no way that Barry could express how very grateful he is to have Eddy as a friend right now. When he met him for the first time, he would never have guessed that he would become someone so dear to him.

“Ok-kay,” he agrees and adds. “Th-thank you.”

The other man rolls his eyes but grins.

“Sure thing, Bar, but this is getting too sappy for me now, so move your ass over to your own apartment and go to bed.”

The lights in the hallway are on when he enters it, likely due to another resident having just returned home, and Barry makes his way over to his own place next door, glad that he doesn’t have to walk in darkness, even if it would be just for such a short way.

He tries not to show it on around others but his assault from two weeks ago still has him very much on edge and he usually avoids turning his lights off even at night these days.

Thus, he isn’t alarmed when he unlocks his door to a lit living room as he has left the lights on so that he wouldn’t have to return to a dark apartment. It isn’t a good solution, definitely not one he could indulge in for too long as it costs unnecessary money he doesn’t really have in the first place but for now he tries not to think about this too hard but just make it easier for himself to feel somewhat safe when he is alone.

Then, he notices Len sitting at his kitchen table and, even though he knows that it is him, he can’t help it but freeze up.

“Hey,” Len says after a moment of rather uneasy silence has passed between them and gets up. His expression is calm and collected but Barry doesn’t miss the anger that is blazing in his eyes as the other man has clearly noticed in what shape his face is in.

“Wh-what are y-you d-doing here?” Barry asks, still feeling very much taken aback by his unexpected visitor, and it takes him another second to realize that it would probably be a good idea to close the door, which he quickly does.

A familiar nervousness overcomes him when Len doesn’t answer but makes his way over to him instead.

“Y-you’ve a- h-heist t-tomorrow,” he points out as he watches his friend stop just about an arm’s length from him. “I th-thought you’d b-be b-busy…”

Len frowns and, for the first time since he got up from the table, actually meets his eyes.

“We finished with the planning a couple of hours ago,” he explains in a grim tone before he nods to Barry’s face in general. “Funny, when we talked before you told me you’re fine. Didn’t find it worth to mention that someone’s broken your nose?”

He sounds calm but the anger is rolling off him like in waves and Barry feels his stomach turn queasy in response.

“I… th-this is… I d-didn’t w-want y-you t-to w-worry. It’s n-nothing s-serious.”

“Someone smacking you up again is nothing serious?” Len repeats with audible incredulity.
“I-it w-wasn’t l-like l-last t-time,” Barry tries to defend himself. “It h-has n-nothing t-to d-do w-with y-you.”

“So what? You expect me not to give a damn when someone punches your face in if they aren’t somehow connected to me or the Rogues?”

“N-no, th-that’s n-not wh-what I m-meant-”

“What the fuck happened, Allen?” Len cuts him off in a hard voice and Barry doesn’t miss how he clenches his fists, which is quite intimidating even though he tries to reason with himself that this is just Len and that he wouldn’t hurt him.

Even so, his apprehension and fear must be plain to see on his face as the other man clenches his teeth in anger for a second before forcing himself to relax again.

“I’m not going to hit you,” Len points out quietly before he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. When he turns his gaze back to him, he doesn’t seem as angry anymore and nods to the table. “Let’s take a seat, okay?”

Barry hesitates as he doesn’t really like the idea of telling Len anything about what has occurred yesterday. It is obvious how upset his friend is and he doesn’t want him to do something stupid in case they have a run-in with Wally tomorrow.

Still, he doesn’t want Len to leave either and he knows that the other man does have a right to be angry after he has more or less lied to him.

After their conversation about Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet, Len has made himself rather scarce, though, and Barry has hoped that he could put it off for a little longer before he has to tell him about what happened yesterday. Not that he kid himself into believing that Len wouldn’t get angry over this but he has thought he would have some more time to collect himself.

Somewhat reluctantly, Barry walks over to his kitchen table but stops when he notices the bowl of apples in the middle of it he hasn’t picked up on so far.

“I brought some food over,” Len explains when he turns to him in surprise. “Mostly canned stuff but also some vegetable and apples. There’s also fried rice with chicken and spring rolls in the fridge but it’s probably cold by now.”

This is an unexpectedly kind thing for Len to do after how piss poor his mood has been for the last weeks and how he seemed intent on avoiding him as much as possible.

It makes a pleasant warmth settle in Barry’s chest as he’s grateful for his friend’s help and he tries not to listen to the small voice in the back of his head that keeps reminding him that this things have been bought by stolen money.

“Y-you w-went sh-shopping for m-me?” He grins and chuckles when Len gives him a miffed look in return. Even though Barry can’t be sure, he thinks that this is probably meant as kind of an apology from the other man for his standoffish behaviour of the last couple of weeks, at least he would like to believe so.

“Th-thank y-you.” Barry meets Len’s eyes with a soft smile and while he still looks at their upcoming conversation with apprehension, he is now very glad that his friend has come over, after all.

In a way it is nearly funny how easily Len can lift his mood and make him feel better while he
himself hardly is able to do so on his own.

“It’s the end of the month,” his friend points out. “Your fridge usually empties out around this time.”

Barry is glad that Len doesn’t mention that he needs to take better care of himself and eat more. He isn’t blind, he doesn’t miss the looks others gives him when they thinks that he doesn’t notice them or the constant concern in his friends’ eyes. Not to mention that Mary and Mrs. Ming keep feeding him snacks at every possible opportunity that offers itself to them.

Also, while Barry tries to avoid looking in the mirror whenever he isn’t fully clothed, he knows exactly what he looks like…

*Ugly* and thin, like a badly *messed up* scarecrow.

The notion alone fills him with dread and not for the first time he wonders what Len *really* thinks when he looks at him… whether he is disgusted by what he sees.

He pushes that thought away, not wanting to bring himself down again by his own stupid insecurities. Len has come over and he brought him food, it is something he should be happy and grateful for, the other man certainly deserves as much.

“I also brought some fried noodles for myself that are still there.” Len’s voice causes Barry to turn his attention back to him and it is then that he realizes that he has drifted off in his own head once more. Thankfully, the other man doesn’t comment on it, even though there is slight concern in his eyes, and instead goes on. “So, if you haven’t had dinner yet, we could eat now.”

It isn’t hard to tell that Len wants to get him to eat something, likely aware that Barry has been rather sloppy with it after seeing his broken nose. The other man has picked up on how he tends to lose his appetite when he is worried or depressed, which is one of the reasons why he lost this much weight after their last fight to begin with.

“S-sure,” Barry agrees even though he isn’t particularly hungry right now. Still, he hasn’t really eaten anything today as last night events have left him feeling uneasy for the most part and while he had some popcorn while he stayed as Eddy’s, he is aware that this doesn’t count as an actual meal.

While Barry heats the food up, Len offers to make some tea, which is not really something he usually does but is very much appreciated.

Len doesn’t try to get him to talk about what has happened while they prepare dinner nor while they eat and Barry is grateful for it.

There is not much talking in general but the atmosphere isn’t overly tense and he is able to enjoy his food and even finish it. Afterwards, he feels stuffed and tired and is glad when Len helps him with cleaning the table.

It’s around half past two when they settle on the couch and while Barry has work today, which means that he would need to get up in just a couple of hours, he doesn’t want the other man to leave just yet. Having Len close again after how he kept his distance for the last couple of weeks is just so nice, especially after what’s happened yesterday.

His head feels heavy and he rests his cheek on the back of the couch, watching Len watch him for a moment before closing his eyes.

“S-someone c-came b-by y-yesterday,” he says quietly and tries to concentrate on how heavy and weary his body feels and not on the uneasiness and pain the notion of last night causes him. “H-he…
i-it’s… i-it w-will s-sound s-stupid b-but…” Barry squeezes his eyes shut even firmer, hardly picking up on the pain that is caused by this due to his broken nose, and balls his hand into fists for a moment. “H-he s-seems t-to b-be m-my g-grands-son f-from… f-from th-the f-future.”

It sounds so ridiculous and he expects Len to laugh or get annoyed because he is probably thinking that this is some stupid lie he tells him so that he doesn’t have to talk about the truth of what has actually happened.

Len does neither, though. He just stays quiet and after an uncomfortable moment of silence passed between them, Barry forces himself to go on.

“H-his n-name is B-Bart and h-he’s y-young, p-probably n-not m-much older th-than e-eleven or t-twelve.” He swallows around the lump that has formed in his throat and makes speaking increasingly difficult, uncertain whether he wants to go on or not. Just thinking about this makes his head hurt and his stomach queasy because he doesn’t even want to imagine how frightening this must be for the kid.

“H-he…” Barry coughs lightly as his voice gives out on him before he tries again. “He w-was s-so ups-set b-because h-he… he th-thinks th-that I’m i-innocent… h-he s-says th-that h-his g-grandf-father w-was a… a-a h-hero a-and…”

Tears start to force their way through his closed eyes and he feels them roll over his skin, leaving warm traces behind. The back of his throat feels raw as he swallows again and debates whether he should move, turn away from Len so that he wouldn’t see this, but he is bone tired and just can’t bring enough energy up to really care.

Instead, he pulls his legs up, so that his knees rest against his chest and he can put his arms around them.

“I-I d-didn’t kn-know wh-what t-to… I-I th-thought h-he i-is c-confused a-and…” Barry grits his teeth again, welcoming the pain that shoots through his jaw joints, and tries to fight off the guilt that keeps wind around him like a constrictor. “I’ll l-likely n-never s-see h-him ag-ain a-and… h-he’s… h-he h-has t-to f-feel aawef-ful… a-and… W-Wally w-was th-there, h-he… h-he w-w-was s-so a-aangry…”

His nephew hates him, he hates him so much…

Barry has been aware of this, of course, but after all these years he has thought that things could have changed a bit. That, maybe, Wally would somehow have realized that he would never do such a thing to him.

They were a family, once…

How could he have let this happen to them?

Barry turns his head, so that his forehead is resting against the back of his couch, and doesn’t even fight the sob. He is too tired and his inside feels raw and cold. Right now, he just wants to get this awful feeling in his chest to go away.

He jumps when a touch to his neck startles him but he quickly realizes that it is Len.

God, he is such a jackass…

Len came over and brought him food and he repays him by breaking down in front of him again.
Damn it…

“Your nephew hit you.”

It isn’t a question and Barry doesn’t reply.

Despite how calm Len sounds, he knows that the other man is livid, the anger is so intense that it is palpable, and he wishes he could make him understand that none of this is Wally’s fault, that Wally is just as much of a victim as Iris was. Even more in a way, because he has to live on with what’s been done to him and Barry knows how unbelievably difficult it is to move on from something like that. How you can never really leave it behind you and how, even years later, it keeps eating away at you on whenever you let your guard down.

“I p-provoked h-him,” Barry finally croaks when the silence becomes just too much. “I-I sh-should h-have kn-known b-better… i-it’s m-my-

“Don’t.” Len’s voice is hard and there is a warning in the way he speaks that causes Barry to freeze and grow completely still.

The other man swears in frustration as he notices his reaction and pulls his hand back.

“Look at me.” When Barry fails to comply, Len adds in a softer tone. “Please.”

Reluctantly, Barry does so and he feels his cheeks grow uncomfortably hot as he tries to focus his blurry vision on the other man.

Len doesn’t look as angry as Barry has feared he would but there is a visible tightness around his eyes and a tension to how he holds himself that make it obvious that he is not taking well to having learned how he got his injuries.

“Have you seen a doctor?”

The question surprises Barry but it is a welcome alternative to what he has expected Len would say.

“Y-yes, J-Jay c-came over sh-shortly a-after W-Wally ar-rived and h-he t-took m-me t-to th-the hosp-

“Good.” Len’s expression stays grim but he seems less concerned. “You got something for the pain?”

Barry nods and realizes that it would probably be a good idea to take one of the pills now that he has eaten something. The notion to get up and walk over to his bathroom isn’t very appealing, though, and he decides that he would take one a bit later as the pain has subsided a lot by now, anyway.

“You should’ve told me.”

The disapproval in Len’s voice is plain to hear and it causes an uncomfortable guilt to rear its head in Barry’s guts as he knows that his friend is right.

“I w-wasn’t s-sure… y-you s-seemed in a b-bad m-mood, I-I th-though…” he breaks off and averts his eyes.

It is so difficult for Barry to know where he stands with the other man at times. One moment he is kind and understanding, the next he lashes out on him for no particular reason or just ignores him for
days on end, making him feel just plain miserable.

They fall quiet again and he can feel Len’s gaze on him, well aware that the other man isn’t exactly happy with his explanation.

“I’m under a lot of pressure right now and I’m not really sure how to deal with everything that’s going on,” the other man finally tells him, sounding both grim and weary. “I get why you didn’t want to tell me. I didn’t exactly give you a reason to but me behaving like an ass doesn’t mean that you can’t come to me if you’re in trouble or something like this happens to you.”

Barry glances over to Len with an unhappy frown.

“I… y-you g-get angry a-and it…”

It scares me.

That is what he wants to say but he can’t bring himself to because he knows how this makes him sound like and he doesn’t want to appear any weaker in front of the other man than he already does.

Len can be quite intimidating, he is tall, in very good shape and knows how to fight, and while Barry is quite certain that he would never try to hurt him in a physical way, there is still this persisting nagging fear in the back of his mind that reminds him how easily anger can turn into violence.

The way Len is looking at him now is uncomfortable because, even though Barry didn’t say it, his friend seems to get what he means.

“Barry, I can have a horrible temper at times and behave like a complete bastard but,” Len says in a calm but firm voice as he meets his eyes, “I’ll never hit you. It doesn’t matter how angry I get, it won’t happen.”

A part of Barry stays sceptical, unable not to, but, even so, Len’s words are both comforting and reassuring and the sudden urge to reach out to him, to actually touch the other man, catches him completely off-guard.

Then, he remembers the other reason why he initially didn’t want to tell the other man about what happened.

“Y-you c-can’t d-do s-someth-thing s-stupid i-if y-you’ve a r-run i-in w-with W-Wally t-tomorrow, ok-kay?”

The Rogues have been surprisingly good at avoiding the Flash for the last couple of months, probably due to Len and the rest of them putting extra effort in planning their heists beforehand but Barry knows how huge the risk is for them to finally cross paths again.

“You mean like turning his head into an ice cube?”

“L-Len!”

To his surprise, Len snorts and, while he still looks pissed, he gives him a tight smile and shrugs.

“We won’t run into him, so stop worrying.”

“Y-you c-can’t kn-know that,” Barry points out with a frown and doesn’t understand how his friend can be so certain in this regard.

“Fine.” Len sighs and rubs his eyes. “I won’t turn him into an icicle should we have the displeasure
“Y-you p-promiss me th-that?”

“For fuck’s sake.” The other man huffs but his amused grin belies his annoyance.

“I’m s-serious,” Barry states firmly because he knows Len and his bad temper by now.

“Yes.” Len lowers his hand again and meets his gaze. “I promise you, alright?”

“Th-thank you.”

He really means it as it is no secret that there is no love left between Len and Wally and that not only due to the obvious reason of the later one being the Flash.

“I-it w-wasn’t W-Wally’s f-fault,” he adds quietly because he wants him to understand this.

Len doesn’t say anything to that, he only purses his lips in a familiar way that makes it obvious that he doesn’t agree with him on this in the least.

For a moment, Barry wonders whether he should press on but he senses that this would probably bring an early end to the once again mostly peaceful mood between them and decides against it. Right now he is just glad that Len isn’t hellbent on doing something stupid.

As awful as it sounds, it isn’t as if he really wants to talk about his nephew anymore, anyway. Thinking about Wally causes the pain in his chest only to grow worse and unwanted memories to try and crawl their way back to the surface of his mind so that it is a bit of a relief that he can put this behind him for now.

“So, there’s a boy running around who’s your grandson from the future?” The amusement in Len’s voice is hard to miss and when Barry turns back to him, he is actually smirking.

“Yeah,” he agrees and chuckles as he lets his head rest against the back of the couch again. “C-crazy, huh?”

“Crazy doesn’t exactly cover it.” Len snorts and shakes his head. “Damn, this world’s getting too fucking strange.”

Barry hums in agreement and can’t help but smile as he watches the other man. For the first time since he had his run-in with Kenneth he starts to feel truly relaxed and comfortable again and it is such a pleasant sensation.

“You’re falling asleep on me again?” Len’s voice is warm and amused but Barry doesn’t pick up on what he is actually saying. It is nice listen to him, though, nice and calming and he decides to closes his eyes to rest them briefly.

He is gone within seconds.

Chapter End Notes

I’m feeling rather tired (because being sick sucks), so I will keep it short this time and just say that I’m really happy about Bart finally entering the story as he’s one of my
favourite speedsters (I just have a fond spot for him) and that I know that Wally doesn’t come over as the nicest person right now but this story is definitely not meant to bash him. The way he acts is due to what happened to him, like Barry he has a lot to deal with and he’s convinced that Barry is guilty.

I would like to go a bit more into detail about it but I will leave it for another time.

As I’ve mentioned before, the next chapter will be in Len’s POV. It got pretty huge and I decided to split it into two, though.

I really hope you guys enjoyed this chapter and thanks to all of you lovelies who left me feedback last time around again, I can’t really express how amazing it is when you share your thoughts with me. :)
Visit to the Gallery Part I (Len POV)

Chapter Summary

Len introduces Barry to an old friend of his.

Chapter Notes

This chapter isn’t edited by anyone other than myself so please excuse any errors you man come across while reading.

Also, thanks so much to all your lovelies for leaving me kudos and comments, it’s so nice of you and it really made me feel better despite being sick! Much love and many hugs to you sweeties! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Sam gives him a rather sceptical look as they stand in front of the dimensional port that leads to Barry’s bathroom. He glances towards the slightly dimmed sight that he can make out through the dimensional exit and frowns. “This is definitely going against his parole and I doubt that Allen will like that.”

“Nobody will know,” Len replies and shoots the other man an annoyed glance. “If there’s anybody who can make sure that this little trip stays under the table it’s Mamani.”

“Yeah, about that… You really want to introduce Allen to that guy?” Sam, once again, looks rather doubtful about this plan, which in turn really starts to rub Len the wrong way.

“Gael’s a friend,” he reminds him curtly.

“I’m not worried about Mamani,” the other Rogue snorts and shifts his weight from one leg to the other as he turns his gaze back to the even and slightly milky looking surface just about two feet from them. “He’s an alright guy, especially compared to the sort of company you like to frequent with these days.”

Len throws Sam a warning glare for this as he is really not in the mood to bring Amunet up right now. Sam rolls his eyes but lifts his hand in a somewhat honest looking placating way.

“Just wanna say that Allen probably won’t be all that jazzed about being whisk away to the household of such a guy.”

This hasn’t to be pointed out to Len, he has been mulling over this as well as he knows what Barry still thinks of criminals, no matter how lenient his stance on this matter has become in regard of the Rogues.

Still, he is sure that Barry would like this little surprise trip in the end. The other man has been in a rather depressed mood over the last two weeks since his grandson from a parallel future arrived…
and Len’s head still started to *hurt* when he thinks too hard about that one.

Barry’s life definitely hasn’t become any less strange after him losing his powers and, considering what is going on, that’s certainly not a good thing.

“He’s no worse than us,” he finally remarks to the other man after an uncomfortable moment of silence.

“He’s tight with the fucking *mob*, Len.” Sam snorts but waves Len’s glare off and nods to the exit of the mirrorverse instead. “Whatever, you’re too stubborn to listen anyway. Just get blondie and let’s get this over with. I need to get back to the game.”

Len gives his friend one last hard look before he turns and climbs into Barry’s bathroom.

The sink creaks slightly in protest under the assault of being used as a stepping stone and he is pretty sure that he would either have to look for a new one for Barry in near future or get him a standing mirror should he and the others stick to this way of entering his flat.

Not that a bigger mirror would be bad investment seeing that this one he is currently using is hardly big enough for a grown man to climb through.

“Barry?” Len calls out as soon as he is standing with both feet on the tiled floor. He wants to make his presence known before he could scare the other man by accident. After Kenneth’s surprise visit Barry has become understandably nervous even in his own home.

For that alone Len would make sure to knock some of that jackass’ teeth out.

A brief silence follows that feels palpably tense before he hears some movement in the living room through the slightly ajar door.

“L-Len?”

Barry sounds confused and hesitant and it doesn’t seem like he is actually coming any closer to the bathroom.

“Yeah,” Len answers and makes his own way over to the door.

The first thing he notices when he enters the short hallway that leads to either the bedroom or the living room, is the smell of lavender. It’s probably the aroma candle Lisa gave Barry a couple of days ago and even though Len usually isn’t a fan of this stuff, he can’t help but notice how pleasant it is. Even with this calming smell, there is still a palpable tension lingering to the air, though.

“Wh-what are you doing here?”

Barry is watching him with a concerned expression next to the end of the couch that is the closest to the exit of the flat.

It is reassuring to see that the other man is as alert as this, even though Len doesn’t particularly like it for him to be in such a constant state of wariness.

“D-did s-someth-thing hap-pen?”

He looks tired, which isn’t exactly surprising. Barry constantly appears exhausted since Len has started to pass by again after their talk about two weeks ago.

Worried and exhausted.
And guilty.

For what, he can only guess as Barry seems convinced that nearly everything going wrong in his life or the ones of people he knows is somehow his fault. It is a source of ongoing frustration for Len.

“No.” He slowly makes his way over to the blonde, trying to appear as relaxed as he can because he’s aware of how the other man seems to unconsciously grow even more apprehensive when he thinks that something is bothering him. “I just wanted to pass by. I’m not interrupting you with anything?”

Barry is still watching him with a slight frown but some of the tension seems to leave his shoulders at that. He shakes his head.

“N-no, I j-just r-read a b-bit.”

The blonde nods to the novel that lays open at the couch, with its pages resting on the cushion, thus giving Len a view of its cover that shows a pretty blond woman, who is drawn in a rather abstract art style. Above her, in big bold blue letters, the title *A Devil in a Blue Dress* is written.

A crime novel, probably another one he borrowed from Mary as the younger woman loves them about as much as Barry does.

Len isn’t big on fiction, whether it’s in form of books or television, but he likes when Barry tells him about the stories he is reading and while he finds it odd and slightly annoyed that the blonde still seems to prefer the ones where the police is portrayed as the good guys, it is good to see him enjoy something this much.

“You’ve finished *The Big Four* already?”

Somehow, it always seems to please the other man when Len remembers one of the book titles he has been reading and this time is no exception. Barry’s smile makes his face look very handsome, even with how tired he is looking right now, and Len fights the urge to step even closer because he knows that this would bring at least some of the wariness and thus guilt right back into those blue eyes.

“Y-yes, j-just y-yesterd-day,” Barry agrees and Len doesn’t miss the slight flush on his cheeks.

“You wanna tell me about it later?” he asks because as much as he likes to listen to Barry telling him about the novels he reads, the blonde seems to enjoy talking about them with him even more.

“S-sure,” Barry readily agrees and the smile is still tugging on his lips. “Y-you w-want me t-to m-make you s-some c-coffee?”

“Not now. I actually came over because I’ve a surprise for you.”

Barry’s expression dims a bit but he seems more curious than wary.

“A s-surprise?”

“Yes.” Len can’t help it and steps a bit closer to the other man. It is a relief when Barry doesn’t draw back and only slightly tenses up in response. “I would like you to meet a friend of mind.”

This doesn’t seem the right thing to say and he can’t say that he is surprised.

“A a f-friend?” Barry looks worried now and nervously glances to the direction where his bathroom
lays as if he was worried that there is still another person in there he hasn’t noticed so far.

“I didn’t bring him over,” Len remarks drily but feels bad about this slight tingle of annoyance he feels as soon as the other man turns his apprehensive and now once again guilty looking eyes back to him. He goes on in a softer voice. “I actually thought we could make a trip to him.”

“Wh-where t-to?” Barry asks and starts to nervously shift his weight from one leg to the other. “A-and wh-who’s y-you f-friend?”

Len stays quiet for a long moment, already feeling how this slips through his fingers and he knows that he should be honest upfront and just tell Barry about is plan but it becomes quite obvious that he likely wouldn’t be inclined to go along with it then.

“I haven’t given you the most reason to trust me recently,” he finally says and he knows it is a bit of a low shot but he still goes on. “But I would never do anything that could get you in trouble.”

Well, other than frequenting with him at all, that is.

That notion is uncomfortable in how true it is and Len pushes it away, unwilling to be bothered by it right now. He isn’t stupid and he has been in this business for over three decades by now. He knows how to get somewhere without catching unwanted attention and from the handful of people he really allows himself to trust next to his Rogues Mamani is at the first place.

There would be no bad consequences for Barry, he is certain of it, otherwise he wouldn’t be willing to risk it.

“You’ll like it,” he goes on and it doesn’t sit well with him how tensed up the other man has gotten once again. Slowly, to give Barry time to pull away if he want to, he reaches for his hand and closes his fingers loosely around his wrist. “I won’t let anything happy to you.”

Barry frowns and his uncertainty is nearly palpable in the air between them. He swallows and licks his lips nervously before he speaks, all the while holding Len’s gaze.

“I-it w-will b-be ag-ainst m-my p-parole, w-won’t it?”

Seeing that lying wouldn’t make any sense, he only nods, which causes Barry’s frown to deepen for a second before he averts his eyes and starts to gnaw on his bottom lip.

“Nobody will know.” Len gives his wrist a slight reassuring squeeze and wishes that the blonde wouldn’t look so damn worried all over again.

“Wh-why?”

Len frowns, not really understanding the question and Barry picks up on it as he elaborates.

“Wh-why v-v-visit t-some f-friend of y-yours? W-we c-could j-just s-stay in and I c-could m-make y-you c-coffee o-or s-someth-thing t-to e-eat.”

He sounds scared…

Len bits down on a frustrated groan and instead gives the other man’s wrist a slight squeeze.

“Because I think a change of scenery would do you good,” he explains. “Even if it’s just for a couple of hours.”

“I-I d-don’t kn-know…”
Barry sounds uncertain, clearly conflicted over whether to agree or not as his common sense probably tells him what a stupid idea this would be. At the same time, he obviously doesn’t really want to reject his idea outright either and it is hard to not show how sobering this is, seeing how careful Barry is to not upset him, how he obviously keeps expecting him to lash out any second now.

Despite what Len told him, Barry still is wary of him and how he would react in case of another fight between them.

And who could fault him for it?

After telling the blonde that he wouldn’t abandon him again, he did the next best thing, pushing him away and shutting him out once more. It wasn’t like before, he didn’t cut him completely off, but he made it clear that he didn’t want to have him around, and Barry, who already had more than enough reason not to trust him, doesn’t seem able to let go of his suspicious and weariness this time around.

The worst thing is that he isn’t even angry. Like a frustrating repetition from when Len messed up before, he just welcomed Len back into his life, which would be a good thing if it weren’t for the fact that it seems like the other man is now walking on eggshells around him all the damn time.

Barry still voices his opinions to Len when he doesn’t agree with something but before a real debate could happen, he will usually just change the topic these days, looking tensed up and uneasy whenever this occurs.

It makes Len’s skin crawl because he doesn’t want *this*.

The notion that Barry could be afraid, actually *really* afraid of him, whether it be of him hurting the blonde in a physical way or just lashing out verbally again, is just unsettling, and he isn’t sure how to deal with it.

There is also the fact that Barry stopped coming over to the hideout which makes no sense to Len at all as he did so only after he stopped pushing the blonde away like the damn idiot he is. Lisa, of course, is convinced that it is because of something he did, which is likely the truth, and resulted in his sister being pissed at him. *Again.*

“I won’t pressure you into this,” Len tells Barry in a calm voice and starts to draw small reassuring circles onto the back of his wrist. “If you really don’t wanna go, we can stay in, and you can tell me about your book.”

Barry watches him with wide uncertain eyes, but it seems the right thing to say because some of the tension starts to ease away from him.

Did he really think that he would *force* him into this?

Len nearly stops then, unwilling to turn this into another point of the long lists of things that make his friend uneasy and miserable. He forces himself to go on, though, because Barry deserves to do something that is fun and enjoyable for him. Should he decline again, he would leave it at that.

“But I really think that you’d like it. No bad repercussions, just a nice little trip to get your head off things and I’ll be there the whole time.”

He doesn’t miss how Barry seems to relax a bit more at the last part and it is both confusing and touching how much the other man seems to trust him despite how wary he is of him at the same time.

There is a brief pause when Barry averts his eyes, considering his words, and Len doesn’t need to be a mind reader to know that he likely pondering whether the risk is worth it.
Then, the other man seems to come to a conclusion as he turns his gaze back to him, still looking uncertain but with a faint smile on his lips.

“If y-you are c-certain th-that n-nobody w-will f-find out ab-bout th-this th-then… th-then ok-kay,” he agrees, looking very pale all of a sudden and Len has to fight the urge to pull him closer, make him understand that he would not let anything happen to him.

There is no way in hell that he would let him go back to the Heights.

“Nothing will happen to you,” he assures Barry once more and steps a bit closer, lifting his other hand so that he can cup his neck. “I wouldn’t ask you if I weren’t completely sure.”

Barry gives him another faint, visible strained smile and nods.

“I kn-know.”

It’s reassuring to hear that, to know that he really thinks so, while at the same time a part of Len isn’t sure how to feel about it.

Their relationship isn’t a completely equal one, Len is very aware of that. Barry forgives too easily, he just accepts being hurt and moves on without allowing himself to feel angry.

This isn’t only the case with him, though, the other man seems keen on the idea that people have the right to abuse him, which is a very upsetting notion. Would he ask him about it, Barry would clearly deny it, not because he is lying but likely because he doesn’t even realize that it is even happening.

Len sometimes wonders whether this has always been the case, even before he got put into prison and what happened to him there. It wouldn’t really surprise him as he’s read up on the blonde, and it’s not uncommon that people, who’ve been abused as a child, tend to develop the oddest ways to cope with that. Often not very healthy ones.

“So,” Barry goes on. “Wh-what’s th-this l-little t-trip ab-bout?”

“I thought we could indulge your hobby a bit.” Len gives his neck a tentative squeeze before he pulls his hand back but still keeps holding onto Barry’s wrist.

“My h-hobby?” It’s obvious that the blonde isn’t sure what he is talking about.

“Art,” he explains with a smirk that widens when Barry’s eyes seem to light up at the mention of it. “Art?”

“Yeah, a friend of mine has quite an impressive private art collection. Thought you’d enjoy a little guide through it.”

“A f-friend of y-yours h-has a p-private art c-collection,” Barry repeats with a slight sceptical frown. “D-do I w-want t-to kn-know ab-bout h-how he g-got it?”

Len snorts and gives him a fond but amused look.

“I’m pretty sure he bought most of it.”

“M-most of it?”

“Better not ask questions you know you won’t like the answers to,” he advises easily and grins when this gains him an exasperated huff in return.
“D-do y-you even have f-friends wh-who aren’t at l-least s-somehow i-involved in c-criminal act-activities?” Barry wonders but only sounds slightly bothered. It’s clear that their friendship has soften him up quite a bit when it comes to the likes of him and the other Rogues.

“I’ve you,” he returns honestly and watches the other man blushes in response.

Barry looks away, to the couch next to them, and Len smiles when his friend turns his hand so that he can grasp his wrist in return.

“I’m not ex-xactly a m-model c-citizen anym-more,” the blond replies quietly and there is a heaviness to these words that doesn’t sit well with Len.

“You’re better than any of those pompous capes could ever be,” he says a bit gruffly as he hates the sad look in the other man’s eyes or how he presses his lips into a thin line as he stubbornly refuses to believe so as well.

A brief silence settles between them that isn’t exactly uncomfortable but not pleasant either and he damns his own disability to make Barry understand that all this shit is not his fault, that he can’t think of it like he really deserves that this messed up stuff keeps happening to him.

Finding the right words is hard, though.

“Wh-where is th-this g-gallery?” Barry finally asks, still not looking at Len.

“Vienna.”

This gets the reaction he’s expected as the other man turns to him with huge eyes and gives him a look like he’s gone crazy.

“Wh-What?”

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“Seriously, call me when you’re ready to be picked up.” Sam reminds Len once again with an increasingly annoyed frown. “Not a fucking hour before so that I’ve to wait like an idiot for you. I’m not your fucking servant.”

“Shove it, Scudder.” Len grunts and tries to block his colleague out, who hasn’t made a secret out of it what he thinks of being left waiting in the mirror for more than twenty minutes after he went to get Barry.

“You can shove it and look for another moron who gets you around the damn planet in fucking seconds if you keep doing this.” The other rogue hisses. “I don’t know how often I’ve to tell you dumbasses this but I’m no taxi!”

“Alright.” Len, who has been studying Barry so far, turn back to Sam with a glare. “I get it.”

The other man scowls at him but, thankfully, doesn’t go on bitching so that he can turn back to Barry, who doesn’t seem to pay them any mind while he’s looking through the portal that would lead them to their destination. There is a wary expression on his face and he looks very pale and tensed up again, enough so that Len starts to worry whether this has really been such a good idea.

“Well, then move it, we’re not getting any younger here and I wanna get back to the others and win at least some of the money back I lost thanks to you.” Sam huffs and just glares right back when Len scowls at him in response.
“Y-you’ll c-come wh-when we c-call you, th-though, r-right?”

They both turn to Barry, who is now watching Sam with an apprehensive look as if he was worried that the other man could abandon them here.

Some of the anger seems to leave Sam at that and he huffs in frustration, reaching up to rub his eyes.

“Yes, Allen, ’m not going to leave you here,” he agrees before he glances over to Len and smirks. “Well, at least not both of you.”

“You’re a real fucking comedian, Scudder.” Len frowns in annoyance before he turns to Barry and nods to the exit of the mirrorverse. “You’re ready?”

The blonde swallows, looking more like he’s on the way to the gallows than to something that is actually supposed to enjoy, and gives him a brief jerky nod.

Len goes first, mostly out of habit and because he knows that it would make Barry feel safer that way, not because he is worried about any unpleasant surprises as Gael knows that they are coming.

The room he enters is of average size with walls painted in a soft campaign colour and dark furniture that is mostly made of cherry wood. To his right is a bookshelf full of heavy looking books which covers give away their age and, as far as he knows Gael and his interest in rare things, each of these is probably worth as much as a small car. On the left, there is a big desk, sturdy and old looking but obviously kept in good condition, behind which a wide window gives a nice view to trees and part of a garden that is cut off by a tall wall from the surrounding area. Next to the desk is a liquor cabinet and next to it a smaller table with three chairs on which a vase with fresh flowers stands. The ground is carpeted, a dark blue colour that harmonizes with the general colour scheme of the office that Len hasn’t entered in over a year by now.

Next to nothing has changed, though, everything looks just as pristine and clean as always.

Still the same old neat-freak, it seems.

He hears Barry exiting the mirror behind him and turns to see how the other man keeps nervously glancing around as he steps up next to him.

“Remember,” Sam says from behind them and meets his gaze with another dark and warning look, “call me when you actually need me to pick you up, not-”

“Just scram already,” Len interrupts him annoyed.

The other man grumbles something of thankless asshat as he turns and finally vanishes.

“D-does y-your f-friend kn-know w-we’re c-coming?”

Len turns back to Barry, who is visibly ill at ease by being in a stranger’s room he knows next to nothing about. That they are currently in Europe, which is a glaring violation of his parole and alone could get him back to prison, isn’t really helping him to relax either.

“Yeah, he does,” he tells him and as if on a cue, the door to the office opens. Barry freezes immediately and looks to the new arrival, a Hispanic man in his late fifties with a receding hairline, clean shaved and thick horn glasses, wearing plain jeans and a dark polo shirt.

Gael, upon seeing them, lifts his eyebrows and smiles broadly.
“Well, I guess better late than never, right Len? Didn’t you tell me that you’d come around eight?” he asks as he walks over to them. “As tardy as always, mi amigo.”

Len snorts and accepts the offered hand with a smirk.

“Because you’re so damn busy these day, aren’t you?”

“What can I say? It’s my well-earned retirement.” The other man shrugs before he eyes him with a clearly fake concerned frown. “Maybe that’s something you should start thinking about as well seeing that you’re not getting younger either.”

“I’m not made of retirement material,” Len returns easily as he’s really not interested to quit his line of work anytime soon.

His friend chuckles and doesn’t seem in the least bit surprised. Then, he shifts his attention to Barry and he gives him a pleasant smile.

“You must be Mr. Allen, then,” Gael says before he adds with a glance to Len. “Didn’t think this shady bastard could make a friend who’s actually a decent fellow.”

Len snorts but ignores the little quip and instead turns to a clearly wary looking Barry and introduces them.

“Barry, this is Gael Mamani, a friend of mine who used to be someone in the business before he decided to retire his lazy ass and move to Europe to spend the rest of his day gardening.”

“Gardening is relaxing,” Gael replies amused, not at all insulted. “And it’s a talent to realize when it’s time to call it a day and to finally enjoy your life.”

“As far as I can remember, you always seemed to enjoy hunting for these posh knickknacks you love so much.”

“These posh knickknacks you’re talking about are worth more than any of the banks in your beloved Twins will likely ever hold in their vaults,” the other man points out in a slightly miffed tone, which causes Len snort in amusement. While they could go on like this for a while as he hasn’t seen Gael in nearly a year and it would have been nice to grab a beer with him and talk about old times, he really doesn’t want to make Barry feel like the third wheel here, though. Thus, he steers their conversation back to the blonde’s direction.

“You know me, I’ve no interest when it comes to art and that stuff,” he tells Gael with a shrug before he nods to the man next to him. “Barry, on the other hand, does and he’s a bit of an artist himself.”

As expected, Barry’s face turns bright red and he shoots Len a slightly annoyed look as he clearly not happy about being pushed into the limelight.

“Yes, you told me so,” Gael remarks, who is now studying the other man with new interest. “And I stand to what I’ve said before, it’s utterly mind-boggling that you suddenly decided to keep company of people who aren’t as culturally lowbrow as the rest of your merry man.”

“I’ll make certain to mention this to Lisa.” Len tells him with a smirk, which causes his friend to roll his eyes with exaggerated exasperation.

“Your sister is an exception, of course,” Gael replies drily. “She owns the true feminine sense of beauty, even if it seems to slip from her at times if you consider that she wastes her time with the lot of you.”
The Hispanic then turns back to Barry and he too seems to notice how uneasy the younger man is as he gives him another friendly smile.

“So, Mr. Allen, you’re interested in art?”

Barry, who needs a moment to find his voice again, coughs lightly and gives the other man a small nod.

“W-well, y-yes b-but I’m n-not v-very v-versatile in th-this a-area, I j-just… i-it’s j-just a h-hobby,” he explains and actually sounds apologetic as if he was somehow insulting their host by this. Len can’t help but frown at that, once again feeling frustrated by how damn insecure the other man is about himself and angry at the world at large for forcing this onto him.

Gael notices it as well, he notices it by how the man seems to consider Barry in a thoughtful war for a second but, thankfully, doesn’t comment on it and only remarks with a chuckle.

“An excellent choice for a hobby, my friend. You see, I myself have no talent whatsoever when it comes to doing art myself but I dare to say that I’ve the eye for it.”

Len has told Gael beforehand that Barry had been through a lot in prison, he didn’t go into detail but his friend is no idiot and while his family kept him from serving time, he too knows how things work in those places.

“What medium do you usually work with?” the other man goes on and Len watches how Barry starts to fidget slightly, probably uneasy to talk about it. This isn’t really a surprise, he is reluctant to show his sketches to anybody most of the time and actually seemed ashamed that one time when Len found the one sketch of him. Barry told him that it was an older one before sputtering that he doesn’t usually draw him, which was clearly a lie and Len found both amusing and quite flattering.

“I d-do m-mostly j-just s-sketching, us-sing p-pencils,” the blonde explains with a helpless shrug. “N-nothing s-special a-and I’m r-really n-not any g-good at i-it.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Len interjects with a slight frown. “He’s really good, he drew a portrait of Lisa that looked just like her.”

Barry, once again as red as a tomato, gives him an annoyed but pleading look that clearly asks Len to shut up and causes Gael to chuckle.

“No reason to be ashamed for having talent,” the Hispanic tells him in good nature before he stirs the conversation away from Barry, for which the blonde is visibly grateful. “I don’t want to brag but I’ve to say that I’ve come to possess some quite unique art pieces over the years and if you’re interested, I wouldn’t mind to give you two a small tour through my gallery.”

Seeing that he told Barry about this beforehand, the other man only hesitates briefly, before he agrees somewhat reluctantly.

“Don’t look so worried,” Gael laughs as he hasn’t missed Barry’s hesitation. “I don’t know what Len told you about me but I can assure you that nothing will happen to you as long as you’re a guest under my roof.”

This causes Barry to flush again in embarrassment but he gives a small nod in agreement. Gael’s words don’t seem to help him to relax, though, as he still stays so tense that just looking at him is uncomfortable.

“Well, before we begin with our small tour, what do you think of getting some refreshments? I’ve
gotten a really nice *chateau* and just waited for the right opportunity to open it,” Gael tells them as he walks over to his liquor cabinet. “It’s a *Petrus*, quite a fancy one that will make your taste buds sing according to a friend of mine who brought it over as a little gift when he visited me from France a couple of weeks ago. It’s from 1982 and think it’s current market price of is around 2,400 euros or so.”

Len nearly rolls his eyes at this and he wishes his friend could lay at least a bit off when it comes to shoving his money into other people’s faces. He isn’t surprised when Barry turns to him with an alarmed look.

“Just relax,” he tells him under his breath. “Gael is made of cash, a couple thousand bucks are *peanuts* to him.”

Barry jumps when the pop of the cork being pulled out of the wine bottle cuts through the air, and Len nearly reaches out to grasp his wrist once again.

It’s only a moment later that Gael comes back with the open bottle of ridiculous expensive wine and three just as fittingly posh looking crystal glasses.

“It’s probably been a while since you tasted anything else but that dishwater you like to drink so much,” the Hispanic remarks towards Len with a smirk before he turns to Barry, leaning a bit towards him and lowering his voice as if he was telling him a secret. “Our friend here has the worst taste when it comes to alcohol, preferring that nasty malt drink of his even if he is offered something actual tasteful for once. He visited me in Peru about fifteen years ago and nearly got lynched by *abuelo* because he possessed the *audacity* to decline a glass of his wine. You see, my family has been owning a winery for decades now and anybody with a lick of taste would give their right hand for a thimble full of it just so that they could tell their friends about this *experiencia increíble*.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, will you shut up?” Len huffs but isn’t able to force the amused grin off his lips. “Your nutcase of a granddad nearly lynched me because he’s just as full of himself as you are, Gael.”

The other man sniffs at that while he starts to fill up the glasses.

“I’m not surprised that such a philistine person like yourself is unable to understand the art of winery or the worth of a bottle of good wine.”

Once again, he turns to Barry as he goes on.

“That man doesn’t realize that life is made up of more than just money and cheap beer. He’s never gotten why someone would actually spend time and effort to get pieces of art and history if not for selling it off afterwards.”

Barry is obviously not sure how to answer and stays quiet, glancing uncertainly towards him as if trying to gauge his reaction to Gaels words.

“Don’t listen to him.” Len gives Barry a smirk as he accepts the glass of wine from the other man. “If it weren’t for me, this old geezer would’ve been sleeping with the fishes for a long while by now.”

“I’m not going to disagree with you there.” Gael grins amused and hands Barry a glass as well. “Len has many faults but the bastard certainly can think on his feet.”

“Cheers,” Len says in lieu of an actual agreement and the other two follow along.

“Y-you’ve kn-known each oth-her for l-long?” Barry asks after he’s lowered his glass again and
glances curiously between both of them.

“About thirty years by now,” the Hispanic answers and shakes his head as he chuckles. “Damn, where the hell did all this time go, hm, amigo?”

“Don’t get all sappy on me,” Len retorts with a smirk before he takes a sip of the wine, which bitter flavour promptly causes him to make a face.

“Eres increíble.” The other man snorts and shoots Barry a look that says as much as ‘Can you believe that guy?’.

“It tastes sour.” Len grunts and glances down at the dark crimson liquid in the glass he is currently holding with a slightly disgusted expression. “Told you already a number of times that I don’t like this shit and you still always try to force this rotten grape juice on me.”

Gael actually scoffs at that and lifts to glass to take a sip. He hum appreciatively at its taste before he frowns at Len in mixture of annoyance and disbelief.

“A bottle of this rotten juice is worth nearly three grants.”

“Because that means anything?” Len smirks and ignores the glare he receives in response as he looks over to Barry. He notices that the other man hasn’t touched his wine so far, which he quickly pins on him probably having a queasy stomach again due to his nerves.

“Ignore him,” Gael tells Barry when he too realizes that his glass is still full. “The wine is fantastic.”

Len is about to tell him that he really doesn’t need to drink it when the blond lifts the glass and takes a sip.

Like Gael before, Barry seems to enjoy the flavour of the deep red liquid judging by his pleased hum.

“I-it’s g-good.”

“Traitor,” Len grumbles and is pleased when he notices Barry’s smile and the amused look he gets in response.

They stay for a bit in Gael’s office, finishing the wine and talking. The conversation is mostly held up by Len and his old friend at first, while the blonde just stands by quietly.

Over the next twenty minutes, Barry starts to relax a bit, though, and even lets Gael involve him into some small talk.

Len watches them as the Hispanic starts to tell Barry a bit about sights Vienna has to offer and feels some of his own tension ease away as he realizes that this little surprise trip could actually work out as intended.

He takes another sip of his drink while keeping his eyes on the other man, not considering that it is still wine, and grimaces accordingly in response to the unexpected sour taste, which causes Barry to glance at him with a smile as he doesn’t miss his reaction.

Despite the sour taste in his mouth, Len can’t help but return it.

Chapter End Notes
I hope you like the chapter, it initially was just supposed to be one but I split it in two because it got rather long in the end.

I introduced Gael here, a character you would have initially never met personally other than much later by reference in conversations, which is something I’m really glad about as it will hopefully help to integrate later plot points better in the story.

Also, I’m still sick, I thought I got over it toward the beginning of last week but then I went back to work and after the first day I felt horrible again, so I went to the doc (again) and it turned out that my flue turned into an outright middle ear infection (that’s autumn for me). Well, it’s not so bad anymore, I got good meds and now I’m feeling better again (hopefully for real now ;). Anyway, I’m still quite tired due to that and I just went over this chapter only once before uploading it, so please excuse if you can notice that.

Next one will be up next week and thanks again for all your lovely comments, I was really surprised and happy about how many I got for the last chapter. You, my dear readers, are just amazing! ;)

Here the translation from Spanish to English (put together with my non-existing Spanish skills, so please excuse any - likely - errors here ;):

abuelo – grandfather  
experiencia increíble – unbelievable experience  
Eres increíble. – You’re unbelievable.
Visit to the Gallery Part II (Len POV)

Chapter Summary

Gael gives Barry and Len a tour through his treasured art gallery.

Chapter Notes

Here is part two of Len’s and Barry’s visit to Gael’s private gallery – this time even with the actual visit itself. ;)
This chapter is not edited, so please excuse any errors you come across!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they finally leave the office to make their way to Gael’s private art collection, Barry seems much more relaxed than before, which is likely at least partly due to the wine he has drunk but mainly due to the Latin’s friendly and easy going nature.

Barry still sticks to Len’s side, which is just fine with him, and while the blonde keeps eying their surroundings just as attentively as before, it’s obvious that most of the worry has been replaced by curiosity by now. Len, who feels also more relaxed now that Barry doesn’t seem as intimidated or tensed up anymore, starts to pay more attention to the place as well.

The house they are in is actually an old villa his friend’s father bought decades ago as a family vacation point and everything in here still looks just as prim and proper as it has all the times before whenever Len passed by. Gael may claim that he hasn’t the same need to show his money off like the rest of his family does but he hardly ever acts on these words in reality, packing every room full with visibly expensive furniture and art pieces and keeping an actual staff around to keep everything in good condition.

“Y-you l-live h-here on y-you own?” Barry asks after they’ve passed through the whole second floor without crossing anybody’s way.

“Mostly,” Gael answers. “My brothers and my nephews and nieces like to pass by and spend a few days here every once in a while.”

“He also has a butler and like ten maids who fulfil his every wish,” Len adds with a smirk.

“Don’t make it sound so dirty.” The other man chuckles before he notices Barry’s surprised expression and explains. “He’s exaggerating, I’ve a friend who was once my father’s butler and moved with me to Austria. By now he’s more of a roommate than anything else, though. And regarding his claim of ten maids, there are two lovely ladies in their late forties who pass by two times a week to look after the house and cook for me whenever they are around. “

“s your butler on vacation today?” Len asks as he lets his eyes wander to the old grandfather clock next to the foot of the stairs they’ve just reached.
“Why, you miss George?” Gael chuckles, well aware of how little Len can stand that man and the way the former butler keeps wrinkling his nose whenever he is around, like his master had let an dirty street dog in.

“Fat chance,” he snorts and follows his friend deeper into the big house.

They reach another set of stairs and Len notices how Barry starts to slightly tense up again. He gives him a questioning look but the other man only smiles faintly in return and shakes his head.

Gael, who doesn’t notice their brief exchanges, leads them downstairs to the basement of the villa.

“I know that it’s quite a little tour to reach our destination but considering the worth my little collection has, it’s better to be safe than sorry,” he explains on their way down and shoots Barry a bemused look that says as much as Annoying, I know, but what can you do? before he glances to Len and smirks. “Especially with the kind of friend I tend to keep around.”

“Because I’d steal one of you ugly-ass paintings,” Len scoffs and while he is looking at Gael, he doesn’t miss how Barry moves a bit closer to him.

He isn’t sure what has the other man so on edge again but he doesn’t like it. When he glances again in his direction, Barry keeps his gaze straight ahead, though, obviously not willing to meet his eyes right now.

After leaving the stairs behind them, it’s just about another thirty feet before they finally reach their actual destination, a sturdy looking door that seems to be made of wood but Len knows better thanks to experience with breaking into a number of such private faults and having already been in there before.

Barry, on the other hand, seems surprised when he notices the display next to the door and when Gael starts go through quite an elaborate process of getting access to the room that includes flickering a card over a scanner below the screen, entering a rather long code and scan his hand on the display. Then, finally, probably just because the Latin thinks it is funny as he has quite an odd sense of humour, he pulls out a very ancient looking key, shoots both of them a grin, and unlocks the door the old-fashioned ways as well.

At Barry’s questioning and slightly bemused look, Len only rolls his eyes and shrugs.

“You know, Mr. Allen,” Gael starts with his right hand already resting on the door handle and his gaze on Barry. “In just a moment you’ll be welcomed in a very exclusive club made of just a handful of people who’ve ever been granted the possibility to enter this realm of human magnificence when it comes to art.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Len grumbles under his breath but loud enough for the others to pick up on it, which earns him a disapproving and annoyed glare from Gael and a clearly amused smile from Barry. “Just open the damn door already, Gael.”

“Remember that you’re not at your place,” the other man points out with a frown. “Either behave or I’ll leave you out here in the hallways.”

It is a joke, a very obvious one, but it still causes Barry to palpably tense up.

“I’ll be on my best behaviour.” Len snarks but reaches for the blonde’s wrists as soon as Gael turns back to the door. He gives it a brief and hopefully reassuring squeeze and meets Barry’s slightly embarrassed but still worried expression calmly, trying to make him understand that there is nothing to worry about.
The other man relaxes a bit again and gives him a small grateful smile in return. Len lets go of his wrist and they both turn back to their host when the door unlocks with a series of clicking sounds of retreating bolts and opening locks that make it clear that this door would probably pose quite an obstacle for anybody who tries to get themselves entrance by force.

“Welcome to my little private kingdom of arts,” Gael tells them proudly and Len feels the urge to roll his eyes come back with a vengeance.

While Len has been in here a couple of times before as he is actually responsible for two or three of the pieces that are in this collection in here, it is quite obvious that Barry has not. The other man actually gasps when his gaze falls upon the first picture that greets them on the wall opposite to the door which leads into a small entrance area from where visitors can either choose to start their little tour by going towards the short hallway that is connected to their left or the one to their right.

“Ah yes, the *Le bassin aux nymphéas, reflets du saule*, one of Monet’s greatest masterpieces.” Gael sounds quite pleased as he says so and studies Barry in an appreciative way. “You’ve good taste, mi amigo.”

Len, who has never been one for abstract art, has still to find out what this picture is actually meant to show other than oil paint being lazily dappled onto canvas to form leaves on water. He holds his tongue, though, as it is obvious that Barry doesn’t share his opinion judging by his wide eyes and clearly astonished expression.

“I kn-knew th-that it is i-in p-private h-hands,” the blond remarks quietly, studying the painting with a fascination as if it showed an answer to a question he has been looking for forever. “I’ve s-seen p-pictures of it b-before b-but… th-this is… h-he h-had s-such an r-remarkable s-style.”

Gael makes the impression of a cat who has just eaten the canary and shoots Len a clearly self-satisfied look, as if Barry’s amazement pointed out even more what a philistine he actually is.

Len fights the urge to flip him off and instead turns to the blonde, who is still studying the picture attentively and he can’t help but feel oddly pleased by how fascinated his friend is by it.

“I’m in the possession of quite some marvellous impressionistic art pieces,” Gael remarks to Barry. “And of many more movements. What do you think of Caravaggio or Rembrandt?”

“R-really?” Barry actually sounds out of breath, like the simple notion of seeing pieces of this long-gone artists is both ridiculously exciting and hard for him to believe.

Well, Len certainly knows now where the next art piece he gets his fingers one would go.

“Certainly,” Gael agrees, still looking stupidly pleased, and nods to the passage on their right. “Let’s go this route, I prefer to start with the old masters and work my way towards the modern, this way you can follow the evolution of art through the centuries.”

The next couple of hours are spent with Gael leading Barry through the different section of this labyrinth of a gallery while Len follows them around without paying too much attention to what is said regarding the history of the artists, the paintings, the art styles, the brushwork, the coloration, the layering and so on.

While the two other men talk about the single pieces, he watches Barry and how he slowly but surely starts to relax and become more certain of himself till he has an actual discussion with Gael about Da Vinci’s *Salvator Mundi* that is present in this collection and how it is more likely a copy than the original.
It is nice to see him not that self-conscious of his stammer anymore like he usually is around people he doesn’t know very well and how much passion he puts into what he’s saying, standing up straighter than usual with his eyes blazing brightly as he makes his points and gesturing to emphasize what he is saying.

Len hardly ever sees him like this and he notices once again how very handsome the other man is, making him want to step closer to him and touch him, just a loose grip on his wrist or a hand onto his back, maybe just a brief brush of their shoulders…

No matter how much he tries to deny it, Len is well aware of what this is what he is feeling for Barry and while a part of him really wants to act on it, he also knows that he would likely mess it up horribly if he did.

Lisa may call him stubborn and stupid or in denial but Len knows himself, even better than she does, no matter how much she would disagree with him there, and he knows that he isn’t the right person for Barry. Just looking back to how he fucked things up all over again a couple of weeks ago makes it more than obvious that he is just not able to give the other man what he needs. He isn’t patient and he certainly isn’t a good person and he would always end up hurting the blonde in one way or another.

If he was a better man, a stronger man, he would have cut Barry off for real a while ago.

But he is neither.

He can’t be with him in that way but he can’t let him go either.

In a way, he knows that it’s the same for Barry as well, though.

Barry seems to need to have him around, wants him to be there even though he is very aware of what a potential source of pain and disappointment he really is.

No matter how little Len likes to think about it in this way, he knows that his friend is damaged by what happened to him, broken by a horrible life nobody should have to endure, and this is one of the reasons, probably the only not selfish one, why he can’t let himself just disappear out of the blonde’s life.

Barry, for whatever reason, has decided that he needs him and Len would try to be there for him.

He will make mistakes and hurt him in future just as he had in the past, he is well aware of that, but he will still try to make sure that the other man doesn’t break under everything his life keeps throwing at him. Aside from that, he knows that has also to protect him from danger that comes with being connected to the Rogues these days.

Everything going on with Amunet and that fucker Carmon has made it more than clear that he is the most likely reason for Barry’s life being in danger right now. He still could kick himself for not being more careful, for letting one of their damn henchmen follow him to Barry and realize that the blonde is someone important to him.

Cutting all contact to him would be a possible way to deal with that but it would likely not work and probably even have more disastrous consequences as neither Amunet nor Carmon are stupid and would still end up using Barry as a wager against him to do their bidding.

Fuck those bastards and fuck this damn drug –

Len is startled out of his brooding when Barry laughs, actually outright laughs, not the quiet soft
chuckle he usually uses but loud and bright and it is so unexpected that he can just stare at the blonde till the other man notices his gaze and quickly calms down again, looking slightly flushed and embarrassed but still smiling.

“Good thing he didn’t listen,” Gael remarks and meets Len’s confused and slightly annoyed gaze with a smirk. “Otherwise he would likely call me a hypocrite again or an outright liar but shame on him for ignoring us like this. It certainly serves him right.”

“You’re badmouthing me again, Mamani?” he asks gruffly but isn’t able to keep the grin tugging on the corner of his lips because Barry is looking at him in such a fond way that causes his stomach to flutter as if he was a damn teenager all over again.

“When am I not?” his friend retorts with a shrug, which causes Barry to chuckle again and Len to fight the nearly painfully strong need to reach out and pull the blonde closer.

He hadn’t expected this little trip to be such a success but Barry makes it hard to miss how very much he enjoys it here and he is glad for it.

After how down his friend has been for the last weeks, he certainly deserves a small pick-me-up.

“You want me to start and tell him some funny stories about you and the shit you got yourself into when you weren’t old as dirt yet?” Len arches an eyebrow and smirks when Gael frowns at the little quip against his age.

“I’ll remind you that you’re on the best way to be as old as dirt yourself.” The other man sniffs before he turns to Barry. “And don’t believe a word he says. This man is made of lies and bad puns, neither of which are worth listening to.”

“Will you shove it?” Len glares at his friend, not very happy about being reminded of his fondness to pepper up his image with puns, which, yeah, he even knew back then weren’t really that good but they were fun and everybody did things in their youth they aren’t exactly proud of when they are older.

“Why, mi querido amigo, isn’t it getting rather chilling in here all of a sudden?” Gael wonders aloud and actually starts to rub his upper arms as if he was suddenly freezing. “Hope nobody broke the heating, wouldn’t that be cold-hearted of our dear lady Fortuna?”

Barry snorts at that and ignores Len’s glare he gets in return.

“It w-would b-be b-bone-ch-chilling,” the blonde agrees instead.

“Not you as well…” He groans and pinches the bridge of his nose.

Maybe getting Barry to meet Gael wasn’t such a good idea after all…

“I l-liked y-your p-puns,” the other man points out in peaceable voice.

“No, you didn’t,” Len replies drily.

“N-not at f-first,” Barry agrees but adds. “Th-they d-did g-grow on m-me, th-though.”

He very much doubts that as using puns had been the best way to frustrate and annoy the Flash back in the day.

“Well, I for once am glad that you stopped using them,” Gael says. “You certainly had the worst
sense of humour.”

“Th-they w-were f-funny in a w-way,” Barry protests much to Len’s surprise.

“For three year olds,” agrees the Latin with raised eyebrow, which causes Barry to chuckle again and Len to give him another glare.

It’s close to three in the afternoon when they finally reach the last room of the collection, which is one of Gael’s most precious possessions and something he invested quite some money and years in to finish.

Contrary to the rest of the collection, it is not directly connected to the route that winds through the different areas but has to be accessed via a rather inconspicuous door that is put just before the small entrance area where they have started their tour before.

“Now to the heart of my collection.” Gael says to Barry as he knows that Len couldn’t really care less about any more pieces of art and just want to finally leave. “It took me more than two decades to finish this and you don’t even want to imagine the money I had to invest to get all the single pieces together.”

Barry, obviously curious now, looks at the door expectantly as the other man once again enters a code on a display next to it that is similar to the one they have seen next to the main entrance door before.

Again a series of clicks follows as locks unlocking themselves before Gael pauses a moment longer because he just has to be so damn theatrical all the time.

“You certainly won’t forget this beauty anytime soon,” he tells Barry with a glint in his eyes before he finally opens the thick security door.

If Len could put a picture to his own definition of tacky, it would be of this room.

One could get nearly blinded by all the gold in here that reflected the bright ceiling lights and the best thing he could say about the furniture is that it looks uncomfortable, the worst that it is just plain horrendously ugly, it’s the same with the walls and the huge chandelier that probably has to weigh three hundred pounds by how massive it is. The rest of the room consists of more paintings and sculptures and that odd looking golden statue of some guy riding a horse on top of what has to be a shrine.

He knows from Gael that it was made for the first King of Prussia but he has no idea why anybody would want to have something like that in their house even if they have enough money to feed it to their horses.

Barry, on the other hand, seems utterly mesmerized by what he sees, which isn’t really a surprise as it seems to turn out that he has just as bad of an taste when it comes to these kind of things as Gael does.

“Th-this is th-the Amb-ber R-Room?” he asks, his voice low as if he was actually humbled by what he sees there right in front of him.

“It is,” the Latin agrees, looking like his grin could easily go round his head if he tried a little stronger. “It is indeed, Schlüter’s and Wolfram’s greatest masterpiece. A room made for the Kings of old.”

Gael, who is taking the whole thing in as well, like he couldn’t get enough of it, doesn’t notice the
amused look Barry gives Len, who really starts to have enough of his friend and his annoying need to lay it on extra thickly when he thinks he has an audience he can impress.

"H-how d-did y-you g-get t-to it?" Barry turns back to their host. “It w-was s-supposed t-to b-be l-lost d-during W-Wold W-War t-two, w-wasn’t it?"

“It was indeed,” the other man agrees and again looks so very pleased with himself. “But you wouldn’t believe what can be archived with the right resources and enough endurance and patience.”

“He mean’s thanks to his parent’s money and due to his parent’s connections,” Len adds as he lets his gaze move around languidly.

“You know that’s not true.” Gael frowns clearly displeased by hearing this insinuation. “I didn’t get to a single one of the pieces here with the help of my relatives.” He pauses then for a second before he smirks and shrugs. “Well, except for the money, of course, but it’s not my fault I was born in my family, is it now?”

Len shoots him an amused look before he turns to Barry, who is studying his surrounding with a rather subdued look compared to how he initially reacted to it.

“Too gaudy?” he asks, trying to understand what caused the sudden change in the other man’s mood. He is surprised when there is a familiar sadness in the blonde’s eyes, accompanied by an also well-known guilt and shames as he briefly glances towards him before he shakes his head and looks back.

“N-no.” Then, Barry seems to reconsider it for a moment and gives him a faint smile. “W-well, m-maybe a l-little.”

It isn’t really hard to guess then what has caused this sudden change in his friend’s demeanour as Len hasn’t missed how he tensed up every time they’ve passed a painting or other art piece before of which Barry must have either known or at least suspected that it was outright stolen.

Gael probably noticed his guest’s reaction too, the man is certainly observant enough to do so, but he choose to ignore it as he knew from Len that Barry was a former cop, who was wrongly put into prison and had his former life pretty much ruined.

Both Len and Gael know that one can’t simply get rid of one’s nature and believes so easily, that those things often stuck to one till the end, but Barry has given the Latin no reason to react anything but friendly towards him so far as the blonde knew better than to start a fight over something like a stolen piece of art in this kind of company.

Still, Barry’s guilt and shame over enjoying a tour through Gael’s private art collection doesn’t sit well with Len as he wants the other man to enjoy this little trip without feeling like he is betraying his own principles for it.

Of all the people he knows, he wishes Barry would be a bit more selfish at times, grant himself a bit more leeway, because with where he is right now, he certainly doesn’t have to try and keep himself at such a high moral standard anymore.

Gael snatches the blonde’s attention again by starting to point out where he got the single pieces and what’s the story behind them, which is certainly entertaining for anybody who isn’t Len.

Despite his growing boredom and urge to finally move as he hadn’t expected them to stay for nearly four hours, he waits patiently, once again making do with watching his blond friend who soon seems able to relax and emerge himself into a conversation again.
Nearly another hour later, when they finally leave Gael’s collection behind and make their way upstairs to have dinner with the other man, who hasn’t accepted a no on their part as an answer, Len decides that he isn’t going to visit another art gallery or art museum any time soon again, not even for a damn heist seeing that he has certainly gotten more information on historical artists and politics today than he ever wanted to know.

While Gael is on the phone, ordering something for them to eat, Len and Barry took a seat on the other man’s couch in his living room that is just as spacious and as the rest of the house.

They are both nursing a glass of wine again as Gael, that jackass, conveniently forgot to buy any beer despite knowing that Len would pass by. There is an actual open fireplace in front of them but the chimney was closed a while ago and these days the fire one can watch flicker in there is only of artificial nature anymore, along with the fitting sounds of the logs crackling thanks to an audio file that is played over a hidden sound system.

Even so, it is still nice and even Len can admit that he finds it relaxing.

It’s definitely the same for Barry, who is sitting unusually close to him and seems rather drowsy, probably due to all the walking and also the wine he is currently drinking. The blonde is watching the flames quietly with half-lid eyes and a rather relaxed and calm expression on his face.

Len’s gaze drops a bit and he notices that his lips are slightly parted-

He averts his eyes towards the artificial fire that is burning in the fireplace and takes a gulp from his glass, welcoming the sour taste to banish what he has briefly imagines would the mouth of the man next to him taste like.

Fuck, this is exactly why he never drinks this shit, while he has no problem with beer, wine always make his mind go to places it really wouldn’t otherwise.

He nearly startles when there is a tentative and unexpected touch to his left underarm that feels like it’s burning his skin even through the shirt he is wearing.

So far, Barry has touched him only a couple of times, not even a handful probably, mostly it is just Len initiating any physical contact between them, and seeing the other man’s hands resting on his arm is nearly hard to grasp for him.

Barry’s blue eyes are warm when he meets them and for the first time he notices that the wariness that has been always in there for the last weeks is actually gone and replaced by something he can’t name, not because he hasn’t an inkling of what it is but because he can’t allow himself to go there.

“Th-thank y-you, L-Len,” the other man says quietly and squeezes his arm lightly. “I r-really enj-joyed t-today… w-w-with you.”

A slight flush creeps over the blonde’s face but he doesn’t avert his eyes.

Len wonders for a brief moment whether Barry has every really considered to act on what there is between them, whether he would ever really want to with everything that has happened to him.

In the end, it doesn’t really matter, though.

He stays quiet and cups Barry’s hand with his own.

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“He’s definitely not the usual kind of people you tend to pick as friends.” Len, who has watched Barry, turns back to Gael and frowns. His friend arches an eyebrow and shrugs. “Don’t get me wrong, I like him, he’s pretty alright for a former cop. It’s just that you usually prefer to surround yourself by people who are a little more like yourself.”

He snorts and gives the other man a grim smile.

“You mean assholes?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have said it this bluntly but…” Gael grins before he turns his attention back to Barry, who has fallen asleep on the couch about five minutes ago. He studies the blonde for a while before he glances back to Len. “When you told me that he’s would be pretty messed up due to what happened to him in prison you really didn’t exaggerate.”

Len frowns as the statement rubs him the wrong way.

“He isn’t messed up, I never said that,” he argues and has to remind himself that he has to keep his voice down to not wake the blonde next to him.

“Of course you didn’t but we both know what you meant,” the other man points out easily before he lifts a hand to stop Len from protesting. “Don’t be so defensive, I’m not meaning to insult him, I’m just stating the obvious. If you’ve such a problem with the term messed up let’s just call it traumatized, you like that better?”

He is right, Len doesn’t like it but he knows that Gael is only stating the truth.

“Por el cielo, don’t looks so pissed.” His friend chuckles before his expression turns more serious. “It’s a shame what happened to him, he’s obviously a good man.”

“Yeah,” Len agrees quietly and looks back to Barry. The other man has nodded off sitting upright with his chin resting on his collarbone and he would certainly have to deal with a stiff neck should he not change his position anytime soon. He thinks about pulling him a bit closer, so that his head would rest onto his shoulder but Gael is right there and he can’t bring himself to do so.

“How come that you two became friends if I may ask?” Gael meets his gaze calmly as he takes another sip of his wine before he adds. “You usually don’t frequent with the arm of the law.”

“He wasn’t a real cop.” Len averts his eyes to the artificial fire in the fireplace. “He was a forensic scientist-”

“A CSI?” his friend interrupts and sounds oddly delighted. “Jose always wanted to become one when he was young, he drove papi crazy with it.”

“Your brother?” Len snorts in disbelief. “The don?”

Gael shrugs and smirks. “We all were young once.”

“No shit.” Len shakes his head and tries to imagine Jose Mamani as someone working for the law but utterly fails. There probably exists not enough imagination in the world to make this possible.

“So, how did you and a CSI become friends?”

“Don’t know, it just happened,” Len explains reluctantly.

“Just happened that you took a former man of the law under your wings?” Gael asks incredulously.
“You remember that you hate pigs, don’t you?”

“He isn’t one-”

“Same difference, mi amigo. He still worked for the police and you Rogues usually don’t like to mingle with that sort, do you?” The other man points out and isn’t fazed at all by Len’s annoyed glare.

“Maybe it’s just none of your business?” he retorts grimly.

Gael chuckles and looks down to the glass in his hand with an amused smirk. They sit in silence for a long moment before the other man turns to Barry again.

“I can never say with you whether you’re that obnoxiously difficult on purpose,” Gael says while studying the blonde,“ or not.” He turns back to Len and gives him a thin smile. “Are you really that worried that I would harm your friend? Why did you bother to bring him over then?”

“It’s not that,” Len explains. “I trust you, otherwise I wouldn’t have brought him along, Gael. I just don’t like to talk about how we’ve met. He’s a good friend, that’s all there’s to know.”

“A good friend?” Something about the Latin’s amused smirk rubs him the wrong way and it must be obvious on his face as the other man quickly adds in a placating manner. “I’m sorry, I tend to stick my nose into things that aren’t any of my business but old habits day hard, mi amigo. You should know that better than anybody.”

“He’s just a friend,” Len insists and tries not to feel so damn embarrassed and livid about the other man having the damn nerve to say otherwise.

“Okay,” Gael agrees simply, which is just even more infuriating if that’s even possible.

Len glares down at the couch table made of hardwood in front of him, fighting the itch in his right fist that tries to urge him to hit something, preferably the other man’s face.

“We never really had the reason to touch upon the topic,” Gael says after the following uncomfortable silence has gotten on too long for his taste, “but I’m no homophobe.”

“Good for you.” Len hisses angrily and if looks could kill he is pretty sure that his friend would have died ten times over in the past couple of seconds.

“Right.” The other man sighs before he leans back into his chair and takes another sip from his glass of wine. “So, seeing how very well you take to talking about your friend, why don’t you tell me instead how your business with the black-market woman of yours is coming along. She’s still not over you dropping her like a wet towel?”

Len is certain that Gael is an ass on purpose now.

“Amunet is stubborn but she will calm down,” he tells him and glances over to Barry to make sure that the other man is still asleep.

“Really?” The incredulity is thick in his friend’s voice. “I don’t know whether we’re really talking about the same woman here. Amunet isn’t stubborn, that crazy woman is obsessive. She wanted to shag you for years and you knew that. I’ve really no idea how you could be so stupid to actually let yourself get into this with her, it’s like giving a junky a shot for free and expecting them not coming back for more.”
“She’s out of her luck, then,” he replies curtly.

“Wonder whether she’s aware of that.” Gael nods to Barry. “She knows about him?”

Len bristles at that and nearly get up to tell the other man off but he is still very much aware of the blonde next to him and instead takes a deep breath before he goes on in a forced calm.

“She does.”

“And she didn’t go after him so far?”

When Len fails to answer but his expression darkens, Gael snorts and shakes his head.

“How the hell is he still alive?”

“She knows that I would come after her if she harms one of—”

He breaks off because he wanted to say my Rogues and that just isn’t right, considering how Barry would probably kick up a storm by being put into the same category as them.

“You’re really fucking sentimental for such an infamous badass, you know that?” Gael grins and ignores the glare he receives in return.

“Shove it,” Len grumbles. “She won’t go after him again, I’ve talked to her and made myself clear.”

“You’re actually considering working for her?” This seems to catch the other man off-guard.

Len shrugs and takes a gulp from the by now rather warm wine, which causes it to taste even more awful than usual.

“There’s not exactly a wide range of options I can choose from,” he reminds his friend grimly. “With those jackasses of the Blue Velvet having her back, it’s difficult to keep her at a distance much longer if we want to hold our turf in the Twins.”

“You’ve spent nearly all of your live in those two cities, Len, isn’t that starting to get boring, anyway? Why not look out for a new playground instead? You know that my Cousin has this business in Brazil—”

“No,” Len cuts Gael firmly off. “We’re the Rogues, we’re not moving towns, the Gems are our turf, it’s always been like that and it will stay like that, nobody is going to change that, not Amunet and not Carmon.”

“Have you ever considered that this is probably the best time to let go of these stupid sentiments of yours?” Gael wonders with a slightly concerned frown. “You’ve more to worry about than that puta loca or Cameron. You know that things will get hot very soon in the states with how the public sentiment towards the heroes is changing, maybe it’s not a stupid idea to move someplace else for a while.”

“This concerns the fucking heroes—” Len starts but is cut off by the other man.

“Right, because the public will certainly turn a blind eye on the villains when they start to regulate the people more strictly who are actually doing them some good.” Gael meets his eyes firmly as he goes on. “Alvares is from the twins, you can imagine what happens to people like you when that nutcase actually becomes the next mayor?”

“He’s like many other politicians have been before him,” Len says dismissively, even though he is
well aware that his friend is probably right with his worries. Right now, he has enough on his plate than to worry about any fucking politician as well, though.

“Let’s hope you’re right, mi amigo.” It is obvious that Gael doesn’t agree with him and he can’t hold it against his friend as he himself knows that every kind of threat, no matter how small, shouldn’t be taken lightly.

“Yeah,” he agrees quietly and turns his gaze back to Barry, who is fast asleep by now but still is able to look utterly exhausted despite that. “Let’s hope so.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope enjoyed this chapter!

Looking up art pieces that are in private hands or have gone missing for this chapter was quite interesting. I like art and enjoy going to art galleries and art museums in real life (we have quite a couple really neat places here in Vienna when it comes to this) and it was fun and surprising to learn how many pieces of famous artists the public will never get to see in actuality other than on photos or replicas because they are in private hands.

Anyway, at least Barry got the opportunity to see some of these here thanks to Gael! ;)

I actually rearranged the content the next chapters (partly to make them longer :3 ) and to get myself a better overview again as this can be a bit of a problem when you have already written a story but start to add stuff to it. I’m pretty good when it comes to backup chapters for the next three weeks (having to stay in bed and being not allowed to do much other than rest has the advantage that I was able to do quite some writing, which you may have noticed by the couple of one-shots I put out over the last week) and I will probably keep at my schedule to update once a week with them but after than it could take a bit longer between updates (doesn’t has to be the case, I just want to mention it in case it happens).

Also, I really want to thank you guys for your kind feedback again, I really enjoy getting these, especially when I wasn’t feeling so good the last couple of weeks! :)

Hope you all are doing great! Till next Sunday!

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mi querido amigo – my dear friend

Por el cielo – for heaven’s sake

puta loca – crazy bitch

Le bassin aux nymphéas, reflets du saule – A piece by Monet that’s worth between 100 – 150 million dollars and in some undisclosed person’s private art collection. The title translates to “reflections of the weeping willow over the water lilies pond”. It was painted around 1920.

Salvator Mundi – An art piece by Leonardo Da Vinci, painted for King Louis XII of France around 1500. Original has been lost for centuries and while it seems to have
turned up again in 2005, many experts are still uncertain whether it isn’t just one of the many copies that have been made of this piece. Its worth is 75 to 100 million dollars.

The Amber Room – A room that had been sculpted out of amber by the German baroque sculptor and architect Andreas Schülter and the Danish amber craftsman Gottfried Wolfram. The room began construction in 1701 and was installed at Charlottenburg Palace, the home of Griedrich I, the first Kind of Prussia, before it was given to Peter the Great in 1716 to celebrate the peace between Russia and Prussia. It contained many jewels, painting and gold and around six tons of amber on 55 square meters and was dismantled and stolen by the Nazis during WWII. The Amber room has been lost since then.
Chapter Notes

Here is another chapter or, to be correct, one chapter that has initially been two. I decided to put these two together because I won’t be able to update next week and because it fits due to their content. It got rather long because of it and I hope you don’t mind (you’ve more time to read it, tho ;).

It is not edited, so please excuse any mistakes you find in it. If you like to, don’t hesitate to point any gramma errors and such out to me, I will always appreciate it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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April 2nd year

“It is so nice of you to do this, my dear,” Mrs Ming says as she hands Barry a glass of lemonade before she turns back to the freshly painted walls of her living room with a pleased look, obviously liking the job that has been done so far.

He lets his eyes go over the nearly done room as well and decides that the work of the last couple of hours has really paid off nicely as the fresh colour does give the room a very nice new look.

“You two have done such a really marvellous job and I’m certain James is also very grateful that you’re helping him with this,” she goes on and looks over to her grandson with a warm smile. “The poor boy has to spend his holiday working in my old little flat instead of finally getting some time to relax.”

James, who is already sipping on his refreshment, chuckles and rolls his eyes in mock exasperation. “The poor boy is glad when he can help you with something. I’ve been way too little around over the last two years, I’m glad that there’s something I can help you with, lao lao.”

It is a nice experience to watch both of them to interact so lovingly with each other. The last month has had Barry in somewhat of a depressed mood for the most part and while Len’s little surprise trip is still not failing to let a pleasant warmth spread through his chest whenever he thinks about it, it also causes a familiar dread to follow up close as most of the Rogues are currently back in the Heights due to how massively south their last heist went.

Being somewhere where he can distract himself from the worry that is constantly nagging at the back of his mind is very welcome and to spend some time in such a nice company like this also helps him to forget about his current troubles at least for a little while. Offering Mrs Ming to paint her living room has certainly been a good decision.

She mentioned to him how she was intending to hire someone to do so the last time Barry and she sat over a new puzzle at the beginning of this week and he thought it would be a nice way to thank her for all her kindness by offering to do the painting himself. While it certainly could never repay all the times she invited him to stay for tea and snacks whenever he felt depressed or lonely, it is at least a small token of gratitude.
James decided to join in on this little endeavour rather unexpectedly this early afternoon as he returned about a week earlier from his last business trip and wasn’t willing to let the chance to help his grandmother get away.

Barry hasn’t exactly been happy about the prospect to work this close with the other man but, against his initial worries, it has not even come close to be as awkward or uncomfortable as he expected it would.

“Well, I will leave you two to your work, then,” Mrs. Ming says and gives both of them another warm smile before she vanishes back to her kitchen where she is currently working on their supper. It is supposed to be a small thank you to both of them for their help and Barry is quite curious to find out what she’s making as the older woman has been very secretive about it so far.

“I’m certainly looking forward to dinner,” the man next to him says with a chuckle. “I’m starving.”

Barry jumps slightly as he hasn’t expected James to speak and feels just as stupid as the handful of times before this has happened today so far. Somewhat reluctantly, he turns to him.

“I’m s-sure it w-will b-be g-good,” he says somewhat lamely and gives James a faint smile before glancing down at the ground, feeling a familiar unease settle over him he just is unable to get rid of.

Since his run-in with the Blue Velvet’s middlemen, he has become ridiculously tense around other men again, even though he is very much aware of how silly this really is, especially with James, who’s certainly not interested in harming him.

It’s depressing how similar he feels to how it was just after he’s been released from prison and he hates it…

“You’re ready to take on the last wall?”

Once again, Barry startles slightly and looks back to James who, while still smiling, is now watching him with that slightly concerned curiosity again like he had a number of times already over the course of the afternoon.

“Y-yes,” he stammers curtly before James has any opportunity to inquire whether he is alright as, even though the other man has been surprisingly lenient when it comes to his odd behaviour so far, Barry knows that he can’t possibly have missed his ongoing jumpiness and general nervous attitude around him.

“Good.” James nods and while gives him a somewhat faint smile, Barry doesn’t miss his slight frown or how his eyes linger a moment longer on him with a look that is both curious and a bit concerned. He doesn’t say anything else, though, and instead walks over to the last wall that hasn’t gotten a new paintjob yet.

Barry hesitates for a moment before he follows.

They work mostly in silence for the next twenty minutes and while it isn’t a particularly uncomfortable one, Barry keeps wondering what the other man must be thinking of him and how odd he has to appear by how tongue-tied and tensed up he is despite how obvious it is that his companion tries to be friendly.

He does feel bad for how stand-offish he has to come across but he knows that there isn’t much he can do about it. This is by far not the first time he had to interact with another person who is intimidating him just by being there and trying to force himself to make small-talk with James would make things only more awkward.
It is stupid but with Len and most of the Rogues gone to whom he has become quite close to so far, he feels more vulnerable than he has in a long time, even though he knows that this makes no sense in a situation like this. James is his employee’s grandson, a really nice man, who could not be any more different from criminals like the ones that are currently troubling his friends and while he is very much aware of it, it’s like his subconscious still urges him to be ridiculously suspicious of him nonetheless.

Barry shakes the depression thoughts off and forces himself to turn his attention back to the task at hand. Drawing and painting, even if it’s just Mrs Ming’s living room, are surprisingly effective ways for him to relax, and it certainly doesn’t hurt that he enjoys the task at hand and how he can mostly lose himself in the repetitive simple motions of it.

As a teenager, he earned himself some money by helping out the people in his old neighbourhoods with smaller tasks, among others painting fences or window frames, and even though it was never a very demanding thing to do, he usually enjoyed it. It was a possibility to get out but also do something else with his time other than just hiding away from home-

“My grandmother told me you’re quite an artist.” James’ voice doesn’t fail to catch him off-guard again and Barry freezes for a second before he forces himself to look over to the other man. His face grows hot as soon as he realizes what has actually been said and he can’t stop himself from protesting feebly.

“I’m r-really n-not th-that g-good,” he explains and ducks his head in embarrassment when he notices that James is watching him attentively now.

“I don’t know about that,” the other man remarks and while Barry isn’t looking at him anymore, he knows by the tone of his voice that he has to be smiling. “I’ve seen a couple of sketches you gave her and they look pretty good to me.”

Barry unconsciously bites his lower lip as his cheeks heat up and keeps his gaze on the brush in his hand, wishing that they would not touch upon this. He is sure the other man just wants to be nice but he has never been good when it comes to dealing with compliments, especially when it comes to his hobby as he isn’t really that good at it.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel uneasy.” James sounds sincere and meets his eyes with a serious but kind expression when Barry glances up.

“I just like your sketches,” he goes on. “At least to me, they seems very good.”

“Th-thanks,” Barry says quietly and already feels bad for how he reacted to this obviously well-meant words. He gives the other man a small smile before he turns his attention back to the nearly finished wall.

They don’t talk again after that and while Barry tries to keep his mind on painting there is still a familiar guilt gnawing at the back of his mind for how unfriendly he’s must come across.

It’s about fifteen minutes later that they’re done and they both start to put the painting utensils away and clean themselves up before Mrs. Ming calls them for dinner.

The surprise meal turns out to be different kinds of filled buns which taste just delicious and seem to be one of James’ favourite dishes, at least judging by how many of them he is able to wolf down. Barry enjoys them too but at a slower pace, savouring the tastes of the different fillings that are mostly new to him, while he listens to James who tells them about their last business trip to Canada and his brief camping trip he had with a friend during his last two days there.
“So, we were lying in this tiny tent, both of us bone-tired after the fishing fiasco and half asleep, and suddenly there is the sound of something big moving right next to me on the other side of the ridiculously thin fabric of our tent.” James turns out to be a rather entertaining story teller, he knows how to use his voice to keep their attention with his hands moving along to his words at times to emphasize certain part, and there is a way to how he speaks, something energetic that is just contagious.

Both Barry and Mrs. Ming listen attentively as he tells them about what was most likely a grizzly bear that accidentally found its way to their camping location in the middle of the night, how he was stiff as a board due to fear while his friend couldn’t care less and actually fall asleep on both him and the bear which was still making its rounds outside their tend.

“I could have kicked his ass in that moment.” James laughs and quickly turns to his grandmother and somewhat sheepishly adds. “Sorry for the language, lao lao.”

He seems to notice Barry’s amused smile then as he turns to him and grins.

“And John had the nerves to complain during all of the next day about how slow I was,” the other man goes on with a chuckle, “because he clearly couldn’t understand how any sensible person would stay up all night just because some stupid bear passed by. He clearly has no idea that we city-boys aren’t used to sleep in places where hungry beast can maul us at nights because they think we would make an amazing midnight snack.”

“I don’t understand why you would want to do a camping trip with dangerous animals like those around, anyway,” Mrs. Ming tells her grandson with a slight disapproving frown. “I don’t even want to consider what could have happened to you out there.”

“You really don’t need to worry,” James assures her. “John is a ranger, if anybody knows whether a situation out there is dangerous or not, it’s him. I just overreacted, you know me.”

“Still, you didn’t even tell me that you would do such a thing,” the older woman goes on. “What if something had happened to you out there?”

James looks rather guilty at that.

“I know but the opportunity to do so just came about and I didn’t want to worry you. We both know that you’d probably have gotten as little sleep that night as I did if I’ve told you.”

“I’m your grandmother, James, of course I would have been worried,” she chides softly. “What else do you have a grandmother for than to look after you?”

Barry watches them quietly as he sips on his cup of tea and tries to ignore the slight stinging sensation in his chest. He’s too old for this, to mourn after something like kind old grandparents, and he feels foolish for doing so anyway.

The taste of the warm jasmine tea turns shallow as the unwelcomed memory of his own childhood forces itself onto him and he tries to will it away, suddenly angry at himself for still having not made his peace with this missing part of his life.

The thought that he had something similar to grandparents once, though, catches him off-guard then and he can’t stop his own mind to bring up the unwelcome memories of the times he spent with Jay and Joan. How those two kind and lovely people were to him more of a family than any of his foster families had ever been and how they accepted him and later on Iris and Wally as well like they actually were their own.
It hurts to remember this, it causes a familiar sharp and cold pain to bloom in his chest like ice flowers on glass-

“You’re alright there, Barry?”

James meets his gaze with a slight worried expression and Barry feels his cheeks grow hot again as he realizes that he got caught up in his own stupid mind once again.

He forces himself to smile and nods.

“Y-yes, j-just t-tired,” he explains and reaches for his cup of tea again, just so that he has something in his fingers. It isn’t lost on him that Mrs. Ming watches him with a familiar concern as well now and it is just plain frustrating how he is able to bring the people who actually care for him down like this every time he is around them. It is really a miracle that they aren’t fed up with him just yet.

The rest of the evening passes by rather quickly and while Barry finds himself in one of those morose moods again, he puts effort into being part of the conversation some more even if it’s just to get some of the worry to vanish from the kind old woman’s face.

Shortly before ten, feeling full and drowsy, Barry decides to take his leave as he still need about an hour to reach home and even though the slight depression from before has mostly left him again, he is tired and just wants to crawl into his bed and sleep.

James decides to take this as his cue to leave as well, which isn’t really surprising as the man has kept yawning through the bigger portion of the later part of their conversation. He is likely still exhausted from the lost night of sleep from a couple of days ago.

“You sure you are alright, my boy?” Mrs. Ming asks as Barry put his jacket on and it’s obvious that she is still somewhat worried, probably because she can sense his mood. He gives a reassuring smile and nods.

“I’m f-fine, n-nothing s-some s-sleep c-can’t t-take c-care of.” Which usually is true as he tends to feel better in the mornings after some rest. He is glad to see when this seems to set her mind somewhat at ease.

“Thank you again for your help, my dear boy,” the old woman tells him warmly and gingerly takes hold of his right hand to give it a slight squeeze. “You both have done a wonderful job.”

No matter what, it’s always pleasing to hear such nice praise and Barry feels a familiar fondness for the old woman overcome him.

“I’m g-glad I c-could h-help,” he tells her and genuinely means it.

Mrs. Ming repays him another kind smile before she glances over to the clock above the entrance to the kitchen. After studying it for a second, she turns back to him with a slight frown. “You will have to take the nightline to travel home, won’t you?”

Barry doesn’t have the opportunity to agree before Mrs Ming turns to her nephew who has just put on his own coat.

“James, would it be a bother for you to drive Barry home? It would take him over an hour otherwise and while I would give him off tomorrow morning,” she says and shoots Barry a slightly exasperated but also fond look, “he most likely would still arrive on time for the opening.”

“Of course,” the other man agrees readily and turns to Barry. “That wouldn’t be a problem.”
“N-no, it’s f-f-fine, y-you r-really d-don’t h-have t-to b-bother,” he tries to decline but James waves him off.

“It wouldn’t be a bother. I don’t have to work tomorrow and can sleep in as long as I want.”

“You really would do me a favour,” Mrs Ming adds and gives her grandson a grateful look. “I wouldn’t have to worry about Barry arriving home safe and sound.”

They are ganging up on him…

Barry isn’t sure what to think of that and while he feels a bit befuddled by this realisation, it’s also kind of amusing. He knows that there really isn’t any way for him to get away from this offer and while notion of being alone with the other man makes him uncomfortable, he doesn’t want to appear rude either, especially with how obvious it is that this would really mean a lot to Mrs. Ming.

“Ok-kay,” he agrees still somewhat reluctantly but thanks James for the kind offer.

“No need to,” James tells him and really doesn’t seem bothered by having to make a detour because of him.

Barry tries not to show his anxiety and reminds himself this is Mrs. Ming’s grandson and he doubts that his pleasant behaviour has only been a facade so far.

After they said their good-byes, Barry follows the other man to his car that is parked in front of the small shop. It is a sleek and expensive looking model in a dark metallic blue that gleams in the light of the street lantern nearby. One he would never have been able to buy even during his time as a forensic scientist.

Briefly, he wonders again how it is that Mrs Ming’s grandson is so well off while she is obviously living a rather modest life and still working with over eighty years. They seem to love each other very much, after all, and James seems like a nice enough man who wouldn’t mind to share his money with his loved ones.

“You’re alright there?” Barry jumps slightly and realizes that he halted a couple of feet away from the car while James has already unlocked it and opened the door on his side. “Have you forgotten something?”

“N-no,” he quickly assures and makes his way over to the other man. “I w-was j-just l-lost in m-my mind f-for a s-sec-cond. S-sorry.”

The other man chuckles and tells him not to worry. “I’m a master when it comes to losing myself in my own head.”

The car is just as nice-looking on its inside as it is on the outside and Barry can’t but let his eyes go over the interior which is obviously state-of-the-art, all leather that feels smooth and soft to the touch, seats that feel way more comfortable than even his own bed and with a main touch display being present at the headboard instead of regular buttons.

“You live in the Keys, right?” James asks while he starts the car which causes the display to light up and some radio music to play in the background.

“Yes, m-my ap-partm-ent b-building is at th-the c-crossing of M-Messner’s and L-Loebs’.”

The other man hums and starts to touch some of the fields on the display which calls up a navigation system where he puts in the address. Barry is pretty impressed by this and also a bit surprised that
James hasn’t commented at all on his obviously expensive car.

It is probably unfair but he is used to people who have a lot of money to touch upon this fact even if it is unconsciously and not in a pretentious way. He is glad that the other man doesn’t seem to see the need to do so.

“You alright with KC 3?” James’s question causes Barry to turn his attention back to him. It takes him a moment before he realizes that he is talking about the radio station.

“Yes.”

The music that is currently playing sounds nice enough to him. It is a song he knows from work as there’s usually a radio playing for the customers during the day and he has never really been a picky listener, anyway.

Barry puts on the seatbelt and listens to a female voice that starts to instruct James the route to his apartment building.

The car pulls back and he decides to turn his attention to the window and watch the world pass by outside like he usually does when he travels home by bus as it is kind of soothing to him.

For the next couple of minutes, they drive in silence other than for the radio that plays in the background.

Barry listens to the DJ of the channel as he announces the next song without really paying much attention to him while he watches the city outside. It is a lulling experience and he feels how his eyes start to grow heavy, especially now that the car starts to get warm.

“Thanks again for helping today.” James’ voice cuts through his drowsy mind and causes him to freeze up. It only takes him a moment to get out of his stupor, though, and he looks to the other man who meets his eyes briefly before he turns his attention back to the streets in front of them. “I know that today is your day off and I really appreciate it.”

“It’s nothing.”

The other man’s gratefulness makes him feel somewhat uncomfortable as he really doesn’t think that it’s such a big deal. Mrs. Ming has been the first person who has shown kindness to him after his release from prison and she has never reacted with anything but patience to him and his odd quirks unlike most other people would have. He knows that he has been outright lucky to get to work for her and painting her living room is most likely the least he could do to repay her for how she makes him feel less like a waste of air but like someone who deserves this kind of treatment despite of who he is and his past.

“It means a lot to her,” the other man disagrees and adds. “I’ve been worried about her because I’m so much away and it’s good to know that she has someone who does help her with the shop and the tasks that have gotten too much for her.”

James looks over to him once more with a serious expression.

“She’s a very kind-hearted old lady and I was concerned because of that because most people would have taken advantage of it,” he tells him earnestly before his expression lightens somewhat again. “It’s good to know that I don’t have to worry about this anymore.”

Not sure how to respond to this, Barry only nods quietly and turns his attention back to the car window. To his relief, James doesn’t say anything else regarding this matter but turns back to the
streets as well.

Usually, it takes him about fifty-five to seventy minutes by bus to arrive home at this hour as he has to change the line once and the busses usually use a longer route after ten. Going by James car reduces this to not even twenty-five minutes and while Barry has felt mostly awkward during their ride he still end up being glad to have accepted the offer after all.

The streets are mostly empty when they pull up his corner and park in front of the building’s entrance.

“I think this should be your apartment complex, right?”

Barry nods and gives the other man a grateful smile.

“Thank you for giving me a lift.”

“Of course.” James returns it easily and Barry is just about to bid him good bye and open the door to exit when the younger man stops him. “I’m not sure whether you’re interested but I’m going to lay a new parquet floor in my apartment and I could need a helping hand. You would get paid for it, of course.”

When Barry hesitation, he goes on.

“You don’t have to, of course, but I think we both would benefit from it and I would pay you fifteen dollars an hour.”

At hearing this amount of money, Barry’s eyes widen slightly as he earns officially seven dollars and twenty-five cents an hours, which is about minimum wage for Kansas but all Mrs. Ming can afford to pay him and that only for thirty-six hours a week even though he often works much more than that.

“The food would also be on me,” James goes on and judging by his amused expression he hasn’t missed his reaction.

“That’s way too much…” Barry knows that he should shut up and not point something so ridiculously obvious out. Also, he probably should not even consider this in the first place.

“I think it’s up to me how much I pay someone for helping me,” the other man points out slightly bemused.

“I can only help you on Sundays,” Barry finally says after he mulled over it for a long moment.

“That’s fine with me.” James smiles again and seems certain by now that Barry is going to accept.

“How sounds Sunday in two weeks to you?”

While Barry really doesn’t like the idea of putting himself in a situation where he would be alone with the other man in a place he doesn’t know and that could potentially turn out badly for him, he also knows what a ridiculously good offer this really is and that he would likely not get another opportunity to make such an amount of money this easily anytime soon again, even if he should only work for a couple of hours or so.

With most of the Rogues currently in prison and him still keeping his distance to the remaining ones, he is struggling again with making ends meet and he would be an idiot to not accept.
At the thought of his friends, he can’t help but let his mind briefly brush upon Len as well, which causes a familiar worry and dread to settle in his stomach. Not willing to think about any of this right now, he forces himself to turn his attention back James and gives him a somewhat reluctant nod.

“Alr-right.”

“Great.” The other man seems quite pleased by his answer and Barry notices how the corners of his eyes seem to slightly crinkle as he smiles. “Is it alright for you if I pick you up from here around ten?”

He nods hesitantly, still uncertain about whether it has been a good idea to agree to this or not.

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He nods hesitantly, still uncertain about whether it has been a good idea to agree to this or not.

“Just tell my grandmother should you change your mind or something else should come up,” James goes on. “She can relay it to me then.”

“Ok-kay.”

Barry exits the care after James wished him a good night and watches the other man drive off with a mixture of apprehension and worry.

It was probably a stupid idea to agree but he still had the possibility to cancel this even though he knows that he most likely wouldn’t. The other man hasn’t been anything but nice towards him so far and he really could use the money.

It would really make no sense for him to back out of their agreement…

With a soft sigh, Barry turns around and makes his way up the steps to entrance of the building.

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Barry comes home later than usual as he has missed his initial bus, which meant that he had to wait for the next one for nearly an hour. At least the weather started to get nicer and the temperatures stayed at a comfortable enough sixty-one degree Fahrenheit even at night.

He is bone tired and the last thing he wished to find when arriving at his floor is a man sitting in front of his entrance, which causes him to freeze the moment he spots him.

The stranger is with his back to the door and his leg pulled up, so that he can let his head rest on his knees with his face turned away toward the other end of the hallway, which makes it impossible for Barry to see whether he knows him or not.

A familiar fear overcomes him and a well-known queasiness settle into his stomach.

It doesn’t help that the lightening of the floor is still rather dingy, even with a couple of the bulbs having been replaced a few weeks ago, and Barry feels a familiar dread overcome him in regard of the place he has to call his home while his racing mind comes up with a couple of possibilities of how to handle this situation.

Like going up a floor to Mary and stay at her place for the night, or try his luck and sneak past the stranger to Eddy’s flat, even though knocking at the other man’s door would most likely alert whoever is currently sleeping in front of his flat. He could also turn around and go downstairs to the basement, to hide away there and maybe find some place that could offer him a spot to sleep.

Barry doesn’t like any of this ideas, mostly because he hates the basement and because he doesn’t want to bother his friends just because he is such a damn scaredy-cat. It isn’t Mary’s nor Eddy’s
problem but his and he really shouldn’t burden them with him not being able to handle this as he highly doubts that this man is somehow connected to the Network or the Blue Velvet. They certainly wouldn’t hire someone this sloppy.

Still, he isn’t stupid enough to actually try and confront that guy and he really doesn’t want to bother Mary, especially because he can’t be sure that she has a customer over, so that it only leaves the basement or Eddy. The stranger, whoever he is, is most likely a drunk who found his way inside the building and trying to pass him to get to Eddy’s flat could turn into a bigger hassle than it is worth it seeing that Barry knows how erratic those can be, which means that trying his luck in the basement is the most sensible thing to do.

Silently cursing his rotten luck once again, he is about to turn around when the man starts moving, which in turn causes him to freeze up.

To his utter surprise and relief, he recognizes the man just a moment later when he lifts his head to sleepily look over into his direction. It is the Scot, the man who helped him months ago after being mugged. Barry has to fish for his name for a couple of seconds before he remembers that it is Evan.

He watches how the other man also halts as soon as he notices him. For a second, a rather confused expression overcomes his face before he seems to pick up on where he actually is.

“Bugger…”

With a groan, Evan starts to get to his feet and Barry, who doesn’t feel that intimidated or worried anymore, slowly makes his way over to him. While the other man isn’t a complete stranger to him, Barry still is somewhat wary of his unexpected presence, and he stops short again when it hits him that the other man shouldn’t know where he is living.

“Wh-what are y-you d-d-doing h-here?” he asks and hates how damn faint and apprehensive his voice sounds, so clearly frightened. “H-how d-do y-you kn-kn-know wh-where I’m l-living?”

The Scot stretches himself with another groan before he turns his attention to him with a frown that makes it clear that he finds it rather stupid that he has to even ask.

“Ah followed ye home a while ago,” he explains with a shrug and Barry can’t help but tense up at these words.

“W-what!?”

He probably shouldn’t be that surprised seeing that Evan is a criminal who hasn’t exactly helped him out of the goodness of his heart. Still, the implication that this man followed him without his notice is very unsettling.

“Keek,” Evan says and Barry has utterly no damn idea what this word even means, “dinnae freak out, Ah mean na harm, okay? Ah’m just in a bawherr o’ a dilemma ’n’ need a place tae stay th’ night.”

“And y-you th-thought th-that I c-could offer one t-to you?” The disbelief in his voice has to be very audible as the other man’s frown deepens.

“Ah wullnae mess wi’ yer stuff, a’right? Ah can kip oan yer floor,” Evan grumbles and crosses his arms. He is mostly glaring at him now and Barry feels more exasperated than threatened by his behaviour.

It isn’t lost on him that Evan looks rather rundown, not exactly like a hobo but close to it and he realizes that the Scot most likely hasn’t his own place to stay if he is here and asking him to spend the
night on his couch. Back then, when he helped him he already wanted money in return and while Barry has assumed that this is simply because he is one of your average thugs it seems that this wasn’t the only reason.

It is probably a completely asinine to even consider to let that man into his flat, a stranger who could easily overpower and hurt him should he feel like it and he knows that Len would have a field day should he find out about this. Barry can actually picture his friend and his angry disapproval right then and it causes a familiar pang to shoot through his chest.

It would be the more sensible thing to send Evan away and threaten him with calling the cops in case he should ever turn up here again.

Evan helped him, though, and while Barry remembers well enough that he didn’t exactly do so out of selfless kindness, he also knows that most people in that area and that late at night wouldn’t even have bothered at all.

“Y-you t-try anyth-thing and I’l-l’ll c-call m-my f-friends. You w-won’t h-have t-to w-worry ab-bout f-finding a p-place t-to s-sleeping anym-more after th-that, d-do you und-ders-stand?”

Barry hopes that his shaking voice isn’t giving his bluff away as he has never been a good liar, especially in situations like this one.

Against his worry, Evan’s grim expression changes to one of utter disbelief before he grins and nods.

“Sure thing, ye wilnae even notice Ah’s thare.”

Barry doubts this very much but despite the gnawing doubt about this decision, he still turns to his door to unlock it.

“Y-you c-can t-take th-the c-couch,” he tells Evan as they enter and tries not to let on how damn anxious he feels. “Y-you c-can also t-take a sh-shower after I-I’m d-done if you w-want b-but you’ll r-rest afterw-wards. I d-don’t w-want you t-to p-poke ab-bout d-during th-the n-night.”

The amused look Evan gives him at that rubs him a bit the wrong way because he can guess that the other man very much doubts that he would find anything of value here.

“M-my b-bedr-room is also off l-l-limit,” he tells him somewhat tersely now and points to the closed door. “Y-you enter anyt-time d-during y-your s-s-stay and I’l-l’ll c-call m-my f-friends, n-no m-matter wh-what. D-do y-you underst-stand?”

“What if thare is a fire?”

Barry doesn’t find this amusing at all and Evan gets it as his smirk quickly dims away.

“Rricht, na disrupting yer kip.”

“G-good.” Barry nods and informs him curtly that he is now going to use the bathroom and that he could take him up on his offer afterwards and also use the shower. Evan only grunts in response as he is clearly not that interested in doing anything of that kind and instead turns his attention back to the couch.

When Barry exits his small bathroom about fifteen minutes later, he isn’t really all that surprised to find the other man already deep asleep and snoring. He studies him for a couple of minutes before hesitatingly retreating to his own bed for the night.
Barry’s knees ache like hell when they are finally done with the last part of James’ flat and it is a relief to just sit down on the newly parquetted ground after hours of moving furniture around, ripping off the old floor and replacing it with a new one.

There have been a few small breaks and they had lunch but other than that they worked for nearly six hours straight, which is what his joints are currently cursing him for.

“You’re doing alright there?” James, who is still standing, aches an eyebrow at him and while he is watching him with a smile, Barry doesn’t miss the slight worry in his eyes as he does so.

“S-sure,” he assures the other man as he leans back against the wall. “J-just need a b-breather.”

“You know,” James says with a smirk, “taking a little break sounds like a great idea.”

With that, his companion follows suit and takes the spot in front of him, while pulling his working gloves off before he lets his gaze move through the living room, the last area they have worked on, and he seems to be pretty satisfied by how it turned out judging by his pleased expression.

“I have to say, even though neither of us is professional,” the other man starts and looks back to him, “we have done a damn fine job, wouldn’t you agree?”

Barry agrees with a nod and pulls his own working gloves off. “Esp-epecially after w-we f-found o-ut th-that you c-c-can’t use th-the h-hammer on th-these b-boards t-to f-fix th-them.”

James makes a slightly pained face at the tease as it has been him trying to get two pieces to connect in the entrance hall with much more force than necessary or advisable. It really paid off that the other man bought more parquet than really affordable for his apartment.

“Well, I’ve learned something new, at least,” he points out with a grin, which causes Barry to chuckle.

“T-true.”

“You, on the other hand, have a surprisingly extensive knowledge on craftsmanship.” James gives him a curious look. “You’ve learned than from your dad?”

A knot forms in Barry’s stomach, painful and firm, and he stills for a moment as this question has taken him by surprise. He licks his lips and tries to smile but he is pretty sure that is has to look just as unnatural as it feels.

“No,” he answers and averts his eyes to where some of the tools are laying on the ground close to the entrance. “N-not m-my d-d… d-dad.”

The silence that follows is brief but uneasy and Barry tries to will the other to not ask him about his family or anything like that.

“Well, wherever you’ve gotten your mad craftsman skills from,” James says with a purposefully light tone, “I’m still impressed. I’ve never been good with anything involving a hammer or saw.”

“You d-did p-pretty w-well for th-that,” he points out and feels himself relax a bit again.

“I read up on how to lay parquet on google so that I wouldn’t look too bad and in case both of us hadn’t any idea of what we are doing,” the other man confesses before he chuckles. “I’m gladly
sticking to my numbers, though.”

James lets his head drop back and sighs. “Done in one day, thank god, I feared we would need much longer, to be honest.” He looks back to Barry and lifts an eyebrow. “You’re up for dinner? I think we’ve earned ourselves something really nice for this and seeing that you did the lion’s share of the work, it’s up to you to choose what we’re getting.”

“I’ve a-al-ready ch-chosen wh-what w-we g-got f-for l-lunch,” Barry points out, leaning back against the wall because even just sitting upright is strenuous right now.

“Because you had done the lion’s share then as well,” the other man reminds him with a bemused smirk and another arched eyebrow.

Barry chuckles before rubs his tired eyes. If he was honest, he isn’t really all that hungry right now. Getting home and into his bed seems much more interesting to him.

“I can also bring you home and we could get something to eat another time.” James has obviously picked up on his exhaustion and meets his surprised look with a warm smile. “It’s rather late,” the other man goes on after a glance at his wrist watch, “and you have been here since early noon.”

With a slight frown, he turns back to Barry and suddenly looks a bit guilty. “I probably should have kept the time better in mind, today is your day off and you probably didn’t want to spend all of it here working.”

“It’s f-fine,” Barry waves him off but can’t fight off a yawn before he goes on. “Y-you’re p-paying m-me, af-fter all, and I exp-pected th-that it w-would t-take th-this l-long f-from th-the b-begin-nig. I c-could h-have alw-ways t-told you th-that I w-wanted t-to l-leave.”

Despite his reassuring meant words, James doesn’t look really convince.

“When do you have to get up for work tomorrow?”

Not really sure what the other man is getting at, Barry hesitates to answer. He really hopes he isn’t offering him to stay for the night because there is no way in hell he would agree to that.

“I could pick you up and get you to my grandmother’s shop,” James explains when he notices his wariness. “This way you could grab some more sleep and I wouldn’t feel so bad about slaving you away today.”

“You d-didn’t,” Barry argues and wonders why the other man is suddenly making such a big deal out of it. It was to be expected that it would take a long time to lay the parquetted in the whole flat and it really hasn’t been anything close to a bad experience for him as James is a rather funny and nice guy.

His initial discomfort regarding being in the flat of another man he hardly knows has lessened within the first hour and by now he doesn’t even feel particularly wary of him anymore. “And it isn’t n-necessary, I c-can t-take th-the b-b-bus. You d-don’t h-have b-bother t-to g-get up th-that e-early.”

“It wouldn’t be a bother,” James explains. “I have to be in Kansas City tomorrow rather early anyway, it would be on my way there.”

Barry’s next protest dies on his lips hearing this and while he really doesn’t want to, he starts to consider the offer. It probably wouldn’t be a lot of extra sleep he would get from that, maybe half an hour to forty minutes, but it would be some extra rest that he really wouldn’t mind to get. Falling
asleep has become a rather difficult endeavour for him again over the last couple of weeks due to how his mind tends to start worry about Len and the others whenever it isn’t occupied with something else and being alone in bed at the night usually offered the perfect opportunity for this.

“I d-don’t w-want t-to c-cause you any h-hassle.”

“You don’t,” James assures him. “I really appreciate your help today, Barry, you did make this a lot easier for me than it would have been otherwise.”

A surprisingly comfortable silence sets between them after that when the other man doesn’t urge him and instead leaves Barry time to thinks about the offer.

After a few minute went by, he looks back to James and agrees somewhat hesitantly to the generous offer.

“Ok-kay, if it r-really d-doesn’t b-bother you.”

The other man’s response is a kind smile.

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Mary groans loudly and Barry feels how his face grows uncomfortably hot. He shoots a miffed look towards the couch where Eddy is currently giving their younger friend a massage after she has complained about how her shoulders and neck kept bothering her for a couple of days now.

Eddy notices it, of course, and gives him a wide grin in return as he doesn’t even try to hide how amusing his discomfort is to him.

“Turn it down, sweetheart,” his friend says with a smirk. “I think Mr. Prude over there doesn’t like it that you vocalize how amazed you are by my mean and satisfying massaging skills.”

Barry feels his face grow even warmer at that and gives Eddie a half-hearted glare from his spot at the kitchen table before he turns back to his book, intend to just stubbornly ignore them from now on.

“Be quiet, you oaf.” Mary huffs from her spot behind the back of the couch but groans once more when Eddy seems to find another tensed up spot of her shoulders.

Barry doesn’t even have to look over to be aware of Eddy’s obnoxious grin.

“You sure you don’t want to try out my magnificent hands of awesome next?” the other man asks and laughs outright when he shoots him an even darker glare in response.

“Stop being so damn insufferable, Ed,” the pretty woman admonishes their friend, which causes the later one to roll his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I am sorry for being my excruciatingly annoying self again. I have no idea how you’re able to stand to be around me.”

“P-patience, l-lots and l-lots of p-patience,” Barry provides drily but still returns his friend’s amused grin he receives then.

“You obviously can’t be suffering too much under this hardship, otherwise you would hardly keep inviting me over,” Eddy points out as he sits back.

“You aren’t all that bad,” Mary agrees cheeky and shrieks in surprise when her friend pinches her
side before he quickly retreats to avoid a slap.

“Thanks, madam, I live to serve and please.” Eddy gets onto his feet and makes a flourish bow towards her before he turns and makes his way around the couch and over to Barry, who has been watching them bemusedly.

“You know that some consider it impolite to read while they’ve guests over,” his friend remarks with a disproving frown and nods to the book in his hands.

“You aren’t g-guests,” Barry points out with a smirk but puts the book down to turn his full attention the other man who takes the seat across from him.

“No?” Eddie aches an eyebrow at that.

“Of course not, dummy,” Mary agrees who has also gotten up and put her shirt back on. “We’re his friends, otherwise you would have been thrown out ages ago.”

Eddy snorts and pulls a familiar deck of playing cards out of the back pocked of his jeans.

“We’ve already established that I’m not that bad thus I will take this as nothing but empty threats.” He starts to shuffle the cards and turns to Barry. “You fancy a game, my dear sport?”

“S-sure, as l-long you p-promise n-not t-to ch-cheat.”

“You wound me, I don’t cheat.” His friend huffs in fake indignation. “I’m too good at this to have to fall back on morally reprehensible means like that.”

Mary joins them and takes a seat next to Barry before she shoots Eddy a clearly unimpressed look.

“You do cheat, you even boast about it afterwards.”

“I do not,” he denies but doesn’t really seem the least bit bothered by that accusation.

“Whatever you say, sport.” Mary rolls her eyes and shares an amused look with Barry.

Eddy starts to hand out the cards and nods again to the book he is currently reading.

“’nother crime novel?”

“N-no.” Barry shows him the cover of the thick book James borrowed him. “It’s about m-meteorology, h-how it h-has ch-ch-changed o-over th-the l-last f-few d-d-decades.”

“Really?” His friend makes a face and gives him one of these incredulous looks that are reserved for those moment when he really doesn’t get him. “Why?”

“W-why n-not?” He shrugs in return and reaches for his glass of coke to take a sip.

“Yes, why not?” Mary agrees and shoots Eddy an amused smirk. “Some people like to read something more sophisticated than the newest Playboy.”

“How do you know about my Playboy collection? Have you been going through my stuff behind my back?” The other man waggles his eyebrow at Mary, which causes her to laugh and roll her eyes.

“Y-you c-can t-take a l-look in it if y-you w-want,” Barry offers but Eddy turns him down with a bemused smile.

“Nah. I’m good.” His friend leans back into his chair and picks his cards up to sort them. “I’ll gladly
make do with the weather channel in that regard.”

“So high-brow,” Mary replies with fond exasperation and does the same.

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**June 2nd year**

It is on an early morning in June when Barry finds Axel asleep in the staircase of his apartment building on his way to work. The kid is curled up with his familiar jacket stuffed below his head as a pillow, looking asleep but palpably tenses up and grows completely still the moment Barry steps close to him.

“Axel?” Barry asks in a mixture of confusion and incredulity as this is probably the last person he would have expected to meet on his way to the bus stop just now.

“’ry?” the kid mumbles as he squints up at him and immediately seems to relax again. He yawns widely then and sits up with a soft groan before stretching himself in a way that reminds Barry a bit of a cat.

“Morn’,” Axel greets him in a much clearer voice before he yawns once more and gets onto his feet. “You’re on your way to work?”

“Wh-what are you d-doing h-here, Ax-xel?”

The boy only shrugs as he rubs his eyes and mutters something under his breath Barry can’t quite pick up.

“D-don’t you h-have s-somep-place t-to s-stay?” he asks concerned but remembers that the young teen told him that he is living with a group of other street kids.

Axel gives him a slightly miffed look before he huffs. “Man, you can be so damn annoying. I haven’t caused any trouble, have I?”

“Th-this isn’t about m-me w-worrying ab-bout you c-causing t-trouble,” Barry explains patiently, which causes Axel to cross his arms in a deviant manner while he is giving him a clearly disbelieving look. He really isn’t surprised by this reaction and tries again. “You c-can’t j-just s-sleep in s-stairc-cases, th-thiis c-can b-be v-very d-dangerous.”

The teen snorts and arches an eyebrow at that. “Wouldn’t have picked up on that one.”

The boy’s smirk wanes when he notices Barry’s disapproving frown, though. He sighs and rubs his eyes again before he gives him a half-hearted petulant glare. “Look, this is just temporary, alright? I’d a fight with the guys I usually stay with but I’m sure we’ll be cool again in no time, so don’t worry so much.”

“Y-you’ve b-been th-thrown out?” Barry knows that the boy is not appreciating his concern but he can’t help it. The temperature outside are no longer in the area that it could be dangerous to anybody who lives at the street but Axel is nothing more than a kid and obviously one that has currently nowhere to stay, which is just plain dangerous, probably more than the boy wants to admit or even understands.

Axel gives him an evil eye and lifts his chin in a deviant manner as he protests. “They haven’t thrown me out, I told them off and left, alright?”
This does doe much for Barry’s worries and he wonders at which hour the kid actually arrived yesterday night. He came home shortly after half past eleven and Axel hasn’t been around then.

Nobody, especially a young teenager like him, should wander around the Keys this late on his own, even if he was used to living on the streets and to look out for his own.

Then, another thought crossed his mind.

“D-did you kn-know th-that I’m l-iving h-here?” he asks somewhat suspiciously and feels his stomach sink when Axel gives him a funny look.

“Yeah.” The kid nods and wrinkles his nose as he briefly glances around the staircase. “I definitely wouldn’t have picked this crappy place to camp out otherwise.”

A feeling of resignation overcomes Barry when he realizes what this means and he doesn’t really want to know the answer to what he asks next.

“H-have you f-followed m-me h-home b-before?”

Axel actually has the decency to look somewhat sheepish about this but shrugs rather defiantly.

“Yeah, I mean, I tailed you a while ago, not to spy on you or anything, I was just curious.”

Barry’s frown deepens and he wonders if this is a common occurrence that people follow him home on which he has just not picked up on so far. The thought is quite upsetting and he can’t but think of Kenneth and what Len and Lisa told him about the Blue Velvet and Blacksmith.

It is obvious that those people would have no problem whatsoever to get to him should they really want to, a damn thirteen year old and some guy he only meet briefly once before can obviously do so without problem.

He really wishes Len would be back out of the Heights already, he knows that it is pretty pathetic but he would feel much safer knowing that he could fall back upon him just in case.

“Hey, I’m not going to cause you any trouble, no need to look so down.” Axel’s words cause him to focus back to the teen and while he feels slightly sick by the realisation that his private home address doesn’t seem to be so private after all, he tries to give the other boy a faint smile.

“I kn-know th-that, Axel,” he tells him earnestly. “You’re a g-good k-kid, I’m n-not w-worried about th-that b-but about you and y-your c-current l-living c-cond-ditions.”

“Man, don’t fret it, I know how to take care of myself.” Axel huffs but despite his annoyed appearance he still seems a bit pleased by Barry’s concern, which makes sense, seeing that he most likely doesn’t have many people how are honestly worried about him, especially grown-ups.

“You w-want t-to j-join m-me on m-my w-way t-to w-work? W-we’re g-getting anoth-ther d-delivery t-today and I c-could n-need s-some h-help p-putting everyth-thing a-away.”

“You may look all nice but under your façade you are such a slave-driver,” Axel grumbles but promptly agrees when Barry offers to get him some breakfast in return.

It is still dark outside when they leave the building a bit later and he listens to the teenager tell him all about whatever mischief he and his friends have been up to over the last couple of days as he has grown accustom to over the last couple of months.

Having Axel around during the drive to work is a nice change to how he usually only has his own
thoughts to occupy himself with and the boy seems to pick up that he really pays attention to him as he keeps on talking for the rest of their way.

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“Uh, who’s that boy?”

Eddy stops just a couple of steps in, just enough for Barry being able to close the door behind him, and frowns at Axel who is laying on the couch, flipping through a magazine he has brought over when he arrived last night.

“Why’s that any of your business?” the teen asks in return and eyes Eddy in a clearly suspicious way but doesn’t move an inch from his cozy spot.

“Axel.” Barry shoots the kid a warning look before he turns back to the other man who seems much more amused by the teenager’s rude behaviour than put out by it. “He’s a friend, who’s currently in need of a place to stay.”

It occurs to Barry that Eddy could somehow misunderstand the situation when his friend keeps eying Axel with a slight frown and he quickly adds that it would be only temporary.

“He’s staying at your place, Bear,” Eddy remarks and shrugs. “He can do so as long as you let him, it’s none of my business.”

“Yeah, it is none of that guy’s business,” Axel parrots in agreement and Barry notices somewhat exasperated that he is still giving Eddy a rather dirty look over the edge of his magazine.

“Axel, this is a very good friend of mine and you will behave in his presence, do you understand?”

The kid only huffs but grumbles his agreement before his face completely vanishes behind the cover of the magazine again.

“Sweet child.” Eddy smirks bemused. “Remembers me of myself at his age.”

He nods over to the table and asks him whether he maybe would have some coffee for him.

“You could buy your own one for a change,” Barry points out drily but turns to make his way over to the kitchenette all the same.

“I could but this still wouldn’t make you prepare it for me.”

Barry shakes his head over his friend’s silly reasoning but doesn’t really feel all that annoyed by it. Having Eddy around is nearly always a nice thing, after all.

The pleasant aroma of freshly grinded coffee starts to fill the room soon afterwards and it isn’t long before Barry joins his friend at the table with two hot mugs.

“So, you’ve decided to open a day-care?” Eddy asks as he accepts his coffee. “Does that mean Mary and I aren’t fulfilling enough for your life anymore?”

“D-don’t w-worry, y-you’re s-still p-pretty g-good at k-keeping m-me b-busy m-most of th-the t-time,” Barry assures him with a snort and while his friend’s presence helps to ease his nerves a bit, it can’t drive away the nagging worry about having Axel staying at his place.

It was without a doubt a stupid idea to offer the kid that he could stay here till things with his friends
have smoothed out again but he has done so more or less out of affect, just as Axel had been about to leave to look for somewhere to spend the night at that day. He hardly could take it back afterwards, especially with how genuinely delighted the boy seemed by the prospect, even though Barry had initially thought that he most likely wouldn’t want to share his small rather crappy flat with him, seeing that he usually does insist on Axel following a couple of rules as long as he is around him.

Now the fat’s in the pan and he can’t bring himself to asks Axel to looks somewhere else to stay while he hasn’t smoothed over things with his friends. It would not only be cruel to do so but worry him to no end.

“I hope so.” Eddy grins over the rim of his mug after he took a sip. His eyes briefly wander over to the couch again, behind which back Axel is currently completely vanished. The bemused expression wanes then and he turns back to Barry.

“You sure that this good deed is worth all of the potential trouble it could bring with it?” The other man is talking in a much lower voice now, so that the boy wouldn’t be able to overhear them even when trying.

“I know that your parole restrictions are all crap,” he goes on when he notices Barry’s miserable expression. “But they can still get you back to the Heights faster than even the Flash could.”

Eddy’s blue eyes are focus intensely on him as he speaks and Barry can’t help but fidget slightly under his gaze.

“Y-yes,” he agrees quietly and turns his eyes on the mug in front of him he hasn’t touched yet. He knows that he is playing a very dangerous game here, something that would probably have worse consequences than his friendship to the Rogues could have should anybody find out. In such a case, nobody would hesitate for even just a second to lock him back up in one of the dingy cells Iron Heights has to offer.

This is also the reason why he insists on Axel leaving his flat before him in the mornings or that they can’t be seen travelling together again. Understandably, the boy found and most likely still finds this pretty odd and tried to get him to spill the reason for it till Barry got so fed up that he told him angrily that he would need to look for another place to stay if he couldn’t keep his curiosity in check. Afterwards, he immediately felt guilty about losing his patience like that but Axel seems to have taken his words seriously, at least, as he hasn’t tried at all again so far.

“Don’t look so damn down,” Eddy tell him with a smirk. “You can always hide him in the bedroom when someone comes around or send him over to my or Mary’s place if there is time for it. The fire escape would get at least somewhat useful that way.”

Barry smiles slightly before he chuckles and rubs his eyes tiredly.

“Y-yeah, th-that’s n-not g-going t-to h-happen. It w-would b-be j-just m-my l-luck and h-he f-falls off it and b-breaks s-someth-thing wh-while h-he’s at it.”

“You’ve clearly too little faith in others.” Eddy heaves an exaggerated sigh at that and takes another sip from his coffee.

They leave that uncomfortable topic rest after that and go for a game of Crash instead. Axel, seemingly having started to get bored by the magazine in the meantime, joins them while Eddy hands the cards out and more or less demands to join in.

“I’m a master of cards,” he lets Barry know rather proudly and shoots Eddy a dirty glare when the
man snort in audible disbelief. “Just wait and weep, old-timer! And just so you know, it’s impolite to whisper while others are around,” he adds in a rather miffed tone, which causes Eddy to bark a laugh and Barry to remind him with a rather disgruntled look that it isn’t polite to pry either.

Axel rolls his eyes but dutifully promises not to do so again.

Both of the men find this rather hard to believe.

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A loud crash startles Barry awake from his late afternoon nap. The first thing that comes to his mind is Axel, who is currently reading some comic book on his couch, followed by the horrifying notion that Wally could have discovered their little agreement.

Though, Barry quickly rationalizes with himself that Wally would never hurt the kid and it is much more likely that he himself would be at the core of this ruckus if his nephew should have really gotten wind of any of this. Then he remembers Kenneth and, before he can even think of what he’s doing, he is already out of bed and stumbling towards his bedroom door.

What greets his eyes is a scene he hasn’t expected at all and he watches somewhat bewildered how Sam, who is clearly as surprised as Barry to find himself in this situation, desperately tries to get Axel off his back. The boy, on the other hand, is clearly hellbent on not letting him do so. He has a good grip on the Rogue, his arms locked around the man’s throat and his legs around his middle, and is cursing like a sailor, all the while seemingly trying to strangle Sam.

“Axel, s-stop!”

The teen is caught off-guard by his appearance and Sam uses this moment to get a better grip on his young attacker to pull him off his back and throw him at the ground where he land with a pained yelp. Before Axel has any possibility to get up again, the other grabs his arm and turns it in a firm grip behind his back. The pained expression on the teens face makes it obvious that this is anything but pleasant. “Fuck you!!! You stupid bastard! Let go of me!!!”

Sam huffs in annoyance and turns to Barry, who has come up to them by now. His look is one of annoyance and confusion. “You’ve got yourself a new friend here?”

“P-please l-let g-go of h-him, S-Sam, y-you’re h-hurting h-him.” Barry watches Axel, who keeps cursing the Rogue to the moon and back through clenched teeth while trying to get up again.

“So that this little rabid raccoon can try to suffocate me again?” Sam snorts incredulously and frowns when Axel starts to spit insults at him again. “Damn straight, you old ugly asshole!!!”

Axel yelps in pain when Sam pushes his arm a bit further then.

“I am neither old nor ugly, you stupid little pest,” the man grumbles before he notices Barry’s concerned and misgiving expression and finally lets go of the boy with another annoyed huff.

Before Axel has the opportunity to try and throw himself at Sam once more, Barry grabs his arms and holds him back.

“C-calm d-down! Th-this is S-Sam, a f-friend of m-mine and h-he m-means n-no h-harm.”

“He came out of the freaking bathroom!” Axel protests but thankfully stops to look all that keen on jumping Sam again. “There was no guy around in there when I took a leak about ten minutes ago!” The boy turns back to their unexpected guest and scowls. “He looks fishy, you sure he isn’t a
psychopath?"

Sam’s scoffs but doesn’t give Axel more than a dismissive glance before he turns his attention once more to Barry, while still rubbing his throat. “You wouldn’t have some coffee for me?"

“S-sure, as l-long as you c-can b-behave,” he points out with a slight smile and feels how the tensions slowly starts to ease away from him again.

“Hey, I didn’t do anything, it was this little mad version of Rambo who jumped me.” Sam nods to the kid with a slightly sour expression but doesn’t seem like he is really holding it against him anymore.

“You could be a madman, Barry tends to attract this kind of folk,” Axel grumbles, obviously still not sure whether to trust Sam or not, which causes the later one to chuckle.

“Well, the squirt has a point there, doesn’t he?"

“Hey! I’m no squirt, you ugly old fart!”

“Isn’t that brat a real charmer?” Sam remarks drily before he turns to make his way over to the kitchen table with Axel’s suspicious gaze following him all the way. The teenager turns his attention back to Barry, when he touches his shoulder slightly. He gives the kid a reassuring smile. “H-he’s a f-friend, n-no r-reason t-to w-worry, Axel.”

His words don’t seem to really convince Axel but Barry takes it as a good sign that the teen doesn’t outright protest either and instead follows him over to where Sam is.

While he prepares some coffee for the other man, he also heats some milk up to make Axel a cup of hot chocolate, a treat the boy really enjoys whenever he receives it. He tries not to think what Sam’s visit could mean and instead tries to stay concentrated at his task at hand.

When all of them are set with their respective drinks, Barry takes a seat next to Axel and can’t but give the other man a worried frown.

“H-has s-someth-thing h-happened w-with th-the others?”

With Axel around, it is difficult to speak with Sam about the other Rogues as Barry doesn’t want to say something to give them away, even though it is possible that the boy already knows who their guest is. The Rogues’ alter egos aren’t exactly unknown, even though most would have a tough time to recognize them out of their colourful outfits more often than not. This worries Barry a bit while Sam doesn’t seem really bothered by the possibility of the young teen finding out who he really is.

“They’re still on their little vacation,” the other man answers with a shrug. “They’ve all been doing fine the last time I checked up on them, well, according to the circumstances, at least.”

“Wh-when w-will th-they b-be b-back?”

It has been nearly eleven weeks by now and he doesn’t understand why they haven’t broken out already. The Rogues are famous for getting out there as quick as possible and it worries Barry that they are still in there. In the news, he hasn’t found anything about any of them being seriously hurt, nothing that would acquire any of them to stay in the infirmary for more than maybe a day, anyway.

Again, much to his frustration, Sam shrugs and takes another sip of his coffee before he simply adds. “Pretty soon.”
Barry frowns, as this answer is hardly as precise as he has wished for it to be but with Axel around he doesn’t want to pry any further. He is quite sure that Sam is rather uncommunicative on purpose regarding this topic, most likely just to annoy him.

Well, at least Len and the others seem to be alright, which does calm his worries a little bit, even though he would have given a lot to learn more.

“Ι-I s-see,” he mutters quietly and studies the amber coloured tea in his mug for a moment before shooting his friend a wary look. “Wh-why d-did you p-p-pass b-by th-then?”

“Wow, you really seem to have missed me.” Sam snort but the smirk makes it clear that he doesn’t take Barry’s words the wrong way. He sits back in his seat and shrugs. “I was just wondering how you’re doings.”

“Y-you kn-know h-how I’m d-doing, y-you’re k-keeping t-track on m-me;” he points out drily.

They aren’t using the small mirror anymore, after Len and the others have been caught, Sam hasn’t tried to contact him via the small device again, which wasn’t such a surprise as the other man never liked to do so in the first place for whatever reason. Instead, Barry has started to pick up on movements in the corner of his eyes when he passed by mirrors and other reflective surfaces. Not very often, but he isn’t stupid and the conclusion is not hard to make.

“You picked up on that, hm?” The other man doesn’t looked very abashed about being caught at stalking him and instead seems to find it rather amusing.

“You c-could h-have sh-shown yours-self, y-you kn-know?” Barry feels a bit miffed by his friend’s nonplussed attitude which increases when he receives another snort in response.

“Well, you could have called,” Sam remind him and it causes Barry to fall quiet because the other man has a point.

There have been a couple of times when he held the little mirror in his hand and tried to make up his mind whether to contact Sam or not. In the end, he always decided against it as he wasn’t sure whether he would be welcome there anymore now only Mick, Marco, Digger and Sam are still around, especially after he made himself rare around the hideout the weeks before most of the Rogues were caught.

It isn’t as if they have ever been hostile towards him or anything like that but they never seemed all that interested in having him there either and he really doesn’t want to force his presence upon anybody.

“I-I… I w-wasn’t s-sure you’d w-want m-me t-to,” Barry explains honestly after a brief pause, which doesn’t seem to surprise the other man at all.

“You really have to work on your insecurity issues, Allen.” Sam doesn’t sound like he means it in an insulting way but Barry still bristles slightly in response. “You’ve been coming over every other day for months before that,” his friends goes on with a smirk. “Believe me, we would have made it clear by then if we didn’t want you around.”

This makes sense, none of the Rogues usually mince their words when they don’t agree with something and Barry starts to feel rather stupid again.

There is still a thing he doesn’t get, though, which is why they would want to have him around in the first place.
It isn’t as if they get anything from it and he is pretty sure that his stammer is only amusing for so long before it grows annoying.

“Barry.” Sam sounds slightly exasperated now. “You don’t wanna hang out with us that is fine but we’re not going to grab the pitchforks should you want to come over either, okay?”

The notion of these men actually not minding to have him around even though Len isn’t there to justify his presence is strange and Barry studies Sam quietly for a moment, wondering whether this means that they’re actually seeing him as something like a friend as well.

“I d-don’t w-want t-to b-bother you,” he says quietly and doesn’t avert his eyes from the other man’s gaze. “I kn-know th-that I-I c-can b-be… o-odd.”

Sam doesn’t answer immediately but studies him before he leans back into his chair and gives him a faint smirk. “We all have our quirks, Barry, and being shy or having a stammer really aren’t the worst flaws any of us has to deal with every day, so don’t be so self-conscious all the damn time.”

Feeling rather embarrassed all of a sudden, Barry turns his gaze towards the window next to him and nods quietly.

“Besides,” Sam adds after a brief and somewhat uncomfortable silence, “you’re making a really mean pot of coffee and that’s always a skill anybody of us can appreciate.”

The other man’s grin causes Barry to relax a bit again and he gives him a hesitant smile in return.

“L-Lisa’s v-very g-good as w-well.”

“Yeah, but princess usually just makes enough for herself and her sugar darling.”

Barry chuckles at Sam’s sour expression before the other man pulls out a set of poker cards from his jacket and asks him about a game. He hesitates for a moment as Axel is present and it is then that he realizes how unusually quiet the kid has been so far. Initially, he has feared that he would butt in every other second and make a real conversation with Sam mostly impossible. This hasn’t been the case at all, though.

Axel, who picks up on his considering gaze, lifts his eyebrows and shrugs. “I know how to play poker, so it’s fine by me but I don’t have any cash on me.”

“Who said that you little piranha could join in?” Sam asks but doesn’t sounds like he would really mind.

“You scared I will clear you out, greybeard?” Axel retorts, which causes the Rogue to scowl.

“What the fuck? I’m hardly over forty yet, you little shit.”

Despite Barry’s initial hesitations to let Axel join in, he decides that it would be fine to play a game without any actual betting other than for the bag of M&Ms the boy produced out of nowhere. Sam seems fine with that as well, even though he doesn’t seem able to not munch continuously away on their wagers till there is hardly enough left for a second game, much to Axel’s annoyance.

It is two hours after Sam has come over that he takes his leave again, this time through the door, with Barry’s promise that he would come over next Saturday afternoon for a game of poker. The surprise visit of the other man has left him in an unusual good mood and he decides to make himself and Axel a little snack, even though they have had dinner already and he has to be careful about rationing the food to have enough left for the next week before he gets his next pay-check.
The boy likes the idea a lot and even offers to help him preparing the macaroni with eggs.

Barry has just put the freshly boiled noodles into the pan and is about to add the two eggs, when Axel asks him about their earlier visitor.

“That dude, he came through the mirror before, didn’t he?”

At his surprised and slightly alarmed expression, the teen only rolls his eyes and remarks that he isn’t stupid.

“You c-can’t t-tell anyb-body about th-this, Axel.” Barry tells him in a worried and grave voice that causes his younger friend to frown.

“Sure, no worries there, Barry. I have your back, we are bros, after all.”

Barry isn’t sure how to response to that and makes do with a nod and a thin but grateful smile.

Again, he starts to worry about how fond the kid seems to grow of him and how dangerous this could be for either of them.

“Dude, start to stir if you don’t wanna eat burnt macs.”

Axel’s voices gets his attention back to his actual task at hand and he curses softly under his breath when he notices that the kid is right.

“Well, good thing you have me around, you woolgather way too much.” With a smirk, Axel walks back over to the table to take care of the remaining M&Ms, while Barry keeps an eye on their food.

He tries to shush the worries in his mind but notices that he doesn’t feel really that hungry anymore.

***

“Awright,” Evan greets him and Barry asks himself once more why he always has to open the damn door.

“You n-need a p-place t-to s-stay t-ton-night?” Somehow he should have known that this would be a likely consequence of letting the other man sleep on his couch for one night. If this was going on like that he could really consider opening a motel.

“Weel… aye,” Scot agrees somewhat hesitant and actually has the decency to look a bit abashed by his request.

The still healing bruise on the other man’s right temple isn’t lost on Barry and he wonders where the other man has gotten that from and whether this could become dangerous for him. Letting someone else stay in his flat, as long as they are of age, isn’t exactly against his parole, at least if they aren’t somehow involved in criminal activities themselves. In other words, this here is most likely another violation of his restrictions and the sensible and clever thing would be to send him away. After all, he didn’t own this man anything.

“Ah’ll be gaen before yer up ’n’ ye wilnae notice me at a’,” Evan add as his hesitation isn’t lost on him. “Ah wilnae cause ye any trouble.”

Barry frowns and already could kick himself for going to agree to this but his unexpected guest has been true to his word the last time around and should something happen, he would at least be able to contact Sam. Not that he wants to consider this possibility as he would rather not have Len learn of
"F-fine, b-but th-the r-rules are th-the s-same as l-last t-time, you aren’t t-touching anyth-thing and m-
my b-bedr-room is off l-l-limits."

The other man looks honestly relieved and readily nods agrees. “Sure, Ah wull be as wheesht as a
moose.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Barry steps aside and lets the other man in.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

It is rather long but I didn’t like the notion of leaving you off with the initial version of it, where it ended and not update for another two weeks, this way I think it works a bit smoother.

Also, I crossed 300 kudos, which is just crazy and I wanted to celebrate it a bit with you. ;) Starting this, I would have never thought that so many people would like my story or that I would get so much nice feedback from so many kind people. Really, thank you all for it, I can’t tell you how happy this makes me! :)

Unfortunately, this chapter, despite his length, has no Len in it but he will return in the next one, where we will also have another poker game with the Rogues, or at least the ones that aren’t in prison right now. I’m really looking forward to this one!

Till in two weeks!
Of Cakes and Reunions

Chapter Summary

Barry joins Sam and the other Rogues, who are currently not in Iron Heights, for another poker game. Things don't go as smoothly as he has hoped for.

Also, Len return. :3

Chapter Notes

This chapter isn’t edited, so please excuse any errors you may stumble across and feel free to point them out to me if you want, I will take care of them asap. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

July 2nd year

“You’ve made us cake?” Sam gives him a bemused look after Barry told him what is currently under the tin foil that is covering the plate he has brought over, and he turns to eye the small gift with obvious curiosity.

Suddenly, the idea to make this doesn’t seem like such a good one anymore, and Barry realizes that he should have just picked up a pack of chips instead from work.

Neither Lisa nor Hartley would have bat an eye in regard of him baking something, and with Len around everybody usually holds his tongue no matter what they think of his hobbies. Today, none of them is here, though, and he regrets that he has just given in to the hunch that this could be a nice kind of thank you for inviting him over again.

Now he isn’t so sure about it anymore.

“Well, thank you, I guess.” Sam steps a bit closer to inspect the still covered food, oblivious to Barry’s doubtful expression.

“You d-don’t h-have t-to eat it, I c-can t-take it b-back w-with m-me w-when I l-leave,” he tells him somewhat unhappily and is surprised when Sam just lifts an eyebrow at that and shoots him a look like he is being ridiculous.

“And get rid of the chance to actually eat something decent for once?” his friend asks.

“It isn’t anyth-thing s-special,” Barry explains and hands him the plate somewhat reluctantly.

“You’ve been living off canned beans for nearly two months, I think there isn’t a single thing out there that couldn’t top this for me right now.” Sam lifts the foil and makes a surprised and pleased noise. “I don’t give a fuck whether you’ve thrown this together in five minutes, Allen.” He shoots him a grin. “It looks delicious, and I know of your mean pancake skills, so I don’t doubt that it will
taste just as damn good.”

Barry feels how his cheeks turn warm, and he jumps slightly when Sam barks a laugh as he hasn’t missed his embarrassed reaction.

“Come on, let’s get to the others,” Sam prompts, and they start to make their way to the living area, at least Barry assumes so as it’s been usually there that the Rogue hang out to drink, play cards, or do whatever to entertain themselves in between jobs or while laying low.

It’s odd being here again after nearly three months especially with Len not being around. He hasn’t been over to any of the Rogues’ hideouts so far without the other man being present as well, and he has always just assumed that Len is the actual reason the Rogues in general tolerating him being there seeing that someone like him, who once worked for the CCPD, would be certainly regarded as too much trouble to keep around for most criminals.

Following Sam through a long hardly lit corridor, Barry quickly realizes that this hideout is the same one where he joined them the first time for a game of poker. He has been over here a number of times since then, but it is clear that nobody has bothered to try and clean the place for a while now. Not that this is really surprising seeing that most of the Rogues don’t seem to really care about these things and with both Hartley and Lisa not being around. It is usually both of them who tend to keep the place at least somewhat in order.

Barry can’t say that he has missed this particular part of being here.

It turns out that the large room Sam leads him to, is the one they usually use as community room. So far, only Mick is present when they enter, doing a crossword puzzle in some magazine, and he only gives them a nod in greeting without actually looking up.

“Take a seat, I’ll grab you a beer.” Before Barry can protest, Sam has shoved the plate back into his hands and is out of the room again, leaving him feeling rather awkward.

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“You heard, Scudder,” Mick says after a minute went by during which he didn’t move from his spot close to the entrance as he is uncertain whether it is really a good idea to join the other man at the table. “Take a seat.” He looks up from his magazine and smirks. “I’m not biting, despite what people may say.”

The embarrassed expression Barry makes in response seems to amuse the other man, and he chuckles, which in turn causes him to tense up even more.

“You’re a stressed out fellow.” Mick leans back into his chair while he considers him for a moment before his gaze zooms in to the plate he is holding. He lifts an eyebrow and nods towards it. “You brought food over?”

“Cake, homemade,” Sam answers in Barry’s state as he chooses this moment to re-enter the room. Digger, who is following his colleague, snorts at that and eyes Barry amused. “Homemade cake? You are a bloody housewife or something?”

“Shut up, Digger, because you aren’t going to eat it.” Sam gives the other man a look that is clearly meant as a warning to watch what he is saying, but the Australian only shrugs while he takes a seat at the table.

“Why waste good food?” Digger asks and takes a pull on his beer. His gaze turns back to Barry, who is still standing close to the door. “Doesn’t care whether a pansy made it or not.”

Barry bristles, and his grip tightens at the plate enough that he is certain that it is going to snap any
moment now under the pressure. Suddenly, he has no idea why he has decided to come here, why he has ever considered it. It has been a stupid idea, a stupid, stupid idea.

Sam groans in response while Mick only snorts and gives their colleague a disbelieving look.

“What?” Digger frowns, apparently not sure what faux pas he walked into this time.

“Really, Digger?” Sam asks incredulously, and while he too has reached the table, he hasn’t sat down yet, so that he glares down at the other man.

“Hey, I’ve no problems with pansies, Hartley is one too, and I don’t mind the guy,” Digger argues before he frowns and adds with a slight sneer. “Other than for the disgusting vermin of his that keeps following him around.”

“Remember what Hart’s told you,” Mick interjects amused. “They don’t like it when you call them pansies.”

“Whatever, then gay or homo, I couldn’t give less of a bloody fuck.” Digger shrugs as he is obviously no longer interested in discussing the proper term of homosexuals and instead turns his attention back to the plate Barry is still holding in a near death-grip. “So, what did you make? Brownies? I could kill for bloody brownies, mate.”

It should be somewhat funny and in a way it probably is, but Barry doesn’t feel anything but horrified and sick by what the other men have just said. He isn’t gay, he isn’t much of anything anymore, but he isn’t… He isn’t interested in men, he likes Len, he knows that, but it is different. Len isn’t like…

Barry takes a shaky breath and wonders why the Australian thinks that of him. He is obviously not the only one judging by the others’ reactions, and it is so damn humiliating.

“Relax,” Sam says, and when Barry turns his attention to him, he notices the slightly worried way the other man is looking at him now. “It’s really no big deal, you know that Hartley is also gay and–”

“I-I’m n-not g-gay!”

The urge to fling the plate at the other man is nearly overwhelming, and he hates how they assume that about him, how they dare to do so when they know next to nothing about him.

This piece of information seems to surprise the other men who are now all looking at him with slight incredulity which causes the anger he feels to spike even more.

“Barry, it’s fine.” Sam tries again. “It’s none of our business anyway.”

“Yeah, nobody cares whether you are a Jizz Junky or not, mate,” Digger agrees with a shrug which causes Mick to actually guffaw and Sam to shoot him a nasty glare.

“I-I’m n-n-… n-not! I-I d-don’t l-l-like m-m-men! I-I d-d-don’t l-l-like th-them!”

“Woah, calm down, it’s alright, you don’t have to.” The concerned expression is back on Sam’s face, and Barry hisses in frustration because they are obviously not getting it.

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“Woah, calm down, it’s alright, you don’t have to.” The concerned expression is back on Sam’s face, and Barry hisses in frustration because they are obviously not getting it.

“I-I d-didn’t w-want th-them t-t-to…” He forces the words through clenches teeth and feels with growing frustration how his mind tries to go to places he really doesn’t want to touch upon ever again, and it is so damn hard to stop it. He already has to deal with this shit at night when he can’t steer his own thoughts, he doesn’t want to think about it now as well.
“I d-didn’t…”

If they think he likes men, do they also believe that he liked what happened to him back then? Do they think he wanted-

“Barry, we know that.” Sam’s voice cuts through the jumble of thoughts in his head and causes him to focus back on the other man. Barry grows nervous when he notices that Sam has come over to him without him even realizing so, but, thankfully, he’s been mindful enough to leave enough distance between them to not make him feel cramped.

“Digger’s just a jackass, you don’t need to mind what the idiot says, alright?” Sam tells him earnestly. “He never thinks before he opens his stupid trap.”

Barry studies the man for a couple of seconds, uncertain whether he is telling the truth or not, before he hesitantly looks over to the other two men, who have kept quiet for the last couple of minutes. Neither of them seems amused anymore.

“I-I’m n-not g-gay,” he insists again, his voice uncomfortably thin and weak, and he is pretty sure that this is the last time he has been invited over, at least with Len not being present. He has to look like such a pitiful idiot after freaking out like this.

“Okay,” Sam agrees easily and it is odd to hear him use such a calm voice. “I think we’ve established that by now.”

The other man gives him a faint smile, and Barry eyes him with a mixture of uncertainty and growing embarrassment as he realizes how ridiculous he has actually reacted. He is kind of glad that Hartley isn’t around because he knows what he must have sounded like, and he feels ashamed for it.

“So, now that we’ve gotten that misunderstanding out of the way,” Sam goes on. “I think we should start with the game.”

Barry swallows and averts his eyes to the plate in his hands. He doesn’t feel like he can meet the other man’s gaze right now and simply gives a stiff nods.

The mood is a rather strained and subdued one for the first twenty minutes or so, and Barry only listens to the other men as he is still too embarrassed about his little episode. He mostly just sips on his beer and tries to keep up with the game which isn’t as easy with how restless his mind is.

Neither of the other try to involve him in a conversation for which he is very grateful on one hand but also worries what they are thinking about him now.

They know about what happened to him in Iron Heights, and they usually don’t seem really that bothered by it, at least when he doesn’t go all up into their faces with it.

He is such an idiot, why couldn’t he have just keep his mouth shut?

“Hey, Allen? Can I get some of the cake you’ve brought over?” Digger’s voice startles Barry out of his thoughts, and he looks over to the other man who eyes him with obvious uneasy as if he was expecting that he would freak out all over again. His face grows uncomfortably warm at the realization, and he only mutters a quiet agreement before he turns his attention back to his cards.

“What the hell, Digger?” Mick snorts and causes Barry to glance over to the tall bald man who is eying the other criminal with an amused expression. “You’ve to be out of your fucking depth if you show actual manners.”
“Shut it, dick-wit.” The Australian grumbles as he pulls the still covered plate over to inspect what is under the cover. His eyes seem to lit up in a clearly pleased way, similar to how Sam’s did before, when he sees what Barry has brought over.

“That’s cake?” Mick studies the sweets with a sceptically lifted eyebrow.

“Well, it’s something with sugar,” Sam provide with a shrug as he puts his ten cent to the slowly growing heap of money in the centre of the table; as usual when Barry joins in, their upper bet limit is twenty cents when they play for actual money.

“Ice cream has sugar,” Mick remarks drily before he turns to Barry. “What’s it?”

“G-Galak-k-tob-b-boureko.”

Judging by the looks the other men give him, they have no idea what he is talking about.

“Gala-what?” Digger frowns.


“Huh.” The Australian turns back to the sweets with a curious look. “Definitely nothing I’ve ever tried.”

Sam eyes the food with new interests while Digger takes one of the small rectangular pieces and takes a bite from it. He makes a pleased noise before he shoves the rest of the pastry into his mouth and grabs a second one.

“Slow down, jackass, that isn’t all for you,” Sam protests and reaches for one as well before quickly grabbing a second and third one.

“Bloody hell, wanker?! Why should you get three?!”

“I’m not as ugly as you?”

“Screw you!”

Barry watches how the three men start to bicker about the remaining three pastries and decides that he should have brought more over. It is surprisingly nice to see that they seem to like them.

“That’s good,” Mick agrees after he has gotten himself two pieces as well and gives Barry a considering look. “Can you cook too?”

“He makes some mean pancakes.” Sam informs him as he wipes his fingers with a paper tissue off before he reaches for his beer and takes a pull.

“Can you bring something meatier over next time, mate?” Digger asks as he picks his cards up again. “That sweet stuff is good and all, but a burger would be even better.”

“I’m sure he’s nothing better to do than cook for a lazy ass like you.” Sam scoffs and ignores the dirty look his companion gives him in return.

Barry stays quiet, mostly because he is surprised about the insinuation that there would be a next time for him to come over.

“He could order a fucking pizza to bring over, and I would still die happy,” Mick adds while he sets his wager. “I would even pay for it.”
“Anything but canned beans,” Sam agrees and makes a face as if he has just tasted something really disgusting. Digger only shrugs and remarks that he doesn’t mind canned beans.

“I just want some meat to them,” he explains.

The mood has noticeably lightened when they turn back to the game, and, while Barry still keeps mostly quiet, he feels much more comfortable and relaxed than before.

It is during their fourth game that Sam mentions Marco and that the other man is currently somewhere in South America. Barry has noticed the other man’s absence but guessed that he doesn’t feel like playing and most likely is sticking to his room. That he is on another continent is a bit surprising.

“What’s he doing there?”

“He’s pulling a thing with some guys he knows from way back,” Sam explains before he huffs and glances at the other two criminals. “I should have accepted his offer to tag along, now I’m stuck with those two morons.”

This causes Mick to shoot his friend an amused glance. “Yeah, because that worked out so well last time you did so.”

“Shut up, it was a misunderstanding.” The brunette grumbles.

At Barry’s curious look, Mick goes on to explain with a smirk. “He slept with the wife of one of Marco’s friends—”

“Will you shut up, I didn’t know she was married to that old fart, he could have been her grandfather.” Sam glares at his colleague who ignores him and goes on.

“- and nearly got himself and Marco shot as that old geezer is the head of one rather infamous mob family down there.”

“How should I’ve known that?” Sam frowns down at his cards. “She talked to me in Spanish all the freaking time, and I am not speaking Spanish.”

“You spoke it well enough to know that she wanted to fuck, mate,” Digger points out with a broad grin and calls it quits for this round.

“You don’t need to speak the same language to understand that.” Mick chuckles.

“How did you get out of it? I mean pulling jobs with others?” Barry asks Sam, both curious and slightly worried as he knows how severe these people take such an affront.

Sam shrugs and explains that Marco knew the Don’s son and that he was able to convince his father to not shoot them.

“Marco, that jackass, actually was pissed at me for more than a month afterwards,” he goes on and sounds like he is still very much annoyed by this. “As if he hasn’t been changing beds every night with married women like other people change their damn socks.”

“Well, he didn’t let himself get caught,” Digger remarks and gets up to grab himself another beer from the kitchen.

“Do you often? I mean pulling jobs with others?” Barry asks as it is
somewhat of a strange notion that they are not exclusively working with each other, even though it shouldn’t, seeing that he knows for a fact that they haven’t always in the past.

Still, he has somehow gotten the image of them only as the Rogues stuck in his head, and he has never noticed one of them doing a thing with anybody else over the last year. Then again, he may have been around quite a lot but not enough to be able to really know about these kind of things.

“At times,” Sam answers. “Mostly when most of us are in the Heights, especially when Len’s one of them.”

At his surprised expression, the other man smirks and shrugs. “Cold usually has the best nose for lucrative heists and a way to keep the speeding dildo off our backs.”

Mick snorts in amusement and agrees with a somewhat grim smile. “He may be a fucking dick, but he does know how to do the job.”

“When aside from that,” Sam adds and puts his cards down after folding as well,” we drive each other nuts if we have to lay low too long and stick together at the same time. Usually we scatter for a while in situations like these.”

Barry wonders why they haven’t helped Len and the others to break out yet, and when he hesitantly asks about it, he is surprised when both Mick and Sam only shrug.

“There are reasons,” the latter explains, which really isn’t telling him anything at all.

Frowningly, Barry studies his cards, and, while his hand isn’t that bad, he doesn’t really feel like playing anymore and thus folds. Mick hums clearly pleased by this as he pulls the small heap of coins over to him, though it most likely doesn’t even sum up to three dollars.

“Th-they’ve b-been in th-there f-for qu-quite a w-while alr-ready.”

“We have been in the Heights for longer before,” Mick tells him and pulls a zippo out from his pant pocket. “No reason to worry.”

Barry watches how the bald man opens the lighter and doesn’t miss how he immediately starts to relax at the view of the flame.

“You are good for another round?” Sam nods to the cards he is currently shuffling, but Barry doesn’t really feel in the mood for another game and shakes his head. Instead, he asks him whether he could get him back home as he feels a bit tired, and, even though it has been rather nice to see them again after the bumpy start, he doesn’t want to overstay his welcome.

Sam agrees, and Barry follows him out of the room while Digger and Mick start another game.

“Thanks for the Galaktata again,” Sam says with a smirk after he’s delivered him to his bathroom. It causes Barry to snort, but he can’t bother to correct his friend as the Greek dish does have a rather hard name to pronounce, and he isn’t feeling up to try to do so again.

“S-sure, y-you’re w-welcome.”

Sam, who stayed inside the mirror, grins and nods once more before he is gone again.

Barry watches his own reflection for a second longer before he turns around and leaves his small bathroom. He feels surprisingly content and decides that a warm cup of tea would be just the right thing to end this day on a good note.
Barry doesn’t know what has woken him, but he is familiar with these kind of situations and instinctively keeps still and his breath as even as possible as to not give away that he is no longer asleep.

Nervously and tensed up, he listens into the darkness around him.

For a long moment, there is just silence, his own breathing, and the loud throb of his pulse hammering in his ears before he notices the dreadful feeling at the back of his mind that tells him that someone is in the room with him.

The realisation is nearly sickening—

“It’s alright.” A familiar voice breaks the silence and his heart nearly jumps up his throat. “It’s just me.”

Barry sits up hurriedly and looks around with wide eyes towards where the entrance to his bedroom is. In the faint shine of the light that falls through his curtains from the streetlamps below, he can make out the familiar silhouette of a man.

“L-Len?” He scrambles to his feet but keeps standing next to his bed as his mind, still groggy from just waking up, has difficulties to decide how to react to this.

It has been over three months now that he’s seen or spoken to the other man the last time, and there is such a chaos of emotions tumbling around in his chest that it’s nearly overwhelming him.

A small part of him has feared that he could be the reason that Len choose to stay in the Heights, even though he knows how ridiculous and presumptuous such a thought really is. It is hard to come up with another plausible explanation, though, as the Rogues hate that prison just as much as any other criminal does, and they usually make sure to escape again as quickly as possible.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Len answers quietly, and Barry picks up on how tired he sounds, which causes a familiar concern to settle over him.

“Are y-you alr-right?” he asks worriedly. He is well aware that the Rogues’ escapes from Iron Heights usually involves them to get at least somewhat banged up on their way out because the guards there may be a bunch of horrible people, but that doesn’t mean that they are incompetent when it comes to doing their job.

Without thinking, Barry makes his way around his bed towards Len, whom he still can hardly make out in the mostly dark room. He stops an arm’s length in front of him, more out of habit and due to nerves than fear.

“I’m fine,” Len assures him with a soft chuckle and moves a bit closer, obviously not satisfied with the distance between them. Barry tenses up but doesn’t step back, instead he studies the other man’s face with a sickening feeling as he is able to see it more clearly now.

There is an ugly and painful looking dark bruise on his right cheekbone and another one on his left jaw where he must have gotten hit by one of the guards’ batons; Barry nearly groans when the memory of how it felt when Michael and Puckett used these weapons on him catches him off-guard. How they punished him for being a bad-

He stomps down on these horrible scars his time in that hellish place has left behind and bites down on a whimper. He suddenly feels out of breath, like something heavy is pressing down on his chest,
and even though he knows that he is far away from there, that all of this lays in the past, he can still feel their damn hands on him-

“Hey.” Len steps closer and forces him to turn his attention back to him. There is an angry expression on his face which scares Barry for a moment before the other man makes a low calming noise and lifts his hands in a placating manner. “It’s alright, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Of course Len wouldn’t hurt him, Barry knows that, should know it at least, but it is so difficult at times. He swallows and coughs lightly before he tries to speak again.

“Y-you’re h-hurt,” he points out unnecessarily but hopes that the other man understands that he isn’t scared of him but of the traces that horrible place left behind on him. Traces he himself still bears to this day…

“I’m fine,” Len repeats in an unusual soft voice and meets Barry’s worried and frightened gaze with a look that is both sad and grim. “It looks worse than it is.”

That seems rather unlikely but, if anything, Len is very resilient, and as Barry studies him, he can’t find any other obvious injuries and is relieved to notice that he doesn’t hold himself like he is trying to hide that he is hurt or in pain either.

Still, the bruises look horrible and painful, and he can imagine how much these have to hurt.

“Y-you d-don’t l-look f-fine,” Barry murmurs quietly and can’t help himself but reach out for the other man’s bruised face. To his surprise, Len doesn’t pull back but watches him with attentive eyes. His cheek have stubbles that scratch lightly under Barry’s hand as he cups it for a moment before he lets his fingers move up slightly to the bruised cheekbone. He touches it very carefully, feeling how unusual hot the skin is there and can’t stop a small sympathetic noise that escape his throat at that. He knows that this is a fresh injury, and that it still has to hurt a lot.

Len doesn’t flinch under his touch, though, and when Barry turns his gaze back to him, he notices that the other man is watching him intently, which causes him to flush and pull his hand back. He averts his eyes, feeling rather awkward due to his unexpected bold behaviour.

The last months had him very worried about his friends, especially Len, and it is good to see him again. That doesn’t change that he is still as confused and intimidated by his own feelings for the other man, though, at least not any less than he has been before he vanished again.

A warm strong hand cups his neck, and he tenses up in response, lifting his gaze to meet Len’s who meets his eyes with a look that is both thoughtful and somewhat troubled.

“You should have more faith in us by now, Allen,” he tells him and squeezes his neck slightly. “You know that we’re as tough as nails.”

Barry chuckles and closes his eyes as he lets himself lean a bit into the touch. “Y-you’re a d-damn th-thickhead, th-that’s w-what you are.”

It’s good to have him back, alive and well. He was worried sick when he learned about the Rogues’ last run-in with the Flash, and he is still grateful that his friend kept his word and didn’t do something stupid to get back on the speedster. It still resulted in most of the Rogues being locked away in the Heights again, but it could have turned out way worse, especially if Len had tried to spur on the confrontation with Wally.
“Having a thick skull is a good thing in this business.” Len seems amused by his words and starts to urge him closer to which Barry relents after just a moment.

He still feels groggy from having just woken up after what can’t have been any more than two or three hours of sleep, and he is too relieved than to really care too much about how close he is to the other man right now. Len wouldn’t hurt him, and there is something so profoundly reassuring about knowing that he is with someone he can trust like this.

“Hey,” Len says quietly, voice low and warm, and Barry shudders when he feels his breath against his ear as he rests his forehead on the other man’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

This is just such a silly thing to worry about and Barry can’t help but chuckle. “I’m not,” he disagrees quietly and hesitantly lays his hand to rest on the other man’s hips.

The notion that Len would have likely just left again if he hadn’t woken up, doesn’t sit well with him, but he tries not to be dragged down by it. Not yet, anyway. He hasn’t seen him in more than three months, he just wants to concentrate on having him here for now.

The other man hums softly and moves his hand from Barry’s neck so that it rest on his back. Then, his second one joins it, and Barry finds himself in a loose but comforting embrace.

They stay like this for a long moment, and, though he can’t be sure, he thinks that Len needs this just as much as he does.

When Barry finally pulls back, he feels a bit lighter and much calmer. He is still tired and has to get up for work in just a few hours, but he still wants to keep his friend around at least for a bit longer.

“Y-you w-want a c-cup of c-coffee?” he asks and shudders slightly when one of Len’s hands caress his back lightly before he finally lets go of him.

“You’ve to get up in a couple of hours,” his friend points out and adds when he notices his disappointed expression. “Maybe a cup before you leave later on?”

“Y-you w-want t-to s-stay?” The notion is both exciting and a bit troubling to Barry, even though it wouldn’t be the first time that Len stayed overnight. He feels the urge to glance back to his bed as his friend would likely prefer to rest next to him again instead on the old couch which is a near guarantee to wake up with an arching back. It still kind of hard to believe for Barry that Evan seems to actually like using the old thing.

Len follows his look before he turns back to him to study him carefully, probably trying to gauge his reaction as he answers. “I’d like to.”

A familiar nervousness nestles into Barry’s stomach at these words, but even though a part of him wants to protest, he knows that he can trust Len. Also, he is tired and can’t deny that, even though he is a bit scared by the prospect of sharing his bed, he wants to have him close.

He missed him so much over the last couple of months, and he don’t want him to leave so soon again.

“Ok-kay,” Barry agrees quietly and isn’t sure whether he imagines it or not, but it seems like some of the tension he has hardly picked up on so far leaves the other man at that.

“Good.” Len sounds rather pleased, and Barry feels his cheeks grow warm again in response.

After getting a spare blanket for his friend, Barry returns to bed while Len decides to take a quick
shower before joining him. Due to the little light, he can’t say whether the other man looked like he came directly over from escaping prison, but he assumes so which causes a pleasant warmth to spread through him.

Laying on his side, the blanket pulled up to his chin as he just can’t help himself despite it already being summer and much too warm for this, he listens to the sound of the shower through the ajar bedroom door and to how Len moves around the bathroom for a bit afterwards before he enters the short hallway again and makes his way back to him.

There is something oddly homely to this, and Barry can’t help but welcome it as it has been so long since he felt this pleasant kind of comfort the last time which comes with knowing that there is someone else living with you, even if Len isn’t really.

For now, for the next couple of hours, he can just pretend, though.

The sound of the bedroom door being pushed opened causes Barry to still, and he listens to Len’s steps movie towards the bedroom before he pauses there. It causes him to look over to the other man, feeling just as nervous as last time before he joined him in his bed.

It is relief when Barry notices that Len has fully clothed himself again, which is likely not the most comfortable way for him to sleep, but it eases some of his nagging worries away, and his friend clearly knows so as well.

He moves over a bit more to make sure that Len has enough space, and his friend seems to take this as an invitation to join him. Watching him lay down next to him makes him feel both excited and apprehensive. The mattress shifts slightly again as Len turns to his side, so that he ends up facing him.

They watch each other in the dim light as a comfortable silence settles between them, and Barry feels himself drift off, slowly but surely.

Without thinking as his mind has grown drowsy and sluggish, he moves his left hand from under his blanket into the space between them and is pleased when Len reaches for and takes a hold of it just a moment later.

Feeling calmer than in a long time, Barry closes his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I hoped you enjoyed the chapter! :) 

Against my initial worries, I did find time to prepare and upload this chapter today, so yay for not missing another Sunday! I can’t promise that I can keep this up, though, but I promise that I’ll try.

I want to thank all of you for your feedback on my last chapter. I was a bit worried about how well it would be received as it was mostly focused on Barry and his interaction with OCs (and no Len being present in it ;), but people still seemed to like it, which makes me really happy. :D

Regarding Barry’s little freak-out in front of Sam and the others, he is currently not
interested in any sexual relationship, and while he is aware of his feelings for Len, he is pretty much spooked by the topic of sex or just the notion of his own sexual orientation, or lack thereof. It’s something he doesn’t want to think about, and, due to the Rogues knowing of what happened to him in prison, he hasn’t expected them to consider him as gay and quickly jumped to the wrong conclusions. Poor Mick and Digger, they certainly didn’t see it coming and will probably be more careful about what they say around Barry in future. ;)

And here is just some small extra info regarding this chapter: The first part has been written over two years ago by now while the second one is about three weeks old. I initially didn’t write about Barry’s and Len’s reunion, but I thought it would be a nice addition.

Btw, I read up on the use of comma in English writing, and you may have noticed an increased number of them in this chapter because of it. I’m still sure that I’ve probably gotten most wrong, but I’m trying to improve myself and my English skills bit by bit! ;)

Next chapter will have more Axel, Len getting pissed again, and Barry’s search for a broom.
A sharp knocking causes Barry to startle up from his nap. Disorientated, he pushes himself into a sitting position while looking around for the source of the sudden noise.

He spots Len at the kitchen table, where his friend is currently working on some blue prints, and their gazes meet for a second. The other man has gotten up and nods over to the door with a grim look. Barry, still not totally awake yet, needs a moment to realize that he indicates him that the sound came from there.

Concerned, after glancing towards his entrance, he turns back to Len and nods towards the bathroom as it would do neither of them any good if Jay or anybody else would learn that one of the Rogues is lazing about in his living room.

Unsurprisingly, Len seems to agree and swiftly grabs his stuff and moves to his temporary hide-out while Barry gets up and makes his way over to the door.

Another knock follows, louder than the one before, and he gets the impression that, whoever is in front of his door, grows impatient which can’t mean anything good.

A look through his door spy confirms this, but not for the reason he has suspected.

Barry quickly unlocks the door and opens it to a rather beaten up looking Axel. The boy seems to have gotten a pretty bad trashing, judging by how bruised his face is and the split lip. His right eye is completely swollen shut, and he is holding his right arm pressed against his chest that indicates that it’s likely hurt as well.

Despite the state he is currently in, the boy looks utterly livid, though.

Before the kid can say anything, Barry ushers him quickly inside his flat as he is pretty sure that Axel wouldn’t keep his voice down considering how upset he looks.

“Axel, wh-what h-happened?”

“Those backstabbing arseholes happened!” The boy spits the words out like they leave a nasty taste on his tongue, and Barry notices that he is slightly shaking. Carefully, he lays a hand on the kids shoulder, succeeding in getting Axel to finally meet his eyes.

“C-come, s-sit d-d-down, and I’ll l-look at y-your injuries,” he tells him in a low and hopefully soothing voice.

“I don’t need you to look after my injuries, I am fine! Those fucks didn’t hurt me!” Axel looks like
he is about to go after one of Barry’s few pieces of furniture should he not calm down soon, and he really doesn’t need the kid to worsen his injuries and break something at the same time.

“Ok-kay,” he agrees calmly and tentatively gives Axel’s shoulder a light squeeze. “I b-believe you, b-but I’m w-worried, and y-you w-would d-do m-me a g-great f-f-favour if you’d l-let m-me m-make s-sure of it m-myself.”

For a long moment, Axel only returns his look with a tense expression and is obviously unsure whether he should allow him to do so or not. Barry is immensely relieved when he finally relaxes a bit.

“I’m fine,” he mutters stubbornly even though he steps a bit closer to him.” Those losers are way worse off than I’m.”

Somehow, Barry doubts that, but he stays quiet and instead steers the upset teenager to the couch he himself has been resting on till a couple of minutes ago.

“You w-want a g-glass of w-water?”

Axel, who looks suddenly much paler than a moment ago now that he is sitting, only shrugs.

“D-does y-your h-head h-hurt?”

“I’ve no concussion, don’t worry.” The kid grumbles but doesn’t sound particularly convincing. Barry is just about to point this out when he notices how his young friend visibly tenses up. Concerned, he is about to asks again whether he is alright when he realizes that Axel’s attention has turned somewhere behind him, and he doesn’t need to look to know whom the teen has spotted.

Len meets his eyes with a grim expression. “Who’s that brat?”

“Hey! I’m no brat, you old ugly fart!” Axel hisses, even though he keeps eying the other man with obvious wariness.

“Axel,” Barry reprimands him but without any real heat behind it. He knows he has other things to worry about than the young teen’s foul mouth, and as he looks back to Len, he can feel how an uneasy heaviness settles into the pit of his stomach. The other man is still standing close to the bathroom and looks about as displeased by the kid’s presence as Barry thought he would. “H-he’s a f-friend.”

Len’s frown deepens, and it isn’t hard to get what he thinks of this. To Barry’s surprise, he doesn’t say anything else and simply goes back to take his former seat at the kitchen table.

Barry doesn’t kid himself into thinking that this is over, though, it is obvious that Len doesn’t like this situation at all, even without him directly saying so, but he is still glad that his friend keeps this to himself for now with the boy around.

“I’ll g-get you s-something t-to d-drink, j-just r-rest a b-bit, alright?”

Axel, who has also been watching Len, looks back to him and gives him an unhappy nod in agreement. “’kay.”

Later, when the teen is patched up and out on his couch, snoring rather loudly, most likely due to a broken nose, Barry joins Len at the table, where the other man is currently nursing a beer while looking at one of the blueprints he is working on in an absentminded way that makes it clear that he isn’t really paying any mind to it.
“This could get you faster back to the Heights than any of us ever could,” he says in a grim tone the moment Barry has seated himself opposite to him and lifts his gaze to meet his. “Nobody will give a fuck about you wanting to help that kid. You’re an alleged child abuser.”

“I-kn-know,” he agrees quietly and starts to nervously chew on his lower lip. The notion of what could happen should anybody get wind of him housing someone underage is weighing heavily on him to say the least.

The look Len gives him in response is one of annoyance and frustration, and Barry has to avert his eyes. He doesn’t like it when the other man is angry at him, especially because he is already livid at himself for getting in this dumb situation in the first place.

Feeling Len’s disapproving glare on himself is a bit unsettling, and he decides to get up and make some tea. Right now, the other man isn’t a very comforting company, and even though he understands and has even expected it, it doesn’t help either.

While he waits for the water to start boiling, he watches the falling rain through the window and wonders what has happened between Axel and his former friends. The boy hasn’t exactly been forthcoming with an explanation of how he got himself into being beaten up, and Barry hasn’t really tried to make him talk. He knows that Axel would tell him when he feels comfortable enough to do so and bothering him about it would only upset him more and get them nowhere.

Len stays quiet as well, but Barry can feel his gaze still on him and can’t help but dread any further conversation with him right now.

The water starts to boil, and Barry takes the pot to pour it into his cup while watching how it turns slightly red as soon as it touches the tea bag. It is then that he hears the other man get up and just a moment later he notices a presence behind himself and grows still.

Slowly, he looks over his shoulder, to where Len is standing close enough that it makes him slightly uncomfortable. He frowns, sets the pot down and turns around, so that they are facing each other.

“You’re ang-gry.” It isn’t a question as he already knows the answer which is really rather hard to miss as Len doesn’t bother to mask displeasure. Barry has realized a while ago that he nearly never hides his emotions when he is alone with him like he does when others are around.

Len frowns which deepens when Axel mumbles something in his sleep from his spot on the couch. “You’ve to be more careful,” his friend tells him, and there is a tension around his eyes and to how he holds himself that makes Barry nervous.

“You m-mean l-like n-not l-letting f-fugitive p-pass b-by m-my f-flat?” he can’t help but ask despite that.

“We know how to keep the trouble away from you,” Len replies grimly. “The little idiot doesn’t. He most likely didn’t even check if someone was seeing him coming here.”

Barry reaches up to rub his forehead, behind which a slight painful throbbing has started again, and tries to think of a way to explain to the other man why he did this despite knowing how stupid of a decision it actually is. “H-he w-was h-hurt a-and s-scared, h-he p-probab-bly h-has n-nowh-where e-else t-to g-go, L-Len.”

“He shouldn’t think that this is a place he can do so to begin with.” Len grunts and throws a dark look over his shoulder to where Axel is still snoring. “You’ve enough trouble on your own plate, and you’re already hardly able to deal with it.”
The words hurt, and when Len turns his eyes back to him, he seems to pick up on it as well as his expression softens a bit.

“Barry-”

“H-he’s a-alone,” Barry cuts him off. “H-he h-has n-nobody h-he c-can t-turn t-to oth-er th-an o-ther s-street k-kids, and i-it s-seems h-he d-doesn’t e-even h-have th-th-that any-m-more.”

“So do dozens of others, you wanna take care of them as well?” Len doesn’t sound angry anymore but calm and reasonable. “You owe nothing to that kid or anybody else, you’d do much better looking out for yourself for once.”

Slowly, as if not to scare him, Len steps closer, and Barry, who has momentarily turned his gaze to the ground, looks back up to him.

“You don’t want to go back there, you know what they did to you the last time.”

“Y-y-you d-don’t h-have t-t-to r-r-emember m-me,” Barry tell him upset, angry that the other man would see the need to bring this up, but before he can say anything else, he is cut off.

“It would be even less save for you now.” If possible, Len looks even more tensed up then before as he says this, which confuses and worries Barry.

“What do you mean?” he asks, but the other man shakes his head and nods to Axel with a grim frown. “Nothing you have to worry about if your ass isn’t put back there because you take care of some snotty child.”

At times like this, when Len makes it so very plain that he doesn’t trust him, Barry feels the urge to pull on his own hair in frustration because he gets that the other man wants to look out for him and keep him away from danger, but instead of sharing with him what is going on, he treats him like he is unable to look out for himself. Like he hasn’t survived the majority of his life on his own.

“F-fine, k-keep y-your d-damn s-secrets.” He turns back to his cup of tea and decides that he really doesn’t want to be around his friend any longer. The pain behind his temples grows sharper, and he knows from experience that it only would grow worse over the next couple of hours.

Closing his eyes for a moment and trying to ignore the presence of the other man behind him, he takes a slow and calming breathe before he turns around. Len is meeting his gaze with a thoughtful and still rather grim expression, and he briefly wonders whether the others see him like this as well, too weak and inept to take care of himself. He pushes that notion away with an unhappy frown and looks over to the couch as he doesn’t want to meet his eyes right now.

“I’ll g-go t-to l-lie d-down f-for a b-bit, I… I’m t-tired.” He nods to Axel. “P-please d-don’t s-scare h-him w-when h-he w-wakes u-up. J-just t-tell h-him t-t-to f-fetch m-me if h-he n-need s-something, I’ll l-leave th-th-e d-door a-ajar, a-aanyway.”

Barry isn’t surprised when Len stays quiet, and while this is annoying and a bit hurtful, he is pretty certain that the other man would not kick the kid out while he is resting.

Without another word between them, he goes to bed.

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“What are you doing?” Barry shoots a glance over his shoulder to Marco who is currently sitting at the table in the living area of the Rogues’ current hideout, drinking some coffee and reading a book.
“D-dusting?”

“No shit.” Sam deadpans before he chuckles. He has taken the spot opposite to the other criminal and is currently tinkering on his mirror-gun as it seems to have gotten damaged during their last heist.

“Why are you dusting, Allen?” the Latin asks and even though there is a frown on his face, he still seems more amused than anything.

Barry stops and turns to them with a slight frown of his own. “B-because th-this p-place is a m-mess,” he points out slowly. “And I d-don’t s-see wh-why th-this w-would b-be b-bothering y-you.”

“Oh, don’t worry, it doesn’t.” Sam shrugs with a smirk before he turns back to his gun. “Clean away, Allen, run riot. I’m certainly not going to stop you.”

Barry isn’t sure whether the other man is making fun of him or not, but before he can say something to him, Marco speaks up.

“You really don’t have to do that,” the other man says as studies him. “We’re fine with how this place is.”

“Speak for yourself,” Sam grumbles and gives the other Rogue a dark look. “This place is a dump.”

“Wh-which w-wouldn’t b-be th-the c-c-case if you’d c-clean every once in a w-while,” Barry remarks and isn’t surprised when both of the other man gives him rather unimpressed looks in return.

He doesn’t see what the problem is, he isn’t going to touch any of their rooms, just the ones they are all using and maybe Len’s if the other man doesn’t mind.

“I w-won’t t-touch a-any o-of y-your th-things if y-you’re w-worried ab-bout th-that,” he assures them because, really, he isn’t their cleaning lady, and he knows that James isn’t the only one who booby-traps his door.

Marco frowns again while Sam gives him another amused look like Barry has totally missed the point. The Latin finally just shrugs and turns back to his book, seemingly no longer interested in his cleaning activities.

Not really sure what this was about, Barry turns back to the shelf.

He doesn’t see why a bit of cleaning would bother any of them but he will make certain to stay away from any of their stuff just in case. Still, after he has started to come over more often again since Len and the others has broken out of prison, he couldn’t help but notice how run-down and dirty this place has actually gotten, and he has always been a bit of a neat-freak which causes him to feel rather uncomfortable to be here these days. It has improved over the last few weeks with Lisa and Hartley being around once again, but it still is pretty bad.

“We have gotten our own housekeeper now?” Mick, who has just entered the room with a beer in one hand and a lightener in the other, doesn’t seem particularly bothered when Barry looks over to him. He seems more surprised and slightly bemused.

“I’m n-not y-your h-housek-k-keeper,” Barry corrects drily.

“You’re the one with the duster,” Mick points out with a smirk before he makes his way over to the others.

“Let him work.” Sam huffs and rolls his eyes. “There’s finally someone who’s cleaning this shithole,
how can you not be delighted about that?"

“You do know that you could clean as well if this really bothers you this much,” Marco suggests for which he gets a very dark look in return from the other man. “So could you.” Sam frowns.

“I’m fine with how this place is.” Marco shrugs and turns his attention back to the pages of his book. Barry is pretty sure that it is another Mark Twain novel.

Sam only scoffs and wrinkles his nose. “Seriously? I’m actually thinking about getting a tetanus vaccination because of how sordid this place has gotten.”

“All of y-you c-could h-have c-cleaned wh-while th-the others w-were g-gone,” Barry interject and nods to the room in general. “Y-you’ve b-been around f-for m-most of th-the t-time, and y-you h-haven’t even v-vacuumed once as f-far a-as I c-can t-tell.”

None of the present men seem to feel particularly guilty about this little fact, and Sam only inquires with an incredulous look whether they even have a vacuum cleaner.

“Hartley usually uses the broom,” he explains when he notices Barry’s frown, which only causes it to deepen because that would be just great.

“You’re a r-ridiculously l-lazy b-bunch, you kn-know th-that, r-right?”

“Guilty as charged,” Mick agrees easily before he suggests a game of poker. “You wanna join in as well, Allen?”

Barry declines as he is going to look for the former mentioned and possibly non-existing vacuum cleaner instead.

Twenty minutes later, it has become more or less a certainty that the Rogues do not own one, which is annoying and frustrating at the same time as he isn’t looking forward to use a broom to sweep up the basement.

How does it come that not a single one of them every thought to get one? It’s ridiculous.

Still, it can’t be helped, and he does know at least about the whereabouts of the broom he has seen been using before.

“What are you doing, Barry-bear?” James unexpected voices causes him to jump slightly.

“Sorry,” the other blonde apologies somewhat guilty. “I didn’t want to startle you.”

“It’s f-fine,” Barry assures him before he decides to try his luck and asks James about a vacuum cleaner. As expected, his friend doesn’t know either where one could be or whether they even own one.

“Why do you want to vacuum, anyway?” James asked a bit puzzled.

“I j-just w-want t-to c-clean a bit,” he explains as he lets his gaze sweep through the room once again, still not able to believe that there really couldn’t be a vacuum cleaner somewhere around.

“What?” The other man reconsiders his question a moment later, though, as he gives their surroundings a brief once-over and hums in agreement. “Cleaning is probably not such a bad idea.”

“Y-you w-want t-to h-help m-me?” Barry asks as he makes his way over to where James stands at the entrance to the small storage room.
As expected, James does not look very keen of this suggestion. “Do I have to?”

Barry snorts and shakes his head. “N-no, it’s f-fine.”

“I could get Hartley,” James offers. “I’m sure he would like to join you.”

“H-he isn’t b-busy w-with anyth-thing else?”

“Nah, he’s just napping.”

Of course.

He gives his friend a bemused look and shakes his head. “N-no, it’s f-fine, I’m p-pretty s-sure h-he w-would n-not ap-preciate you w-waking h-him up.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” James agrees and makes a slightly pained face. “He usually gets rather cranky when I do that.”

While not helping, the other man sticks around and tags along to receive the broom Barry has seen Hartley put back in one of the old closets you can find around her.

As usual, James is doing the main part of the talking, which Barry is more than fine with as he generally prefers to listen to others, even though he isn’t entirely sure how to feel about his friend’s ideas regarding some explosive chewing gum. He can’t help but point out what kind of unsettling concept that is, which causes James to sulk for a bit but not to leave.

In the small cabinet close to the stairs, he finds the broom as well as a mop and an old rather battered bucket. He carries all of it back to the kitchen, from where he plans to start his little cleaning crusade. James stays, once again in a good mood, and they start to throw rather ludicrous scientific ideas about possible further inventions back and forth.

Barry can tell that the other man enjoys it that he plays along, and so does he as it is nice to brainstorm these kind of things with someone else. There aren’t many people in his life with whom he can do so anymore, and while he doesn’t really miss his job at the CCPD or being the Flash, he does miss the work and coming up with solutions to problems which required this kind of thinking at times.

“You were a CSI before, right?” Barry, who is just about to finish mopping the improvised kitchen, halts and shoots the other blond an uncertain look.

“Yes,” he agrees somewhat hesitantly.

“That is pretty cool.” James remarks before he seems to remember what this actually means and quickly adds. “Despite you being a former cop, I mean.”

“Th-thanks.” Barry gives the other man a faint smile and turns back to mopping the floor.

It is kind of a dirty little secret when it comes to his former occupation that everybody knows of, and while he himself doesn’t particularly feel like discussing it with anybody, let alone a group of notorious criminals, it is a bit assuring to hear the other man say so.

“You ever worked on one of our cases?” His friend asks out of the blue and causes him to grow still for a moment. There is no reason for him to be so nervous about this as James nor any of the others, aside from Len, know anything about him being the former Flash, but he doesn’t understand where this sudden change of topic came from.
“You have,” the other blonde concludes from his reaction, and contrary to Barry’s expectation, he doesn’t seem angered by this little fact but curious instead. “You ever got one of us in prison?”

It feels like his stomach is twisting up in a knot, causing him to feel slightly sick as he looks at the other man, unsure how to respond or why he would even ask this.

“Hey, what are you two up to?” Both James and he look over to the kitchen entrance to find Lisa standing there, a confused frown on her face as she studies the mop in his hands. Her expression turns slightly annoyed then, and she lifts her eyes to meet his. “Are you cleaning?”

“Ding-ding-ding!” James agrees, which causes Lisa to shoot him an annoyed look but otherwise ignores him as she focuses back on Barry instead. He doesn’t miss how her lips are slightly pursed as she seems to think about what to say, and he wonders what he has done to irritate her.

“You don’t have to do that,” she starts and nods to the mop in his hands before she glares at James. “You really don’t have to clean after these pigs.”

“I don’t mind him cleaning after-”

“Shut up, Tricks, it isn’t his responsibility to look after your lazy bum. You can always clean after yourself,” Lisa reminds him sharply, which causes the other Rogue to bristle and protest. “Hey! I am not lazy.”

Barry watches them argue for a moment, and while it is kind of nice that his friend is worrying about others taking advantage of him, it still gets really annoying what a big deal everybody is making of him just wanting to do some cleaning.

“I kn-know th-that I d-don’t have t-to d-do th-this,” he tells her and while he tries, he isn’t successful in keeping the slight hurt out of his voice because Len is apparently not the only one who seems to think that he is either stupid or weak or both of these things combined. “I’m n-not y-your c-c-cleaner, I d-don’t d-do th-this t-to m-make y-you l-like m-me or l-let m-me s-stay b-but b-bec-cause I d-don’t f-feel c-comf-fortable w-with h-how m-messy everyth-thing is.”

Why would Lisa assume something like that of him? Why does Marco, for that matter? Is it because it is so unusual for them to have someone around who wants to live someplace that is actually clean or is it himself? He knows that he comes over meek and rather subdued more often than not, but he certainly won’t let himself be exploited in such a way, and he has thought that the others are aware of this as well.

Getting some order into the hideout doesn’t seem all that appealing anymore…

Lisa steps closer to him, and as he looks back to her, he notices that her expression has softened a bit.

“I see, well, that is something I can definitely relate to.” She gives him an apologetic smile before she nods to the mop in his hand. “You wouldn’t mind me giving you a hand?”

Barry is a bit surprised about his friend’s sudden change of heart but can’t say that he wouldn’t welcome some help as there is still quite a lot of cleaning ahead of him. “N-no, th-that w-would b-be g-great.”

“Good.” She seems satisfied by his agreement and turns to James, who is currently munching away on some chocolate bar he got from the fridge, and gives him a hard look. “You will join in too.”

“Eh, no I won’t?” The other man frowns and nods to Barry. “He said I don’t have to.”
“Well, too bad, I say you do, you lazy ass.” Lisa grunts, and stems her hand into her hips. “Or are you really okay with Barry doing all the work for you while you are just mooching about?”

“But I’m alright with how the place looks—” James tries to protest, but Lisa cuts him off.

“I know, and this is still disturbing to me.” The blond woman huffs as she wrinkles her nose. “I couldn’t care less, though. You’re going to help, or you can be sure that I’ll tell Hartley who sabotaged his last couple of dates.”

James makes a surprised and alarmed protesting sound, but Lisa cuts him off again, this time with a sharp movement of her hand while glaring him down. “I’m not joking.”

The other man seems about to protest for a moment longer before his shoulders slump, and he mutters his agreement.

“H-he r-really d-doesn’t h-have t-to,” Barry says, but Lisa only gives him a slightly exasperated glance in return. “Do you really want to clean this shitty place all on your own? You do remember how big it is, right?”

“W-well, n-not all of it, j-just th-the g-general areas,” he explains which causes Lisa to pinch the bridge of her nose, something her brother also tends to do a lot when he is frustrated, and sighs in supressed exasperation. “You’re either way too nice or a complete idiot, Bar.”

Barry bristles at this words but has no opportunity to argue when Roscoe chooses this moment to join them in the kitchen.

“Here you are,” the other man says as soon as he spots Lisa and smiles slight. “I’ve been looking for you—”

“Good, I was just about to go and fetch you,” the blond woman interrupts him and walks over to him.

“You were?” Roscoe asks with a now somewhat wary expression.

“Yes, we’re finally going to clean this disgusting bolthole, and it isn’t going to be just me and Barry.”

“What? But I have to—”

“Your magazines and books can wait,” Lisa states firmly. “This is more important right now.”

“Wait a minute—”

“No, this is going to happen, and this is going to happen now.”

Barry watches how Roscoe’s protest wanes away under Lisa’s glare as she has obviously no interests in leaving this matter just to him, and while he really feels the urge to point out that she doesn’t have to do this seeing that it has been his idea in the first place, he doesn’t. It is more than likely that she would only get more annoyed, and he is glad that her irk is not directed towards him right now.

“You and James can go and grab some more buckets and mops, there’re a couple in the closet next to the stairs in the ground floor. I’ll try and get the others to lend a hand as well.”

“But, Lisa—” Roscoe’s protests fall on deaf ears, and they all watch the blond woman leave the
kitchen without giving them another glance.

For a couple of seconds, all of them are looking at the entrance quietly, and Barry is pretty sure that he isn’t the only one who is taken by surprised by the sudden turn of events.

Then, Roscoe turns around to face him with a grim and pissed off expression on his face that causes Barry to tense up in alarm.

“Great,” he scoffs. “Thanks a lot, Allen.”

“I d-d-didn-”

The other man ignores him and heavy sigh before he turns to James. “Come on, Trickster, let’s get the cleaning stuff.”

“But I don’t want to!”

“Nobody cares.” Roscoe grunts annoyed before he leaves the kitchen as well.

“Aww man…” James huffs frustrated but follows his friend with still slumped shoulders.

Barry just watches them go, unsure of what has just happened and worried that all of the Rogues are going to be pissed at him for getting them involved in this.

Well, it can’t really be helped anymore.

At least this would speed up things considerably.

Chapter End Notes

Seems like things between Len and Barry have started to get a bit more tense again. But Len finally met Axel, so yay for this!

Also, I love what a natural Lisa is at bossing people around. ;)

Next chapter will be up either next week or the week after that, I’m not entirely sure how I want to post it just yet. I’m thinking about changing my uploading schedule to once every two weeks whenever I’ve a lot on my plate in real life or want to invest some more time in other stories (because I tend to get a really crazy urge to write some of those at times), so that I can keep it at one chapter at least every two weeks. This is just something to keep in mind so that you aren’t surprised (or worried, because some of you are just the sweetest people :) when I miss to upload on a Sunday.

Also, in the next chapter Barry will get quite a scare, and Len will be in a horrible mood.

Thanks so much for reading, and I really hope you enjoyed the chapter! :)
Seeking Comfort and Finding None

Chapter Summary

Barry runs into someone he would rather have not seen again. It leaves him scared and with a bruised arm which causes him to turn to the Rogues. Unfortunately, Len isn't as understanding of his situation as he hoped he would be.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not edited!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This probably falls under child labor,” Axel grumbles as he makes his way over to the counter with another heavy box full of old papers and magazines, one of many which have been stashed away and forgotten in the storage room of the shop a long time ago.

“Y-you o-offered t-to h-help,” Barry reminds him while he goes through another box. Mrs Ming has offered him to pick whatever perks his interest as a thank you for clearing out the storeroom after closing the store today, and so far he had found a handful of magazines for himself and Mary, mostly about cooking and home decoration, but also some older journals about chemistry and electronics. “And y-you’ve g-gotten a wh-whole b-batch of f-fresh w-walnut m-muffins in advance, s-so d-don’t c-complain.”

The teen only mutters something unintelligible under his breath as he joins Barry in sorting through the content of the dusty boxes. Mrs. Ming has mentioned to Axel that there are also some comic books somewhere in between the magazines, and that he could keep them if he wants to, which is clearly what the teen intends to do right now.

It is already quite late, about an hour after the shop has officially closed, and they are the only ones left inside by now as Mrs. Ming has already gone to bed. Barry likes being able to spend time here, a place he feels really comfortable at, while he can also relax a bit and spend some time with Axel. The boy has really grown on him over the last couple of weeks, and it usually really helps his mood to have him around.

“Why haven’t these been thrown away already?” Axel asks as he shows him a magazine cover and points at the release date. “This is from 2002! I have been a toddler back then!”

“Y-yes,” agrees Barry with a smile. “Th-they a-are t-truly a-ancient.”

He only gets an unimpressed look in return. “Well, you’re old, so over a decade has to be nothing for you.”

Barry can’t help but laugh hearing that. “H-he, I’m n-not th-that o-old.”

“You’re over forty, you are ancient,” the kid points out, and Barry smiles due to how certain he
sounds about it.

“Y-you’ll b-be f-forty m-much s-sooner th-than you m-may b-believe j-just y-yet.”

“If you say so,” Axel flippantly agrees but obviously doesn’t think there is any validity to that statement. A sudden gasp from the boy causes Barry to tense up and turn to him in alarm.

“Look at this! This is one of the first issues of *Racoon-Man: The Great Journey to Mars!* How fricking cool is that!? They’ve to be worth at least thirty bucks now!”

A cover of a guy in a very questionable racoon costume is shoved towards Barry for a second before Axel puts it aside and starts to dug through his box with new-found gusto.

“I also l-liked h-him a l-lot w-when I w-was y-your age,” Barry mentions to the boy and isn’t sure whether he should be amused or insulted by the incredulous look he receives in response.

“You know Racoon-Man?” Axel asks sceptically and frowns down at the comic he has just put aside.

“Y-yes, I also d-did r-read c-comics wh-when I w-was y-younger, l-like m-most k-kids d-do,” Barry explains with a chuckle and shrugs when Axel eyes him like he has grown a second head. “I l-loved t-to r-read about R-Rocky J-Juergens, a-and h-his adventures as th-the m-masked R-Racoon-M-

“Really? But… you usually just read those boring magazines about science and stuff, or those boring novels,” the boy points out and turns his attention back to the comic in his hands with a slowly deepening frown. “How old is Racoon-Man?”

Barry snorts and wonders whether the kid would believe him that Rocky Juergens, aka the Rakoon-Man, has fought criminals long before he himself was even born. Then again, he doesn’t want to destroy Axel’s view of the world and instead remarks that a superhero’s age hardly matters.

“Th-they an-wh-what th-they s-stand f-for inspire p-people, and it w-will d-do s-so l-long after th-they’re n-no l-longer in p-print. Th-their ages are n-not imp-portant.”

Judging by Axel’s doubtful expression, the boy doesn’t really seem to agree, and Barry can hardly hold it against him. He is still young, and for kids it’s sometimes hard to grasp how the world has already existed a long time before they arrived and still will do so a long time after they left again.

They proceed working through the big amount of older magazines and papers in a comfortable silence for a while, and Barry finds a couple more of interesting journals and magazines as well.

“What else did you like to read when you were a kid?” Barry looks over to Axel and sees that the kids is watching him with a contemplating and curious look.

“Well,” he starts and thinks for a moment before he goes on. “I l-loved t-to r-read th-the G-Grey G-

“W-well,” he starts and thinks for a moment before he goes on. “I l-loved t-to r-read th-the G-Grey G-

His young companion hums and keeps watching him like he isn’t sure what to make of this new side of him he hasn’t been aware of before.

“So, you had a lot of the issues?” Axel asks a bit hopeful which causes Barry to smile again.

“N-no,” he explains. “I m-mostly r-read th-them at th-the l-l-library and at th-the s-store wh-where I h-helped out after s-school.”
“Really? In a library?” Axel asks in utter disbelief and eyes him sceptically as if he was trying to evaluate whether he is lying. “They’ve comics there as well?”

Barry chuckles bemused by the slightly outraged tone of the boy and nods.

“Y-yes, th-they’ve c-comics t-too,” he assures Axel who is still looking at him as if he has just told him that the moon is made of actual cheese. “N-not th-the n-newest ones, at l-least n-not b-back th-then, b-but our s-school l-library often g-got c-comics and other b-books d-donated b-by f-folks wh-who d-didn’t n-need th-them anym-more. W-We actually h-had q-quite a b-big s-section th-there.”

“But those are comics,” Axel reminds him and still sounds like he thinks that he is missing something very essential here. “Why would they offer comics to read?”

“J-just f-for th-that exact r-reason,” Barry explains and nods to the issue the teen is still holding. “You r-read it, wh-which improves y-your r-reading s-skills and m-makes it easier f-for you t-to k-keep up in m-more s-school r-related s-subjects as w-well.”

Axel studies the book in his hands with another frown before he shoots Barry another doubtful glance. “Our teachers didn’t want us to read comics in class.”

Barry feels a familiar fondness for the young teen overcome him as he agrees. “M-mine d-didn’t e-either as y-you’re s-supposed t-to p-pay at-tention d-during c-class, Axel.”

The boy grumbles something under his breath before he turns back to going through the box. Barry is just about to do the same, when Axel speaks again. “Who was your favourite?”

It isn’t hard at all to recall that one, and it fills Barry’s chest with a sort of heavy and slightly painful nostalgia as he thinks back to how he often hid away in those issues when he was young and the real world had hardly anything to offer but abuse and misery.

“Th-the F-Flash.”

This causes the teen to snort. “Figures.”

“W-what is th-that s-s-supposed t-to m-mean?” Barry asks and can’t help but feel slightly insulted by the kid’s reaction.

“You’re like the old Flash, at least how they’ve written him, all honest and trying to help everybody,” Axel explains with a shrug and gives him an amused look. “Though, you’d probably look stupid with that hat, not that the old geezer doesn’t.”

“Axel,” Barry admonishes and feels rather irked on Jay’s behalf. “J-Jay G-Garrick is a h-hero, wh-who h-has s-saved m-more p-people th-than you h-have p-probably m-met s-so f-far, it r-really d-doesn’t m-matter wh-what c-costume h-he w-wears w-while d-doing s-so.”

“Jeez, whatever, I don’t have a problem with his get-up, I’m just saying that his hat is rather… funny looking.” Axel shrugs and reaches for one of the magazines he has put aside before. “Look, the other Flash’s get-up was neat, all red and cool-looking.” The kid shows him a cover of where Barry himself is shown during his first year as the Flash. He nearly pulls a face seeing himself in his old costume, looking painfully tensed up as he poses for the camera.

This has been an eternity ago…

“The Flash’s current costume is looking rather shitty, though,” Axel goes on which causes Barry to frowns and asks what he means.
“The new one, with the modified mask, it makes him look pissed off all the time.” Axel gives him a funny look at that. “You didn’t notice the difference? Really?”

“I d-did, b-but I h-haven’t p-paid it t-too m-much a-at-tention t-to it.” He has noticed Wally’s version of the costume, he has caught a couple of glimpses in papers and on TV, but he usually hardly lingers long enough to study them. Seeing his nephew, in or out of costume, is still a very uneasy and painful experience, and he usually prefers not to.

“Trust me, the old one was way better,” Axel tells him seriously before he goes back to looking through the box.

Barry watches the kid for a moment longer, his good mood gone, before he finally turns back to the task at hand as well.

Two hours later, close to one in the morning, both of them have finally emptied the last box, and while Barry locks the door behind them, Axel is trying to read one of the comics he has picked for himself in the near darkness.

“You’re g-going t-to r-ruin y-your eyes,” he points out to the kid, who shakes his head and disagrees. “Nah, I have the sight of a hawk.”

“S-still, w-wait t-till w-we’re b-back at h-home, okay?” Axel gives him an annoyed look but puts the comic away with an exaggerated sigh, which causes Barry to smile. “Y-you c-can r-read all you w-want w-when you’re s-somewh-where w-with an actual l-light s-source.”

The temperatures have started to drop again over the last week, and the night is quite cool, so much so that he actually regrets not to have taken his thicker coat to work instead of the lighter summer-jacket he is wearing now.

They make their way over to the bus-stop, and Barry starts to feel slightly uneasy again with how badly lit this path still is. He tries to fight the fear down, though, as he doesn’t want to worry Axel. It isn’t the first time that they have to use the bus this late, and he knows that he is just a bit on edge because he hasn’t slept so well the last couple of weeks.

“You think it will rain?” He turns his gaze to the teenager next to him who is alternatingly glancing up at the sky before he worriedly looks back down to the bag with his new possessions. Barry turns his attention up to the sky as well and notices that it has vanished behind a thick layer of clouds.

“Th-they’ve s-said th-there w-would be a s-storm t-tomorrow,” he remarks. “B-but I d-don’t th-think th-that you’ve t-to w-worry about it t-tonight. I’m s-sure your c-comics are s-save.”

Axel snorts but looks a bit relieved. He still folds the upper part of the plastic bag back so that its goods are completely covered and carries it pressed against his chest.

They are lucky tonight and don’t have to wait more than maybe five minutes before the next bus arrives. The ride goes by in mostly silence, as his younger friend is absorbed in one of the comics about the *Racoon-Man* while Barry makes do with watching the familiar building pass way.

As usual, he gets out one stop earlier so that Axel can get up to his floor and wait for him there to unlock the door without anybody seeing them enter together. It’s obvious that the teen still thinks that he is overly paranoid but doesn’t protest.

The air has become even colder over the last forty minutes, and he shivers slightly as he watches the bus drive off before he too starts to move again. Like usual, the streets are mostly vacant which puts some of his worries at ease.
The temperatures dropped quite a bit now that August is coming to an end, and as he pulls his jacket a bit tighter around himself he can’t help but marvel over the fact that in just about three weeks his second year out of prison would come to an end as well.

Time is an odd thing, even now without his connection to the speed force or maybe especially now. It feels like it is flying by on some days while keeps slowly crawling by on others.

It does take him about ten minutes till he is able to make his apartment building out, and he feels exhausted enough that he can hardly think of anything but his own bed. He would make Axel a small snack before laying down, but he would postpone his shower till tomorrow morning. All of his limbs feel heavy, close to lead instead of flesh and bones, and he is incredibly glad that today is Sunday, and that he wouldn’t have to get up in only a few short hours.

Barry notices the stranger that is walking towards him on his sidewalk quite late as he has kept his eyes mostly to the ground, silently prep-talking himself to speed up a little bit so that he could arrive home earlier. The shadowy figure is tall and broad, undoubtedly a man, and Barry’s feet automatically slow down on their own. He glances over to the other side of the street which is still as empty as before and considers passing over there but isn’t certain whether this could attract the stranger’s attention and maybe a possible bad reaction.

Despite his gut feeling that tells him to be wary of whoever this person is, Barry decides against changing sides and tries to walk as close to the houses as possible so that there would be enough space between them while passing each other.

The man is walking slowly, obviously in no hurry, which should be a good sign but unsettles him even more. He keeps his eyes glued on the ground and tenses up when they are just about to pass.

A hand grabs his upper left arm, and he flinches due to how painfully strong the grip is. His throat closes up again and only a thin alarmed croak escapes his lips when he looks over to the stranger, thinking about how absurd this is because he really should have seen this coming, he should have listen to his instincts. He is so damn stupid…

Not that it would have really made a difference. Barry isn’t quick on his feet anymore and running away would most likely only have gotten him some additional problems.

The stranger doesn’t speak, which doesn’t do anything to make this whole situation any less unsettling. Barry doesn’t recognize his face, it is hard and angular, and he has nearly unnaturally intense green eyes that bore themselves into his.

For a horribly moment, time seems to freeze around them, and the stranger only stares at him, not blinking, not speaking, while Barry’s body starts to shake in fear.

His stomach makes a nearly painful lurch towards his throat when the man finally says something, in a still all too familiar voice that gives his identity immediately away. “Your little friend is quite a handful, isn’t he?”

Barry’s eyes grow wide in fear and worry, a reaction that causes the other man to chuckle deeply.

“Don’t worry, he is fine.” The grip around his arms intensifies and causes him to groan in pain which in turn makes his captor smirk. “You remember me of a little kitty I once had as a child. He was also always scared…”

Without any apparent effort, Kenneth pulls him closer and thus partly lifts him off the ground, so that their noses are nearly touching. “He would freeze whenever I grabbed one of his little legs, like you
do right now. He would never utter a sound, only stare at me with those wide scared eyes of his.”

Barry’s hand desperately tries to claw the other one off his arm but the grip could as well have been of iron, he can’t get it to move at all. His unsuccessful struggling only seems to increase Kenneth’s amusement and for a long moment he doesn’t say anything but only keeps watching him like a bug squirming under his thumb before he presses down on it.

Then he lets go of him and it catches Barry so off-guard that his legs nearly give out under him. He swiftly backs off to the house wall next to them without taking his eyes off the taller man.

It is nearly surreal when Kenneth nods at him next as if they were friends before he moves on into the direction he has initially been heading to, without sparing him another glance.

Barry stares after him for a couple of minutes as he doesn’t dare to move and turns his back to the man. When Kenneth is finally rounding another corner and vanishing behind it, he quickly makes his way towards his building while desperately hoping that Axel is really alright.

***

“What the fuck is that brat doing here?!”

Len sounds as furious as Barry has expected, and he can feel Axel actually retreat a bit more behind him at the other man’s angry words. He shoots the kid a worried look before he turns back to Len who has made his way over to them by now.

“L-Len-”

“Shut up!”

Barry flinches back and can’t help but feel alarmed by how livid the other man sounds. His body tenses up painfully in response, and he tries to fight down the panic that tries to get a grip on him. He has known that Len would react like this, there is no reason for him to lose his head over it like this.

“You shut up! Don’t talk to him like that, you ugly ass!” Axel hisses and comes out from behind Barry with a clearly angry expression of his own on his face.

Sam, who stands close to them as well, snorts bemused by the kid’s spine but his grin is quickly gone again when Len fixes him with his glare.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Scudder?!” Len nearly bellows at the other Rogue. “You think this is a damn day-care centre?!”

“Hey, I was just playing taxi, Barry is the one who wanted to take the brat along,” Sam explains with a shrug and swiftly makes a step back when Len moves closer, his fists clenched and obviously ready to punch him.

“Because you jackass are too stupid to think on your own? You need me to tell you how fucking idiotic this is!?”

“L-Len,” Barry interjects as he fears that the other man really would start a physical quarrel with Sam and forces himself to stay calm when the furious gaze is turned onto him once again. “It w-was m-my id-dea, S-Sam j-just d-did m-me a f-f-favour.”

The words don’t seem to do much to calm his friend down and Barry can’t help but feel somewhat scared by his reaction. Len usually doesn’t react like that, he grows angry and upset but in a much
quieter and controlled way.

“Hey, what’s the ruckus about?” Barry looks past Len, to where the hallway they are currently standing in makes a turn, and spots Lisa coming around the corner, a worried frown on her face that quickly is replaced by surprise when she notices Axel. “Who is the kid?”

“Hey! I am no kid! I will be fourteen in two months!” The boy’s protest seems to amuse Lisa, and she lifts an eyebrow in response as she walks up to them.

“Nearly all of fourteen?” she quips and chuckles when Axel scowls at her in response. Her expression grows more serious, though, when she notices her brother. “I guess you didn’t know that we would have another guest?”

Len only gives her a dark glare in response before he turns back to Barry.

“This is no fucking orphanage. You want to look after the brat? Fine, I won’t stop your stubborn ass, but don’t get us involved in this.”

His voice sounds much calmer again but no less intimidating than before.

“Fuck you! I don’t need your help, you ugly old f-”

“A-Axel!” Barry cuts the teen off and grabs his arm to pull him a bit back and away from Len who may appear much more collected again, but he is obviously in a really bad mood, and the kid either doesn’t get it or is foolish enough not to care.

Thankfully, Len ignores Axel and instead turns to Sam. “Get the damn child back to his flat.”

“L-Len, I w-wouldn’t h-have b-brought h-him h-here if I w-weren’t w-worried a-about h-his s-safety-” Barry shrinks back a bit when the other man turns to him again with impressive scowl on his face.

“I don’t care! I told you that this brat will mean trouble, and you are either too stubborn or too stupid to see it. He’s your problem, and you take care of him.” Len looks so angry, it makes Barry nearly feel sick, and he has no idea what causes his friend to behave like this. He knew he would be anger, he expected it, but he has thought he would still help…

“K-Kenneth kn-knows ab-bout h-him.”

A nearly tangible tension falls over them, and Len, who was about to turn around to leave, has stopped in his track and looks at him in a way he isn’t sure how to read.

“You’ve seen Kenneth?” Lisa sounds honestly worried and steps closer to him while giving him a concerned once over. “Did this bastard hurt you again?”

“Wait? Someone attacked you?” Seeing that Barry has been rather sparse with his explanation of why he wants both of them at the Rogues’ hideout all of a sudden, he isn’t surprised by Axel’s question.

“I-I’m f-fine,” he tries to assure the boy. “H-he j-j-just… t-talked.”

He doesn’t miss the incredulous look both Lisa and Sam give him at that, but neither of them point out how very unbelievable this is for which he is grateful.

“Sam, can you get the kid to the kitchen and get him something to eat?” Lisa asks but doesn’t take
her eyes off of Barry.

“The hell, Lisa? Do I look like a nanny to you?” Sam huffs while Axel protests against being called a kid once again.

“Just take him there, for fuck’s sake.” The blond woman hisses at her colleague, and it becomes clear that she too has trouble keeping her temper in check right now. She forces herself to sound calmer when she goes on, though. “There are tons of left-overs in the fridge, he can grab himself something to snack on and stay there while we talk.”

“Food? Nice!” Axel’s sudden change in demeanour is hard to miss that the prospect of something to eat, but it isn’t the same for Sam, who scowls at her in return. “I am no-”

“Just take him there already,” Len cuts the other Rogue off and shoots him a warning glare which finally gets him to agree, even though he still doesn’t seem all that jazzed about being assigned to babysit the teen, no matter for how briefly.

“Fine, but as soon as the brat’s there, I’m gone,” he grouses and gives Axel a sign to follow him. The kid doesn’t seem so sure about leaving either, though, and gives Barry an uncertain look.

“It’s alr-right, th-they’re f-friends,” he assures him. “Y-you’re s-safe h-here.”

Axel hesitates a moment longer, before he nods somewhat reluctantly but still doesn’t move. Instead he glances warily towards Len, and he turns back to him once more. “Are you going to be alright?”

“Of c-curse.” Barry gives the kid a reassuring smile and a brief squeeze to his shoulder. “H-hurry al-long, I’m s-sure y-you’ve t-to b-be s-starv-ving b-by n-now.”

This seem to do the trick, even though Axel’s gaze lingers on him a second longer before he finally turns around to follow Sam. Barry doesn’t miss how he gives Len the evil eye as he passes him. The other man ignores the kid.

“Come on, brat, the earlier we reach the kitchen, the earlier I get rid of you again.” Sam grumbles, still audibly annoyed.

“Because you are all sunshine and kisses to be around, old fart,” Axel retorts and easily avoids the slap that is aimed for the back of his head. Barry watches them vanish behind the corner before he turns back to the others with an uneasy feeling as he really isn’t looking forward to this conversation.

“Let’s get somewhere more comfortable to talk,” Lisa suggests and nods to Len’s room that is just down two doors. The other man doesn’t say anything and starts to move towards it instead, obviously agreeing with his sister’s idea. Barry hesitates to follow him as he still feels a bit unsettled by how his friend has reacted before.

A tentative touch on his elbow startles him slightly, and Lisa meets his eyes with an apologizing expression before she nods to the room her brother has just entered.

“Don’t worry, he isn’t really angry at you, he is just generally in a crappy mood right now,” she explains which doesn’t really succeed in reassuring him, but he still follows her.

Len’s room is one of the bigger ones, which may be beneficial regarding space but makes it also one of the coldest seeing that it is underground, and there is no heater installed. Barry knows that the other man uses a transportable heater during winter when it is getting too cold to really do anything in here, but it probably would still be a while till then, and he regrets to not have been mindful enough to bring his thicker coat with himself.
There are only two chairs at the working table as Barry is usually the only one who joins the other man in here for any amount of time, and he decides to make do with one of the empty boxes that are stashed in the corner. Lisa shoots him a partly amused, partly exasperated glance but doesn’t protest over being offered to take one of the chairs.

“So, what’s happened?” the blond woman starts when all of them are seated. “You said that you’ve seen Kenneth again?” Her expression becomes more concerned as she gives him another once-over and asks again. “Has he hurt your?”

The pain in his upper left arm isn’t really that bad anymore, and Barry is pretty sure that it hasn’t really been damaged other than being a bit bruised. He shakes his head and tries to give her a reassuring smile. “No, I’m fine.”

Lisa looks doubtful, but before she can say anything else on this topic, Len interjects.

“Where have you met Kenneth?” He sounds calmer than before, much calmer, but there is still a slight edge to the way he speaks that makes it obvious that his temper hasn’t really settled down just yet. Nonetheless, Barry is glad that he isn’t yelling at him anymore as this has him left feeling still rather uneasy around him.

“On my way to the apartment,” he explains and feels his stomach sink when he watches how the brief confusion in the other man is quickly replaced by understanding and renewed anger.

“You walked there again?” Len asks with a slight scowl before he scoffs. “Of course you did, you damn idiot.”

Barry bristles at the insult, even though he knows that Len has a very valid reason to react like this.

“What do you want me to do? Hide away at home till you have sorted things out with the Blue Velvet and that woman?” Speaking becomes harder again as his throat has started to close up, and he is grateful when Lisa answers before her brother has the possibility to do so, seeing that his words don’t seem to have done anything to soothe the other man’s anger.

“Of course not, Barry, but walking four blocks home late at night is something rather stupid to do in your position, and I know you know this as well.”

He frowns but doesn’t protest as he is well aware of how reckless this actually was.

“I get it that you care about this kid,” Lisa goes on in a softer voice. “But for someone in your position, he could mean a lot of really bad trouble.”

“So am I supposed to do?” Barry asks quietly, and a familiar weariness starts to cling to him. “Kick him out and tell him not to pass by the store anymore?”

It takes Lisa a moment to answer, and he hates to realize that she probably really doesn’t think that this would be such a bad way to handle this situation.

“You want to help the kid, and this is a very noble thing to do,” she says in a soft tone even though her face holds a rather grim expression. “But you’re not in a position where you can afford doing this.”

Barry averts his eyes and bites his lower lip as he listens to her. His head is hurting once again, and he slowly reaches for his right temple to rub small soothing circles, not that he has any hope that the pain would leave him again any time soon. He is way too tensed up and exhausted for this to
“There’re people out there who want to hurt you because they know that they can get to us that way, and when they realize that the kid means something to you, they’ll not stop from using him as well,” Lisa goes on in her calm and reasonable voice that bothers Barry nearly more right now than having Len yelling at him again probably would.

“Aside from Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet, there is also the very real and likely possibility to consider that someone finds out that you letting a teenager stay at your place. You can’t hide this forever, someone will pick up on it sooner or later, and they won’t care that you just want to help the boy.” Lisa is right with all what she has said so far, and Barry is well aware of it as she is just speaking out all the concerns that have been following him around since he allowed Axel to stay over in his flat for the first time.

“Th-there’s n-nobody l-l-looking after h-him.” He gives Lisa a pleading look, willing her to understand.

“Taking care of that boy won’t atone you for anything that happened to your nephew.” Len’s voice is unusually cold as he suddenly decides to take part of their conversation again.

Barry feels how his body grows stiff and his breath catches in his throat. It is as if someone has pushed him under ice-cold water, and for a moment he is utterly overwhelmed by the misery and pain that swaps over him like a wave.

“Len!” Lisa hisses and actually kicks her brother forcefully against his shin. “What the hell!?” Len, who has kept returning Barry’s upset gaze coldly, turns his attention to his sister with a glare and grunts. “He is behaving like a complete moron—”

“And you are proofing once again what an utter jackass you are!” Lisa cuts him off furiously. “You can’t say shit like that—”

“Why?! Because I hurt his feelings?” Len sneers and looks back to Barry with a grim expression. “It’s still the truth.”

“God, you are such—”

“N-no, th… th-that’s n-not th-the r-reason.” Both, Lisa and Len seem surprised about him having said anything, and Barry thinks that this is both upsetting and insulting. He swallows before he speaks again and forces himself to meet the other man’s eyes firmly as he does so. “Y-you c-can th-think wh-whate-ever y-you w-want b-but y-you d-don’t kn-know m-me—”

“Because you are so fucking difficult to figure out?” Len snorts and smirks rather nastily. “You’re really not as complex as you like to think. You’ve messed up spectacularly, and you aren’t able to let go of that part of your life which in turn provides the rest of us a bunch of extra problems. It’s really not that hard to get.”

Barry feels how his eyes start to itch and he really, really hates how the other man is so very capable in hurting him with just a few words.

He also hates himself for actually caring so much about what he says or what he thinks of him, and he knows that he really shouldn’t because while Len isn’t completely off with what he has just pointed out, he really doesn’t know that much of him. It is a bitter realization that it is most likely the best to keep it like that…
“Really, Len?” Lisa’s voice cuts into the tense moment between them, and Barry averts his eyes while swallowing with some difficulty around the lump in his throat. “He’s the reason for the problems we have? As far as I can remember, it wasn’t him who shagged that psycho in the first place. He’s certainly also not responsible for her totally ticking out about this having been nothing more than a damn one-time thing for you or her starting her own little revenge war against us because of it, you damn asshole!”

“No, you shut up! I’ve had enough of you and your fucking bad mood! You—”

Both of the sibling stop glaring daggers at each other and instead turn to Barry as he suddenly gets up from his seat.

“I’m going to lay down for a bit,” he utters before he turns around and quickly leaves the room.

He just needs somewhere to be alone right now.

***

Someone is in the room.

The familiar feeling causes a shudder to run through his body, and while Barry is still hardly awake, his mind immediately tells him to be alert. He grows still and for a horrible moment he has no idea where he is or who could have come up to him while he has been sleeping.

“It’s alright, it’s just me.” His body relaxes again as soon as he recognizes Len’s voice, and he remembers that he is in one of the basement room of the hideout.

Slowly, Barry presses himself up in a sitting position and looks over to the other man, whom he can hardly make out in the nearly complete darkness in here. He notices how stuffy the air is and realizes that he has to have been asleep for at least a couple of hours.

“Is everything alright?” His voice is craggy and a cough slightly to clear it.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” Len moves closer, and while Barry can hardly see anything, he can clearly hear his movements. He feels the old plain mattress he chose as his resting spot move when the other man sits down which in turn causes him to tense up once again in response.

“Y-you want m-me t-to l-leave?”

The makeshift-bed only consists of the mattress itself, but it isn’t exactly small and does offer just enough space for two people, though Barry doesn’t really like the idea of having the other man this close right now. They have slept in the same bed before, just a couple of times, and despite his worries, he has nearly always been able to fall asleep, but he doubts that this would be the case this time around as well.

Len doesn’t answer for a while, and both of them sit together in the dark silence of the room for a bit, an uneasy tension between them.

Barry wonders how late it is. He is thirsty, and his head is still hurting.

The other man moves again, he can feel it by how the mattress shifts slightly and, he looks back over to him. Even that close, he can hardly see him out-
A hand touches his arm, and he immediately recoils.

“D-don’t!” His face grows hot, and he turns away.

The air between them, which hasn’t been all that comfortable to begin with, turns even tenser. They both stay quiet, and Barry starts to notice how oddly oppressive Len’s presence really is and how he still doesn’t want him to leave at the same time. He rubs his face and sighs tiredly.

“I-I sh-shouldn’t h-have b-brought h-him h-here.” Barry lets his fingers rest on his chin and closes his eyes. “I-I’m s-sorry, I p-panicked after…”

Kenneth comes back to his mind, and he shudders.

Len doesn’t respond, and he hasn’t expected him too. It is probably for the best, anyway.

A couple of minutes goes by after that with neither of them saying anything, and Barry wonders whether he would be able to fall back asleep should he lay down or whether his thirst would keep him up. His drowsiness increases again, so much that he nearly forgets the other man next to him and is startled again by him speaking. “He hasn’t hurt you?”

It takes Barry a moment to get what the other man is talking about. “N-no.”

His arm hurts where Kenneth has grabbed him, but it is nothing more than a bruise and nothing worth to be worried or upset about, especially for Len as Barry is too tired to deal with any more of his bad mood.

“Good.” Len says after a brief moment of hesitation, and Barry turns his eyes to where he can make out Len’s faint silhouette. He smiles sadly when he realizes once again how crappy they both are at talking to each other. It’s obvious that the other man feels bad about what he has said before as he usually is when he has gotten carried away by his anger. It doesn’t make it better, but beggars can’t be choosers…

“I d-don’t l-look a-after Axel b-bec-cause o-of W-Wally.” Barry rubs his eyes again and adds somewhat hesitantly. “W-well, h-he’s p-probably p-part o-of i-it b-but n-not th-the o-only r-reason.”

Len stays quiet, but Barry knows that he is listening.

“I d-don’t w-want h-him t-to th-think th-that th-there’s n-nobody h-he c-can t-turn t-to sh-should h-he n-need h-help. H-he’s a k-kid and ev-very k-kid d-deserves t-to h-have s-someone l-l-looking out f-for th-them.”

Nobody deserves to have to grow up alone, and there are too many out there who have to nonetheless.

Barry pushes that notion away and takes a deep breath, which causes him to once again pick up on how stuffy the air actually is. With a small yawn, he slides towards the other edge of the mattress and gets up.

“What are you doing?” Len asks as he too gets up.

“I-I’m th-thirsty,” he explains and winces when a sharp pain shoots through his back after straightening himself up too much. While the mattress is comfortable enough, it is obviously rather old, and he starts to doubt whether it would be really wise to try and go back to sleep on it later.

“You want me to get you something?” Surprised, Barry looks over to Len and once again feels a bit
sad about their situation in general.

Len wants to be nice and probably tries to make up a bit for before, but he is so tired of this.

“N-no,” he declines quietly and closes his eyes. He feels exhausted and sick and having the other man around doesn’t help.

An uncomfortable silence follows as neither of them moves or says anything, Barry too tired to wanting to deal with any of this right now, and Len likely unsure how to apologize.

In a way, Barry would actually prefer for it to stay like this as he really doesn’t want to have to deal with another apology and be reminded of how worthless those really are in the end…

He wishes that there is nothing for the other man has to try and apologize for, in the first place.

“I shouldn’t have talked to you like that,” Len starts, and the regret is thick in his voice but before he can go on, Barry interrupts as he doesn’t want to hear it.

“N-no, y-you sh-shouldn’t,” he agrees tiredly and reaches up to rub his eyes. “B-but y-you d-did, a-and y-you’ll d-do s-so ag-gain and ag-gain, a-and I j-just d-don’t… c-can w-we n-not t-talk ab-bout th-this r-right n-now? P-please?”

His voice cracks, and he hates himself a bit for how weak he is.

Another tense silence follows, and he is both relieved and disappointed when Len finally speaks.

“Okay,” the other man says quietly and there is distance to his voice that hasn’t been there before which causes Barry to suddenly feel like crying because he doesn’t want this either.

“Ok-kay.” He swallows around the lump in his throat and rubs his eyes again, brushing the unshed tears away before he can make a fool of himself again.

“I-it h-has g-gotten r-rather s-stuffy i-in h-here,” he goes on, mostly just to fill the silence because being alone in the dark with Len suddenly feels rather oppressive, and he just wants to leave. “I-I’ll k-keep th-the d-door o-open f-for a-a b-bit t-to g-get s-some f-fresh a-air i-inside.”

Aside from wanting to get away, he also needs to check up on Axel, whom he has left alone without warning, and while he knows that nothing would have happened to the boy in the meantime, he can’t help but feel a bit worried and guilty.

“You can use my room to rest some more,” Len offers in a cool voice that makes Barry’s eyes itch even more despite the kind offer. “The brat has nod off on the couch, by the way.”

“Oh…” It is good to hear that Axel seems to have done fine without him around, even though he hasn’t expected Len to acknowledging the teen presence at all after how he reacted to his arrival.

In all actuality, he has feared that the other man would insist on the boy to leave again.

“Th-that i-is g-good. H-he h-hasn’t c-caused a-any t-trouble, h-has h-he?” Axel isn’t exactly an easy child to handle, and he doesn’t doubt that there is a lot of ruckus he could cause should he get bored and the opportunity to do so presents itself to him.

“No, he’s spent the last hours watching TV after grabbing some food.”

“How d-did h-he g-get th-there?” Barry asks as he is curious about how Axel has found his way to the living area as Sam had made it rather clear that he saw his babysitting duties fulfilled with getting
“Hartley showed him,” Len explains rather curtly before he walks over to the door. The hallway outside is dark as well but still somewhat brighter than the room they have been in so far, and Barry can’t help but wonders once more how late it actually is.

“You look like you are ready to keel over.” Barry frowns and turns his attention back to Len whose face he can at least somewhat make out now. He notices that the other man is studying him with a frown again.

“I-I’m f-fine.”

“Yeah,” Len agrees but doesn’t even try to hide what he really thinks of that. Instead he turns to leave the room and tells him to follow.

Barry does so reluctantly.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, hope you liked it!
“I didn’t cheat.” Eddy makes such a scandalized expression as he says this that Barry can’t help but laugh while Mary seems to only get more annoyed by it.

“Of course you’ve cheated,” she insists and nods to his cards. “You probably exchanged half of them during the last game, you scam!”

“Too bad you can’t proof anything,” the other man smiles sweetly which causes Axel to snort even though the boy is also eying Eddy in a clearly irked and wary way.

“W-we aren’t p-playing f-for anyth-thing anyw-way,” Barry tries to appease Mary and winces slightly when she turns her scowl on to him next.

“That doesn’t change the fact that he has been cheating.” The young woman’s expression only darkens when she looks on to Axel who sits next to Barry. “Let aside that he shouldn’t do something like that in the first place, he did so in front of Axel.”

“So what?” Eddy asks and glances at the boy in question with a smirk. “The little shit probably knows everything there is to know about how to chisel your way through a game without me needing to show him anything, isn’t that right?”

Before Axel can answer, Barry interrupts him and tells Eddy not to call the kid that. “W-we t-talked about using th-this k-kind of l-language wh-when he’s ar-round.”

“I’ve been called worse than that before,” Axel points out with a shrug which doesn’t do anything to mellow Barry’s annoyance.

“Th-that’s n-n-” A knock at the door cuts Barry off.

“You’re expecting someone?” Eddy, who has turned towards the entrance to the apartment like the rest of them, gives him a curious look that quickly becomes concerned when he notices how pale Barry has gotten all of a sudden.

“Hey, don’t worry,” his friend tells him. “The kid’s my nephew, remember? No need to fret.”
Barry knows that Eddy means well but while his friend is so willing to lie for him, he just doesn’t feel comfortable with it. He never has and probably never will, which is also the reason why he is so bad at it. Besides, there aren’t really that many people who would pass by via his entrance door on an early Sunday afternoon other than the ones that are already present or Jay, and the notion of the older man finding Axel being inside his apartment is alarming to say the least.

He isn’t allowed around kids and teenagers without any supervision, and, considering that, he isn’t really breaking any rules as Mary and Eddy are here as well, but he still knows what kind of picture this would paint.

“I could hide,” Axel offers, and while he tries to sound nonchalant about it, Barry doesn’t miss that he has grown a bit anxious as well.

“Don’t be stupid,” Eddy disagrees with a slight frown. “You’ve any idea in what kind of a trouble he would get should whoever is in front of the door still notice you?”

Axel scowl at him in response but doesn’t argue as he is most likely aware of lacking his suggestion has been or what kind of repercussions this could mean for Barry.

“I can answer it.” Mary gives Barry a reassuring smile and is just about to get up when he tells her not to. “I-it’s f-fine, I’ll h-handle it.”

Judging by the worried and doubtful way his friends are looking at him right now, they don’t seem so sure about this which doesn’t exactly do much to calm his nerves. Still, he has known that this would happen sooner or later, and it would be unfair and cowardly to try and hide behind them as this is something he has gotten himself into, after all.

“It’s f-fine,” he repeats when he notices Axel’s worried expression and gives the boy a small smile just as the knock sounds again. He turns to the door with a concerned look and gets up.

Even though he has kind of expected it, he still feels his stomach drop when he spots Jay through the spyhole on the other side of the door.

The older man’s friendly expression that greets Barry when he opens the door, dims as soon as his eyes fall onto him, and he wonders how guilty he has to look to cause such a reaction.

The thought causes a surge of anger to flash through him a moment later as this is ridiculous. There is no reason for him to feel bad about having Axel around, he hasn’t done anything to the kid or anybody else!

“H-hallo, J-Jay,” he greets him and feels his face grow warm when his voice cracks in the middle of it. This is already such a damn farce, and the older man hasn’t even stepped a foot into his apartment yet.

“Hallo, Barry, I hope I am not disturbing you with anything?” There is a slight note of suspicion that clings to how he says this, and the way he is looking at him, has Barry to fight the urge to forcefully shut the door into his face. This is so damn demeaning. The older man seems to notice as he starts to frown and studies him with a mixture of worry and another much less well-meaning emotion.

“No,” he answers after a tense moment passed between them and doesn’t even try to hide how exhausting his former friend’s presence is to him as he steps aside to let him in. “I’m j-just p-playing c-cards w-with s-some f-friends.”

Jay’s frowns again as he enters which quickly turns into an openly surprised and then infuriated expression when he notices the others at the table. Then, it is gone again, and he just studies Axel in
an eerily neutral and calm way for a moment.

“Who is the child?” He doesn’t sound angry or accusing, or, at least, he makes the effort not to, and while Barry feels very much out of his depth and slightly sick, he can appreciate it. Before he can open is mouth to answer, though, Eddy beats him to it.

“That is my nephew, Axel,” he explains with an easy smile. “His parents are in kind of rough spot right now, and I offered to let him stay with me for the time being.”

His smile dims a bit, and the way he looks at Jay next is not very friendly and has something rather hostile to it. “You don’t need to worry; I’m keeping an eye on him while we’re over. We don’t wanna anything happen to him, do we?”

Mary hisses something under her breath, and judging by how Eddy flinches a moment later and by the pained and irked expression that crosses his face, it is likely that she has just kicked him under the table in response to his words.

Barry feels how the blood rushes to his face, and if he could have, he would have smacked the other man right now as well for not keeping his mouth shut. He is well aware that Eddy has done so to make a point, to have his back in a way, and to tell Jay to back off. Seeing how he tries to do so is still horribly demeaning, though.

He is surprised when he notices that Jay looks quite taken aback by the other man’s words. He guesses that it is because Eddy is once again his direct and crass self, but it becomes obvious that this isn’t the case when Jay turns to him next with a considering frown. The older man doesn’t say anything but regards him with a look he isn’t really sure how to interpret.

“What?” Eddy asks in a painfully audible taunting tone that makes Barry cringe slightly and shoot him a pleading and angry look. His friend either doesn’t notice it or doesn’t care as he still goes on. “You thought he didn’t tell us his dirty little secret?”

“Eddy, that’s enough.” Mary hisses and gives her friend a furious look while Axel looks both curious and puzzled.

“Yeah, right. We don’t wanna scare the kid after all.” Eddy sneers and shrugs before he turns back to the table to collect the cards from their last game and shuffles them again.

“What dirty little secret?” Barry feels his stomach sink when he watches how Axel turns to Eddy for an explanation before he looks on to him with a frown. “You have dirty secrets? Really?”

This causes Eddy to snort which quickly is replaced by another pained wince when Mary kicks him once more under the table, this time audibly so.

For a long moment, neither of them speaks. Barry can feel Jay’s eyes on him, but he can’t bring himself to meet the gaze. He doesn’t want to see the expression on his face. It shouldn’t matter, whatever the other man thinks of him, it really shouldn’t anymore. Sadly, despite his best efforts, it still does in some way because he is still left feeling miserable.

“You’ve told them?” Jay asks as if Eddy hasn’t just said so, and Barry feels angered and hurt by this because he is once again treated like he is an actual twisted and abhorrent person who should be too ashamed to tell anybody about his crimes.

This frustration is also the reason why he finally turns to the other man, his chin slightly lifted in a stubborn and daring manner, and agrees. “Y-yes.”
Barry knows that it is stupid, but he dares Jay to berate him for it. To make him feel even worse for who he is made out to be these days.

To his utter surprise, his former friend doesn’t. Instead, he only studies him quietly for a couple of seconds before he nods slowly. “Good, I’m glad you’ve someone you can confide in.”

The anger is suddenly gone, and Barry is left with an all too familiar emptiness instead. He watches how Jay’s expression turns grimmer again, then, and already knows what he is going to say next.

“You know that this could get you in very serious trouble very quickly, Barry,” Jay reminds him in a slightly reproachful tone and looks back over to Axel who is still watching them with obvious confusion. “Having someone underage in your apartment, even with other adults around, borders on violating the restrictions of your parole. You would be in grave trouble should anybody find out about this and tell this to your parole officer.”

A sickening worry overcomes Barry, and he has to look away as it becomes unmanageable to meet the other man’s eyes. He knows how right Jay is about this, it is a fear that follows him around everywhere these days.

“You considering to tattle on him?” Eddy meets Jay’s now obviously annoyed expression with a smile that shows too many teeth. “Just trying to clarify where you’re standing on this one, Mr. Garrick.”

“I don’t know you,” the older man replies in a hard tone and the dislike is plain in his voice. “But I know when I see people who mean trouble, and while you don’t seem to take Barry’s situation very serious, I can assure you I do, and I really don’t think you are the kind of people he should surround himself with right now.”

Jay’s gaze moves to Axel for a moment who is looking more confused and annoyed be the second. “You seem to know about his situation, and you still bring you nephew over which is clearly something you wouldn’t do if you really had either of their well-being in mind.”

Something crosses Eddy’s face, an odd expression Barry can’t place, but he is certain that it doesn’t mean anything good. He is just about to interject when Axel suddenly speaks up.

“What the hell are you all going on about?! Why is it such a big no-no that I’m over at Barry’s place? You think he’s gonna eat me or something?” The boy has meant this question for all but has his eyes focused on Jay at whom he is glowering now.

Barry feels his stomach sink and really starts to regret that he hasn’t told Axel about the reason why he is so concerned about anybody learning about his presence in his home. His younger friend was curious about it at first but let it rest as soon as he picked up on how uncomfortable the topic made him. It still concerns Barry a bit that Axel doesn’t seem all that bothered about this.

“We all have secrets,” the kid told him with a shrug when he had asked him a while ago about whether he was angry at him for not telling him the actual reason for being so secretive, and it really wasn’t a reassuring answer.

“You know those memes about the Pedobear?” Eddy asks nonchalantly, and Barry feels so horrified about this ridiculous question that he can only stare at the other man in disbelief for making such a crude joke about this.

“For heaven’s sake!” Mary hisses and actually throws her tea spoon after the other man who is a bit too slow to evade it and makes a protesting and pained noise when it hits him square on the forehead.
“What’s wrong with you, Edward!?”

Eddy turns to her with an equally annoyed expression, but before he is able to say something, Axel beats him to it. “You’re a paedophile?”

Barry doesn’t answer, he wouldn’t really know how to, and with Jay around he doesn’t even try. What good would it do him denying it with the other man just insisting on it being the truth, anyway? He would only end up in troubles all over again. This whole situation is so damn sickening and painful, and while he tries to keep a calm demeanour, he can feel how his eyes start to itch.

“The hell?” Axel scoffs when nobody comes forth with an explanation. “Are you all stupid? That’s such bull.”

“W-watch y-your w-w-words,” Barry berates him weakly and hates how thin his voice sounds. The boy tries to meet his eyes, but he can’t bring himself to do so, and he turns back to Jay instead who has watched their exchange silently so far.

“D-did y-y-you p-pass b-by f-for a-a r-r-reas-s-son?” he asks quietly and keeps his gaze at the point past the other man’s shoulder as can’t help it but feel ashamed.

Jay doesn’t answer immediately, and Barry wish he would just leave again, he feels sick to his stomach and just wants for everybody to be gone and to be left alone.

“No, I just wanted to pass by and see how you are doing.” There is regret and worry in the older man’s voice, and he honestly seems to feel sorry about what has just happened.

“What? You didn’t come over to make his day?” Eddy asks from his spot at the table with audible bite. “Wouldn’t have thought so with how you’ve outdone yourself just now.”

“Just shut up already,” Mary says in a quiet and grim tone, and Barry doesn’t need to look at her to know that she is giving their friend a reproachful look. Eddy does, and a rather tense silence follows that drags on for a couple of very uncomfortable moments before Barry just can’t stand it anymore.

“I-I f-feel a-a b-b-bit i-ill,” he tells Jay, still without meeting his eyes. “I-I th-think I-I’ll l-lay d-d-down… y-you c-can s-s-stay i-if y-you w-want.”

He glances at the older man and tries to smile but fails. He probably should say more, he just can’t bring himself to, though. Without another glance to any of them, he hurries into his bedroom and shuts the door behind him firmly.

It is most likely an incredibly stupid idea to let Jay alone with Eddy, even though Mary is around to keep the latter somewhat in check. He also worries about Axel and what the teen could say by accident. What is the boy to be thinking of him now?

Standing with his back to the door, he marvels over how quickly this nice afternoon has turned gone painfully south within just a few minutes. It’s so tiring, all of it, and he wonders how long he will be able to go on like this, living this lie they’ve chained him to.

His eyes are burning, and he brushes a hand over them as he slowly makes his way over to his bed.

He just wants to sleep and all of to go away for just a bit.

Barry buries his face into his pillow and tries to forget where he is. The pain in his chest is sharp and throbbing, and he concentrates on only his breathing.
Mid-September START of 3rd year

Barry watches with a mixture of slight amusement and resignation how the first thing Len does after he has exited his bathroom is eying his living room with a suspicious look. He knows that his friend is looking for Axel, and while it still irks him a bit how he seems to be ridiculously averse to the boy, he has realized by now that the other man is more bark than bite when it comes to the teenager.

“Where is the brat?” Len asks in his usually gruff manner he uses whenever Axel is around and finally walks over to the kitchenette with the two white bags of Chinese take-out in his left hand.

“Axel’s s-staying w-with h-his f-friends,” Barry explains quietly as he follows him.

Len frowns at that. “Haven’t they kicked his ass the last time around?”

The memory of that night causes a slight spark of worry to flare up in Barry’s chest, but he tries to ignore it. He has worried when Axel came up to him, in a surprisingly good mood, and told him the he and his former buddies have made up again.

“Th-they s-seem t-to h-have w-worked th-things out,” Barry tells him as he stops next to his couch while Len proceeds to the kitchen table. The other man only hums and doesn’t seem overly surprised about this turn of events. He probably had his own share of falling out and reconciling with people that are similar to Axel’s friends.

Oddly enough, this reaction appeases Barry’s worries somewhat, and he nearly asks the other man whether he thinks that he should be concerned about Axel but stops himself before he does so. Len is obviously relieved to not have Axel around, after all.

It isn’t even as if the boy has been staying over every night anymore for a while now as he has made up with some of his former friends a couple of weeks ago, at least to such a degree that he spends most of his time with them again. Despite not really needing to anymore, Axel still comes over at his place at least once or twice a week, though.

Seeing that Len has kept his distance again over the last month, and the fact that the couple of times he chose the pass by where coincidently the same on which Axel was around, he doesn’t know about it.

Barry isn’t sure whether he likes the idea of them spending an evening alone with the other man again. It has been a while since it was just them, and while he has expected things between him and Len to get a bit strained after letting the teen into his life, he still hasn’t been prepared for how uncomfortable and tense their relationship has become over the last handful of weeks.

Then again, he probably should have seen it coming, especially after how Len reacted to him not wanting to hear his apology that night about which he still felt bad…

While Len puts the different dishes he brought with him out on the table, Barry starts to prepare himself some tea and coffee for the other man.

It is a bit of a surprise when he notices that his friend has brought over more food than usual, and it takes him a moment to realize that it is most likely because he has thought that Axel would be over as well. That is unexpected and a bit confusion, especially with how obvious Len made it that he would rather not have the kid around.

Even so, Barry feels a faint warmth fill his chest at the notion that Len would actually have brought
something over for the kid as well, even though he doesn’t like the idea of him staying here.

He also feels a bit pleased when he notices that Len has brought him his favourite dish, stir fried soybeans with tofu and carrots which causes some of the tension to ease away that keeps clinging to him whenever the other man is around these days.

After the tea and coffee is ready, and they’ve taken their seats, Barry digs in with gusto as he hasn’t eaten lunch yet. The food turns out to be delicious, and he isn’t sure whether it is because of its preparation or because of how hungry it is.

It takes him a while before he notices that Len is watching him, which causes him to halt and frown curiously at him. “S-someth-thing th-the m-matter?”

The other man, who doesn’t seem at all embarrassed about having been caught staring, only smirks slightly and shakes his head. “Nah, I’m just thinking that I should have gotten you a second.”

Barry flushes and notices that, while his box has been mostly emptied by now, Len hasn’t even eaten half of his.

“I h-haven’t eaten y-yet,” he tells him a bit defensively and adds curtly. “I j-just d-didn’t h-have th- the t-time.”

“That’s good, otherwise I would have brought this over for nothing,” Len replies with another of his slight smirks, and he seems more amused than annoyed by clipped tone. He definitely seems to be in a better mood tonight which is a nice change for once. Barry can’t help but relax a bit as he mutters his agreement, flushing slightly, due to how defensive he must have sounded.

“You haven’t been over much the last few weeks.” The comment causes Barry to halt, and for a long moment he only stares at the couple of soybeans that are still left of his meal as a familiar heaviness settles over him. He isn’t sure how to reply seeing that Len has done the exact same thing.

“I-I’ve b-been b-busy.” It is a lie, and he doesn’t expect the other man to believe it.

Len snorts and meets his annoyed expression calmly. “You suck at lying just as bad as at bluffing.”

It is just such a stupid little comment, there is clearly no hostility behind it, and Barry still feels very upset all of a sudden.

“M-mayb-be I’m j-just t-too s-stupid f-for it,” he points out tersely and looks down at his nearly emptied box of takeout. He feels no longer hungry.

This seems to catch Len off-guard as he doesn’t immediately respond, and a tense silence settles between them instead.

Barry bites his lower lip and closes his eyes for a second, not sure why he is starting to feel so miserable again… which isn’t true.

Len’s words from a couple of weeks ago are still so very clear in his mind. They follow him around wherever he goes, no matter how much tries to distract oneself with other things or what time of the day it is.

“We both know that’s not true.” Len’s voice is calm but not in that cold distant way Barry has become familiar with over the last couple of weeks. Somehow this doesn’t make it any better, though.
“I’m n-not s-stupid,” he agrees and coughs lightly because his voice sounds too thin. “I c-can n-ever at-tone f-for wh-what h-happened t-to W-Wally.”

It hasn’t bother him this much at first, Len’s words, that is. He is used to him lashing out by now. It doesn’t mean that he likes it, but he has come to accept it.

Still, what he said about Wally, about him trying to use Axel to make himself feel better, it stuck to him and has started to gnaw away at him, no matter how hard he tries to ignore it.

Maybe the problem is that Len could be right about it. Barry has never looked at his need to help the boy from this angle, but it would make sense…

“What happened to your nephew is not your fault,” Len tells him firmly, and there is audible regret in his voice which causes Barry to nearly break because he is so familiar with this, with useless apologies and empty promises, and being hurt again and again…

“I-I l-let th-this h-happen t-to h-him-”

“You didn’t,” the other man cuts him off sharply, and there is an urgency to how he speaks that hasn’t been there before. “I shouldn’t have said any of this, I didn’t mean it, I was just a fucking idiot again.”

The sound of the other man getting up causes Barry to lift his gaze and look over to him in slight alarm, and he before he even realizes it, he gets up to, making a step back, nearly stumbling over his own chair.

This causes Len to halt immediately, and a pained expression crosses his face. His good mood is obviously gone now, and Barry can’t help but feel a bit like a jackass for it.

“Look,” the other man starts again as he meets his eyes. “I wasn’t angry at you back then. You just were unlucky enough to come over when I was about to bite the next best person’s head off.” He rubs a hand over his face and heaves a sigh. “I don’t know what to tell you, Barry. My apologies have to sound like damn jokes by now, and I get it that you’re angry at me, it’s good that you’re, you should be.”

Barry gnaws at his lower lip nervously and doesn’t notice that he has crossed his arms in front of his chest again, making him look a lot like he is actually hugging himself.

He doesn’t get Len at times, nothing of him, not his bad temper or how miserable he seems to feel after having hurt him.

“I th-think y-you’ve b-been r-right,” he suddenly says and blinks rapidly because his vision starts to get blurry. “I-I… I th-think I’m u-using A-Axel b-bec-cause… I f-failed W-Wally…”

Because he is just as much of a miserable person as Jay and the others know him to be.

Len steps closer, he rather feels than hears it, and he quickly turns his attention back to him. He tenses up in response which in turn causes the other man to pause once more.

It is difficult to make the other man’s expression out through the unshed tears in his eyes, and he just doesn’t want another fight between them. He is so tired of this…

“You’re helping Axel because that is just the person you are,” Len argues quietly and sounds so certain about it as if he actually knew this to be a fact.
Barry nearly laughs due to how ridiculous it is as he knows that he isn’t the kind of person Len tries to make him out to be, he has never been anything but a failure for all of his life.

“Barry,” Len’s voice is smooth and low, and Barry nearly jumps by how startled he is when he looks up and finds the other man standing in front of him, close enough that he could easily reach for him. “You’re a good person, everybody who knows you knows that.”

“N-no,” he disagrees unhappily. “Th-they d-don’t.”

He sees Len reach for him, and while the urge to flinch back is strong, he forces himself to stay still because, no matter how miserable the other man’s words have left him again, he still missed this… missed him.

The hand that cups his neck is big and rough, and warm, and there is still a part of Barry that is angry at Len, but it is small compared to the need of finding some comfort. He forces himself not to think about it or what it means when he makes the step closer to the other man so that he could lean against him, rest his forehead against his shoulder. He just tries to imagine that he is safe and that it doesn’t feel like the world is weighing down on him.

The other man makes a small surprised noise as he has obviously not expected Barry to welcome the offered comfort. He only needs a second to adjust, though, and loosely lays one arm around his back, pressing his lips against the side of his head.

It should unsettle Barry, how close they are, how intimate this really is, but he tries not to think about it or anything else. He is so tired of everything, he just wants to feel safe, even if it’s just another lie and will last only a moment.

“Everybody who counts knows it,” Len finally replies, and his breath his hot against Barry’s skin, which causes him to shiver. “And there’s something seriously wrong with those who don’t.”

Barry nearly protests, nearly points out that they aren’t, but catches himself because he doesn’t want to talk about this anymore. He doesn’t want to make himself feel any more miserable, especially now that he has someone who helps him to ease the pain away that threatens to crack his chest open.

They stay like this for a long quiet moment, Len stroking his back in a way that feel soothing and nice while Barry tries to regain a grip over his emotions.

He already feels rather embarrassed about how he has lost it again, even if it was just briefly. Especially with Len around seeing that the other man is really only part of the reason why he actually is so upset right now.

Barry sighs softly and moves his head slightly, so that he can rest his cheek on his friend’s shoulder with his eyes still closed.

“S-sorry.”

“I’m the one who needs to apologize,” Len reminds him. “Not you.”

“It’s ok-kay,” he replies as he presses his forehead against the other man’s throat and his jaw, feeling his stubbles there.

“It’s not,” the other man argues, and while he is probably right, Barry can’t bring himself to hold onto his hurt feelings anymore. Nearly a month of doing so has been exhausting, especially with what has happened with Jay just a bit over a week ago. He just doesn’t want to be angry at him anymore.
“I’m sorry I keep hurting you.” The regret is plain in Len’s voice as is the apology in how tentatively he runs his fingers through his hairs.

Barry hums softly and loosens his arms that feel a bit stiff from how tight they’ve kept holding onto his own chest before he moves them so that he can settle his hands onto the other man’s hips.

“I d-don’t l-like y-you g-get-ting ang-gry a-and... s-screaming at m-me,” he says quietly and can feel his friend tense up briefly before Len’s lips brush against his forehead again, just above his left eyebrow.

“I know.” Len rests his chin on his head and firms his arm around his back a bit. “I’m really sorry about that.”

“It’s ok-kay.” Barry likes how safe his friend makes him feel, and while a part of him tries to remind him that he should pull away and get some distance between them, he can’t bring himself to do so. “I kn-know y-you d-didn’t m-mean it.” Which doesn’t exactly make it okay, and he is well aware of it, but he also understands that the other man is in a rather tough spot right now, and it wasn’t like he didn’t have a point in what he said.

“Still shouldn’t have said it,” Len points out and brushes his lips against his forehead again, causing Barry to slightly shudder by this intimate display of affection that should probably alarm him way more than it does.

“N-no,” he agrees quietly and lets his arms wander around the other man’s back to return the slight embrace.

They stay like this for a couple of minutes, the world around them shrinking down till there is nothing left but each other.

That is, till his right side neighbours start to fight again, loud enough that Barry is certain Marco could likely get the whole conversation they are currently having in what must be either Portuguese or Spanish.

Len snorts before he chuckles, and Barry can’t help but smile as well, amused by how rotten these people’s timing is.

Neither of them pulls immediately away, though, and Barry only moves his head enough so than he can press his forehead against the other man’s collarbone and sigh softly.

“Your place sucks,” Len remarks calmly, which causes Barry to chuckle and shoot him an incredulous look. “Y-you’re one t-to t-talk.”

“I’ve no annoying neighbours,” the other man points out.

“Y-yes, ins-stead you’ve an-noying f-flatmates.” He smiles, which grows a little bit when Len returns it, obviously bemused by his all too true statement.

“Sam told me you’re badmouthing us behind our backs.” Len starts to scratch the back of Barry’s head lightly, causing him to shudder in response. “It seems he did tell the truth.”

At his slightly irked glare, the other man only shrugs and explains that these are Sam’s words.

“I d-don’t l-like h-him s-spying on m-me,” Barry reminds him darkly but doesn’t protest otherwise as Sam is checking up on him for a reason. It still would be nice for him to actually show himself when he does so and not make it feel so creepy.
“He isn’t spying on you,” Len correct with a faint smile. “He just keeps an eye on you at times. You obviously don’t like using the small handheld mirror I gave you any more than he does.”

Barry frowns as he rests his cheeks on Len’s shoulder and thinks about pointing out that this doesn’t exactly makes it alright for Sam to constantly hurt his privacy. He doesn’t, though, he still remembers his last run-in with Kenneth and what could happen to him if he should decide to come after him again and this time for real.

There has been something horribly familiar in the way the killer looked at him that night a bit more than four weeks ago, the same sickening way people usually do when they intend to hurt him and are looking forward to it.

The notion causes him to shudder all over again.

“H-he s-still c-could j-just m-make h-himself n-noticeable,” he points out with a frown, forcing himself to focus back on the conversation as he doesn’t like to think about that dangerous and twisted man any more than he has to.

“He wants to mess with you,” Len explains with a slight shrug. “He likes you.”

Barry gives the other man a doubtful look. “H-he m-messes w-with m-me b-b-because h-he l-likes m-me?”

That is such a stupid kind of logic that it would totally fit to Sam. That man can be such an annoyance.

“We’re an odd bunch,” the other man remarks and Barry notices how his smirk is turning into an actual smile which is both amused and unusually relaxed. It seems that some of his good mood has returned again for which he is glad.

Despite still not liking Sam’s tendency to mess with him on purpose, he glances up to meet Len’s gaze with an amused smile of his own. “Y-you c-certainly are.”

They return to their meal then and after finishing it, they settle for a game of poker, playing for the shrimp chips that Len has brought along with the rest of the food. Barry enjoys how light and comfortable the mood between them has become once again as they haven’t had a lot of time for themselves for a while now with everything that has been going on.

In the end, Len leaves shortly before midnight, and while Barry knows that is a good thing because he needs to get some sleep before he has to get up again for work in a couple of hours, he is also honestly sad about seeing him go.

“We really have to get you a mirror,” the other man grumbles as he considers the sink with a frown. “That thing doesn’t look like it’s going to last much longer if either of us keeps using it as a steppingstone.”

Barry isn’t sure what to think of that remark regarding an actual standing mirror, even though some of the others have commented on the exact same thing a couple of times by now. Still, he can see where his friend is coming from as the sink has started to become slightly loose due to its constant abuse.

“I’ve told him so a number of times already.” Sam’s unexpected appearance in the mirror causes Barry to flinch back in alarm and he shoots the other man a half-hearted glare for it, which earns him a cheeky grin in response.
As Len is about to make his way into the mirror-world, Barry reaches for his arm and touches him slightly at his elbow.

The other man halts and turns to him with an ached eyebrow, slightly surprised by his action seeing that Sam is there, and Barry’s face grows uncomfortably warm as he averts his eyes to the tiled wall next to them.

“Th-thank y-you f-for c-coming o-over,” he says quietly after a moment and forces himself to look back to his friend to meet his gaze with an earnest but slightly uncertain look. “It w-was r-really n-nice.”

Len doesn’t immediately respond, and Barry starts to worry that he has made a mistake, after all, Sam is right there, and he knows that the other man doesn’t like to display these kind of affections while anybody else is around.

He is just about to pulls his hand back and mutter an apology when Len moves, turning slightly to him to take hold of the hand that has been on his elbow just a second before. It is unexpected, and Barry freezes despite himself even though the touch doesn’t scare him.

There is another brief pause in which they just meet each other’s gaze before Len slightly nods. “Yes, it was.”

The other man’s face is oddly sombre for a second before it is replaced by a faint but warm smile.

Then, Len’s hand is gone from his, and Barry watches him enter the mirror without another word. He tries not to notices how Sam is looking between them with a considering and clearly curious expression.

They are gone just a moment later, and Barry decides to go to bed. He is tired and doesn’t feel up to deal with the emotions that are currently tumbling over each other in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you lovelies for reading, and I really hope you enjoyed this chapter.

Also, thank you so much for leaving me feedback! I really treasure every single one of your kudos and comments. :)
The Shards of a Broken Past

Chapter Summary

A fight happens, and Jay passes by again.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not edited.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why can’t I join in?” Axel whines from his spot at the couch as he glares at the table where some of the Rogues are currently playing another game of poker.

“Because you’re a snotty little brat,” Sam grumbles and puts his wager down.

“I’m not, you old ass!”

Mick snorts and shoots an amused glance at the teen. “Do you even know how to play?”

“Sure! I’m an ace when it comes to poker! I never lose!” the kid boasts loudly, obviously very certain about his own skills in regard of this game.

“Yeah, I’m sure you don’t,” Sam adds drily which in turn rubs Axel the wrong way again. “Screw you, you ugly-”

“Axel!” The boy’s angry demeanour deflates a bit, and he gives Barry a sulky glare. Barry, who is also sitting at the table with the rest of the men and reading one of Hartley’s magazines, returns it with an unimpressed look which seems to annoy Axel even more.

“It’s not fair!” he protests and crosses his arms in front of his chest with a huff. “I could totally beat them!”

“You could also totally shut up, pestinha,” Marco grouses, making it rather obvious that Axel has started to grind on the Latin’s nerves.

“And you could cut your hairs, lady-man!” the kid replies with a sneer.

Digger, who has just taken a pull of his beer, spreads the mouthful all over the table as he let out a guffaw, which causes the rest to protest in disgust while Marco gets up and turns to the boy, anger blazing in his eyes. “Seu pedaço de merda!”

Axel is quickly on his legs as well and seems ready to bolt the room if necessary but still tries to stay his ground for now, with his chin lifted in a defiant manner. “Fu-”

“Axel, th-that’s enough!” Barry shoots the teen an exasperated look before he turns to Marco. “P-please c-calm d-down, M-Marco, h-he’s j-just b-bratty b-because h-he’s b-b-bored.”
He has really hoped to spend a quiet afternoon with them as he isn’t feeling too well. Then again, he really should have known better. His friends’ moods have steadily grown worse over the last couple of weeks, and Axel is certainly not helping to diffuse the persisting tension with how he seems to be hellbent on being a brat today.

“Y-you are, and y-you’ll ap-pologize f-for ins-sulting h-him,” he tells the boy firmly which earns him an outrageous protest. “What!? No way! He started it! He insulted me first!”

Growing frustrated, Barry wonders why the kid has always to make things difficult, not just for himself but for both of them. The Rogues are in general not much keener on the idea of having Axel around than Len is, and it has been hard for Barry to get them to agree that he can bring him over these days.

It isn’t just because they don’t like having a kid around, but also the fact that Axel can be incredibly snotty if he puts his mind into it. Though, to the teens credit, most of the Rogues aren’t exactly all that friendly or welcoming towards him either.

“Axel, y-you w-will ap-pologize, or you’ll s-spent t-the r-rest o-of t-today b-back in m-my r-room.” It probably is a somewhat unfair thing to demand of him, but Barry has to get him to understand that he can’t act like this around the Rogues or people in general.

Axel meets his eyes with a furious glare, and for a moment he seems to quarrel with himself whether he should press on and protest further or not.

Thankfully, he decides against it, and after giving Barry one last scowl, he turns to Marco and more sneers than says. “Sorry.”

With that, he sits back down on the couch, obviously intend on ignoring them from now on.

Barry sighs quietly before he turns back to the Latin with an annoyed expression. “Y-you c-could w-watch w-what y-you s-say t-to h-him as w-well. You kn-know th-that y-you’re g-goading h-him on l-like th-this.”

“Or the brat could just not come over,” Marco returns with a shrug after he has sat back down and turned back to his cards. “We aren’t a fucking Kindergarten, no matter what you seem to think.”

“Hey, the little snot’s annoying, but he isn’t that bad,” Sam argues much to Barry’s surprise. “I mean, compared to the rest of you, he’s actually quite a nice addition.”

“Screw you too, Scudder.” Mick smirks before he adds. “I don’t mind the kid, he’s no worse than I’ve been at his age.”

“That’s a shocking revelation,” Marco remarks drily and grins when the other man flips him off.

This is exactly the kind of behaviour Barry doesn’t want them to display when Axel is around, but he is well aware that it is like talking to a wall when it comes to this. He turns back to his magazine and tries to ignore the others as well as the slight pain in his lower abdomen that has been bothering him the last couple of days.

Hartley and James join them about half an hour later, and so does Len not too long afterwards.

“You wanna join in the next round, mate?” Digger asks after he has won the last game and is now shuffling the cards again. Barry smiles but declines, the pain in his abdomen hasn’t subsides so far, and he doesn’t think that he would be able to really concentrate. Aside from that, he is pretty sure that the rest would prefer to go on and play for actual interesting amounts of money that are above a
couple of cents at a time.

“You’re alright?” Hartley, who has sat down next to him, studies him with a slightly concerned look, and it isn’t really surprising that he has picked up on his discomfort. The ginger is very observant when it comes to things like that.

“Yes, j-just a b-bit under th-the w-weather.”

“You’ve been under the weather a lot the last couple of weeks,” James points out as he picks up the cards Digger has dealt him and gives him a curious look. “You’re coming down with something?”

“Let’s hope not,” Mick interjects and shoots Barry a wary glance. “I’m really not keen on getting sick.”

“Always so concerned about your fellow men.” Hartley snorts before he turns back to Barry. “I could get you some aspirin, if you want.”

It is a nice offer, and for a moment he considers it but decides against it in the end. His stomach feels a bit queasy, and he knows from experience that this only grows worse when he takes pain-killers.

“It’s probably the Weather-Witch. I start to feel sick around him as well when I’m too close.” Barry bites down on a frustrated groan while most of the Rogues start to laugh over Axel’s quip, and Marco seems ready again to hit the boy by lightning.

“Hehe, Weather-Witch, I like that!”

“Shut up, Tricks, or you I’ll punch that fucking grin off your face, idiota!”

“Oh noes, the Weather-Witch wants to jinx me!”

The bottle of beer hits James square in the face, and Barry has just enough time to get on his feet and back away before Marco lunges over the table for the other blond.

The brawl doesn’t even last twenty seconds before the Latin is pulled of the other man. Still, both of them have been able to get away with something to show for it as James has a bloody nose and a rather nasty looking bruise around his right cheekbone where the bottle has hit him, and Marco has both a split lip and a black eye.

“Fucking idiots!” Len seethes and seems about ready to punch both of them just for good measures. “You can bash your damn skulls in as much as you want but do it somewhere else!”

“Why? You worried about your little sweetheart?” Marco hisses in anger and gets punched square across his jaw for this by Len. Another brawl breaks out, this time between both of them, and it takes the other Rogues quite a bit longer to get both of them apart.

Barry, who is standing a bit to the side, watches this with a mixture of horror and embarrassment and has to fight the urge to just retreat from the room. Axel, he notices as he glances over to the teen, has gotten up from his seat at the couch as well and is watching the bunch of grown men with a curious but also very wary expression. He seems ready to bolt should he have to.

Marco is spitting curses in Portuguese at the other man as Digger and Hartley pull him back, while Len is able to regains his composure.

“Bloody hell, calm down, mate.” The Australian grunts and adds in a warning tone when Marco throws him a dirty look. “You hit me, and I’ll shove one of my boomerangs up your ass.”
“Wouldn’t you two like that?” Mick snorts and returns the nasty glares he gets from his two colleagues with an easy smirk. His attention is pulled back to Len when the other man shakes his hand off that has still been holding his arm in a rather firm grip. Sam lets also go of him as well a moment later but seems a bit more hesitant to do so.

The air between them becomes tense again when Len walks over to Marco who has also gotten his two colleagues to let go of him by now, and Barry asks himself in frustration and worry why the others don’t stop him. He really doesn’t want to watch them starting another brawl all over again.

Len looks no longer furious or upset, though, instead he has that eerily collected expression he always gets when he is really pissed off but able to keep his temper in check. It is almost more unsettling in a way.

Marco seems to have been able to calm down as well, but still appears a lot readier to start something again. He only meets Len’s gaze with an irked glare, though.

For a moment they just seem to try and stare each other down before Len starts to speak, without breaking the eye contact to the other Rogue. “Neither of us likes this current situation, Mardon, and getting at each other’s throat is the stupidest thing we can do right now. You know that.”

“Because you’ve kept such a cool head just now, haven’t you?” The Latin sneers and stubbornly refuses to back down. “Our current situation is your fault because that nutcase of a bitch is somehow really surprised that she wasn’t anything but a quick fuck for you.”

Len tenses up for a moment, giving the other man a really pissed off glare, and Barry is certain he would hit him for this. To his surprise, Len relaxes again instead and heaves a quiet sigh while pinching the bridge of his nose, a familiar gesture of his that makes him look both quite exasperated and tired at the same time.

“Yeah, I know. But letting our tempers get out of hand won’t solve this problem, we need to keep a levelled head.” Len points out grimly and adds after a moment. “And I’m working on the situation with Black.”

This causes Marco to scoff and cross his arms in a defiant manner. The Latin doesn’t argue with him about this, though, and instead mutters something under his breath Barry can’t pick up but is pretty certain that it is in Portuguese again, most likely more swears.

He wonders what Len means when he says that he is working on the situation with Blacksmith. Whatever it is, he is pretty sure that he wouldn’t like it one way or another.

A noise from the entrance to the living room causes Barry to look over to it. There he spots Roscoe who has stopped there and is now studying the situation in front of him with a slight frown and a wrinkled nose. It isn’t surprising when he finally settles on giving all of them a look of disdain and haughtiness.

“A bunch of toddlers have more dignity than the lot of you,” Roscoe points out, and Barry doesn’t miss that he has fixed his gaze on Len as he says so. The latter’s expressions darkens considerably at that.

“Careful, Roscoe, Len may just have told us to not kick each other’s faces in, but I’m sure he will make an exception for you,” Sam says with a smirk but doesn’t seem seriously annoyed about his friends condescending manner.

Roscoe scoffs and is just about to say something else when Lisa turns up next to him, already
wearing a slightly disgruntled expression. She has obviously heard part of what has been said. “You
idiots are fighting again?”

Like Roscoe’s before, her eyes immediately go to her brother, and she starts to scowl in exasperation.
“What the hell is wrong with you all? We’ve already enough trouble at our hands, we don’t need
you jackasses to go at each other’s throat in addition to this.”

“Pig’s arse, we didn’t fight, princess,” Digger protests and nods to Marco with a smirk. “Mate’s just
a bit sensible today, that’s all. All’s ace again, though.”

Marco looks about ready to jam his elbow into the Australian’s face who is still standing next to him,
and the other Rogue is clever enough to quickly get some distance between them as soon as he
notices his furious glare.

“Let’s go back to the game,” Len tells them in a tone that sounds more like an order than a
suggestion. The others don’t protest, and with that most of the tension in the air is dissipating again.

Barry still feels a bit flustered by what has just happened, though, and decides to move to the couch
to try and read some more of the magazine.

Axel hardly pays him any mind, most likely because he is still a bit miffed about what has happened
before.

Over the next five minutes or so, Barry can’t help but notice that he keeps throwing slightly
concerned looks to the Rogues, even though he obviously tries to appear nonchalant about what he
has just seen.

“Are y-you alright?” he asks quietly and isn’t surprised when Axel turns to him with a slight scowl
and replays in a chilling tone that he is fine.

Lisa and James join them a bit later, and the four of them end up playing a couple of rounds of UNO.
The mood has turned more comfortable again by then.

***

Beginning of October 3rd year

Barry exits the bus, humming to himself while carrying the two paper bags of groceries he has just
bought, and wonders whether he should make himself some rice with chicken or a ham and cheese
omelette for dinner tonight.

He really likes the beginning of the months and how this means fresher food and more options for
him to cook. Thanks to Len, he doesn’t have to worry about going hungry anymore, and while he is
incredibly grateful for this support, he still usually prefers fresh vegetables and self-cooked meals to
the canned food his friend tends to bring over.

The sound of the bus driving away follows him as he walks up the stairs to the entrance of his
apartment building, and it is a relief to finally enter it as the staircase as the wind has grown even
worse and more chilling the later the afternoon got.

It has become palpable over the last two weeks that autumn is finally here. The temperatures have
started to steadily drop again, and the weather is getting worse with each passing day. Not that it
bothers Barry all that much. He has always liked autumn and how everything seems to calm down,
and grows quieter as well as how colourful nature becomes for a few short weeks. It is a season he
really feels comfortable with.
The staircase is vacant as he starts his way up to his floor and still tries to decide what to have for dinner.

He is so deep in his own thoughts that it takes him a moment to notice the man that is standing in front of his apartment as he sets foot on his floor.

His good mood is gone the second he recognizes him, and it is replaced with a kind of dread and worry that causes his stomach to drop uncomfortably.

He comes to an abrupt halt and just looks at Jay for a moment with a tiring knowledge that the relaxing afternoon he has hoped for would be no more.

The other man, who has watched him arrive, doesn’t miss his reaction, and Barry can’t help but feel a bit bad for it even though he has every right to feel upset about seeing him again.

Jay’s last visit has left him feel horrible and humiliated for weeks, and while Axel hasn’t started to be afraid or wary of him, as he is insisting that he doesn’t believe any of what he has learned back then, it could still have caused the kid to hate and avoid him.

The floor is quiet when neither of them speaks for a long moment, and the tense silence quickly becomes uncomfortable enough that Barry’s stomach starts to feel queasy again.

He can’t help but wonder why it has to be this way as Jay and he have been friends once, close friends. He actually even considered him family, and now he isn’t sure what to call the other man anymore. Jay certainly does mean well even though it is still hard to believe for Barry that he actually cares about him after everything that happened and how the rest of his former friends seem intend to live on as if he has never even existed.

Even so it doesn’t make it any easier to have him around these days.

The bags in his arms grow heavy, and it causes him to let go of this uneasy thoughts and urge himself to finally walk up to his unexpected visitor despite how little he wants to have another conversation with him.

Jay, who didn’t seem sure what to say or do so far despite the fact that he has been obviously waiting for him, seems to take this as a good sign and actually smiles at him in a friendly but noticeably uncertain way.

“Hallo, Barry,” he greets him, and there is a slight concern to the way he studies him that is utterly uncomfortable.

Not really sure how to reply as his throat has tighten up again, Barry only nods and steps past Jay to get to the door, mindful of leaving enough space between them as he does so.

“Let me hold one of the bags,” the other man offers, and while Barry isn’t comfortable with it, he knows that it would be stupid to decline. He is glad when he notices that Jay steps away again after taking hold of one of the paper bags, apparently aware of his aversion to have other people too close to him.

They enter his flat in silence, and Jay follows him over to the kitchen table where they put his groceries down. He steps a bit back and away from Jay, meeting his eyes only for a moment before he turns around and walks over to the sink. Despite not being thirsty, he fills a glass with water and takes a few sips, though his stomach still feels slightly queasy so that he decides to just keep it in his hands.
While he doesn’t look at Jay, he can feel his eyes on him, and while it really shouldn’t have such a strong effect on him it is still upsetting. He knows that he should have sent him away because now he would have to listen to one of his well-meant but painful advices again.

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and sips at his water once more.

“Can we sit down, Barry?” The older man meets his eyes calmly and gives him a small but honest smile. “I’d like to talk to you about what happened last time, and I’d also like to apologize.”

This is not what Barry has expected, and while he can’t stop himself from feeling morbidly curious about what Jay has to say, he stays suspicious.

He nods slightly and waits for the other man to take a seat before he takes his own opposite to him.

Jay turns his gaze briefly to his hands which he has folded on the table in front of him. He frowns down at them thoughtfully before he looks back up to him with an earnest expression. “I’m sorry for the trouble my last visit has caused you. I know that there would have been a better way to handle it, but I’ve been caught off-guard to find a kid in your flat.”

His former friend pauses and the way he presses his lips together for a moment as well as his frown make it clear that he is still not happy about that. “I know that Axel is Eddie’s nephew, and that you weren’t alone with him, but I still don’t think that it is a good idea to let someone underage into your home. You didn’t break any of your restrictions, but you could still get into serious trouble for it should your parole officer find out about it.”

Barry has lowered his gaze while Jay has been talking so that he is now studying the glass in his hands. He can still easily imagine the somewhat reproachful way with which the other man is now watching him, though, as if he was not only a twisted person who sexually abuses kids but also stupid enough to play with fire despite knowing how dangerous this could be for them.

“I know that my presence lead to the boy finding out about you, and I’m really sorry about that. There was clearly been a better way to handle this. This doesn’t change the fact that it was wrong on your and your friend’s part not to tell the kid about this in the first place. He should-”

“S-stop, p-please.” His throat hurts, it feels raw, like sandpaper grinding on sandpaper as he swallows, and he is so fed up with all of this.

Barry isn’t surprised to see that Jay doesn’t look happy with him when he finally meets his eyes again.

“Barry, this is not a game,” the other man reminds him in a grave voice. “You’re a potential threat to the boy, but so is he to you. While Eddie’s and Mary’s presence may keep you from making any mistakes, what will happen if Axel turns up on your step one day because his uncle isn’t home, and he knows and trusts you because he has been over with Eddy before? What if he thinks it is a good idea to spend some time at your place till his uncle comes back? Would you send him away?”

This is so damn absurd. Barry has no idea how to answer this. Does Jay really think this little of him that he would do such a twisted thing to a young boy? Do all of them?

What a stupid question… of course they do…

Abuse. It always comes back to that, abusing and being abused, his whole fucking life is like a house made of those bricks. It is so damn painful… What did he do to make them think he is like that?

“What w-w-would you w-want me t-t-to d-do?” he asks grimly, and the anger that grows
inside him starts to become harder and harder to keep down. “R-r-run a-around w-w-with a-a s-s-sign th-th-that r-r-reads ‘W-Warning: P-paed-doph-ph-phile! K-k-keep y-y-you k-kids a-a-at b-bay!’?”

Jay doesn’t find this any more amusing than he does. “Of course not, but I would have expected you to treat this issue with the kind of seriousness it deserves.”

“Y-y-you th-think I-I-I d-d-don’t kn-know h-h-how s-s… s-serious th-this i-is?!” Something in him feels close to snapping, and Barry has to fight to keep from yelling at Jay because, despite everything, he is just trying to look out for him. Even if all of this is nothing but a hurtful farce.

The other man doesn’t answer immediately but watches him with those damn sad eyes, as if Barry is the biggest disappointment in the whole universe.

It hurts so much.

“Why did you let the kid into your flat, then? I’m also honestly surprised that Mary would agree with that, seeing that she knows about this part of you.” Jay doesn’t mention that he isn’t at all surprised that Eddie would agree to any of this, though, and it irks Barry to no end that the other man dares to judge his friends, any of them, as if he knew anything about them.

“H-have y-you e-e-ever c-cons-sidered th-th-that th-they’re n-not w-w-worried ab-b-bout th-th-that b-b-bec-cause th-they kn-know I-I w-w-wouldn’t h-hurt A-Axel?” he asks in a hurt and small voice, and it is painful to see the exasperation in Jay’s eyes like he has just said one of the stupidest things one could possibly think of.

“Barry, I believe you that you don’t want to hurt the kid or anyone at that matter, but you-”

“I-I’m s-s-sick,” he finishes for Jay, and it is like his inside has turned to lead, like it is trying to pull him down, turning just to breath into a chore.

They stay quiet for a long moment then.

“Yes,” the older man agrees as quietly and sounds honestly sad as he does so.

Barry closes his eyes and takes a deep slow breath while trying to keep the hurt and anger from drowning him.

“I-I d-d-didn’t h-hurt W-W-W-”

“Barry-” Jay tries to cut him off with a warning in his voice, but Barry presses on because he wants to be heard, just once.

“I-I d-d-didn’t!” He hisses and glares at Jay angrily and hurt. “I-I d-d-didn’t h-hurt W-Wally o-o-or I-Iris!”

“Stop it! We both know that this is a lie,” Jay disagrees grimly and the anger is now plain on his face. “You did, and you have to come to term with that! It isn’t fair to yourself or Wally, or anybody else if you try to hide from this, no matter how painful it is!”

“I-it i-isn’t a-a l-lie-”

“Barry! We have proof that you did it! There is no damn way that you didn’t commit those crimes!”

Jay actually grows agitated enough that he hits the table with his fist, his eyes blazing with anger and sadness, and disappointment. Barry startles, bad enough that the spills half of the water in his glass over his hands and table, and for a long and awkward moment, they fall both back into a tense
silence.

Quietly, Barry gets up to get some paper towels to clean up the small mess. His eyes are burning so badly that it is hard for him to see.

Neither of them speaks as he wipes the table dry, and again he can feel the other man’s eyes watch his every move. He doesn’t sit back down after he has thrown the used paper towels into the bin.

“Barry,” Jay finally starts again, and he sounds so damn sad, so regretful that Barry grows seriously sick. “You can’t go on like this. I know that you’re really trying to live a normal life, and that you’ve done really good so far, but you have to face what you did, and you have to come to terms with it. You will not become better if you can’t do that.”

Barry, who has his back to the other man, watches the cloudy and darkening sky outside, and, once more, he marvels over how he can hurt so much without anybody having actually laid a finger on him.

It is ironic that the people he let so close to him, those who meant and somehow still mean so much to him, are the ones who are the most awful to bear.

“J-Jay,” he starts in a quiet and slightly raspy voice but keeps his gaze on the sky. “I-I c-can’t exp-plain wh-why D-Diana’s l-lasso… I…I d-don’t und-ders-stand it e-either b-but… I-I d-didn’t-”

“Barry.”

“N-no, p-please, l-l-let m-me f-finish.”

Jay falls quiet again, even though it is palpable that he would rather not have to listen to what he is going to say now.

Barry swallows to wet his dry throat a bit before he goes on.

“Y-y-you n-never r-really t-told m-me h-how y-you r-really c-can b-believe th-this of m-me, e-even w-with th-the d-damn l-lasso… y-you sh-should h-have kn-know th-that I w-would n-never d-do th-this t-to W-Wally o-or I… I-Iris… th-that…” He breaks off and swallows again while he brushes the tears away from his cheeks. He takes a slow breath before he goes on. “B-but i-it d-doesn’t m-matter a-anym-more. I-I kn-know th-that I-I t-talk t-to d-deaf e-e-ears wh-when I-I b-beg y-y-you t-to b-believe m-m-e th-that I-I d-didn’t a-a-abuse W-Wally o-or k-kill I-Iris. Y-you j-just w-won’t h-hear m-me, a-a-and w-w-while I-I d-don’t u-underst-stand, i-it… I-I h-have s-started t-to w-wonder wh-what g-g-good i-it w-would d-d-do n-now anyw-way.”

It isn’t funny, nothing about this situation is or should be, but Barry can’t fight the urge to chuckles, because in a sad way there is still something bizarrely amusing to this.

He is such a joke for really believing that he could have a normal and happy life. He has never been good enough for it, he has always been nothing but a failure, failing himself and the people closest to him…

“I-I’m t-tired o-of a-all o-of th-this, o-of b-being t-told t-to b-b-be s-some k-kind o-of m-monster wh-while I-I’m n-not, a-and y-y-you m-may b-believe wh-whatsoever y-you w-want, I-I c-can’t ch-ch-change it… I-I c-could n-n-never… th-they n-n-never b-believed m-me, wh-why w-would y-y-you…” Barry breaks off briefly and brushes over his eyes again, and even though it is a rather redundant thing to do by now, he still doesn’t want Jay to see him crying.

He turns around to the older man who once was his friend, and can’t bring himself to meet his eyes.
“P-please d-don’t p-p-pass b-by a-anym-more. I-I c-c-can’t… p-please, j-just s-s-stay a-away f-from m-me. I-I kn-know y-you m-mean w-well, b-but… y-you kn-know n-n-noth-thing, y-y-you… I-I j-just c-can’t d-do th-th-this anym-more…”

A tense moment passes by between them. Barry can feel Jay’s gaze on him, and he just want him to leave so badly.

It is just too much...

Then, Jay does just that without another word.

Barry listens to him getting up and crossing the room, and as soon as the door closes behind the older man, he starts to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

So, we slowly but surely are moving towards a part of this story I’m really looking forward to! :3

Next chapter will have Barry visit the hideout again, and we will get a nice little flashback to how Barry’s life has been before everything went downhill for him.

A huge thank you to all of you nice and lovely people who left me either comments or kudos! You really are awesome! :)
A Faint Echo from the Past

Chapter Summary

Barry tries to find some comfort after his last talk with Jay and remembers something from a long time ago.

Chapter Notes

Hi there!

There is a flashback in this chapter, I marked it by having the text in that section entirely in italic. I hope this won't confuse anybody.

I'm quite busy right now as I've a big exam coming up next Tuesday and don't have much time for anything else but to try and squeeze all the required knowledge into my head, so please excuse if you find more errors than usual in this chapter. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry realized early on that Sam isn’t very fond of being used as a regular mean of transportation by him, Len, or pretty much anybody, and he certainly makes no secret about it. Especially when Barry calls unexpectedly like it’s the case right now.

Though, despite his ongoing complaining about them using the mirror verse to travel between the Rogues’ hideouts and Barry’s flat, he has yet to refuse taking him over to their place.

This is also the reason why Sam appears in his mirror in front of him with a rather annoyed expression that makes it clear that he has most likely been forced to leave a poker game again.

The other man face turns slightly wary the moment he catches sight of him, though, and he studies him with a frown. “You’re alright?”

There is a palpable unease to how he watches him, and Barry can’t say that he is surprised. The majority of his friends aren’t really that good when it comes to dealing with emotions, whether it be their own or the ones of others, and him having obviously cried just a little bit ago must set Sam pretty much on edge.

“Y-yeah, I’m f-f-fine, j-just a b-bit u-under th-the w-weather. C-can I c-come over, or w-would it b-be a b-bad t-time?” he asks and tries to keep his voice as even and firm as possible.

Judging by how Sam eyes him, he is clearly not buying it but doesn’t asks about it again. Instead, he shrugs. “Sure, there isn’t much going on right now anyway.”

Barry gives him a grateful smile and climbs into the mirror with his friend’s help.

They fall silent after that, and after the short trip through the in-between dimension he quietly follows
Sam down to the living area where a couple of the others are around, once again going after favourite pastime - playing poker.

“Hi, Barry!” James, who spots him first, greets him with a wide grin while nodding to the little heap of money in the middle of the table. “Guess who’s going to win!”

“Better guess who’s going to end up with a kick in his ass if he doesn’t shut up.” Mick grumbles in annoyance while Digger lifts his hand in lieu of an actual greeting.

“You wanna join in?” Sam asks, and Barry doesn’t miss how he is looking at him with the same wariness as before. As if he was expecting him to break down right then and there.

Not wanting to make his friends feel uncomfortable and not really feeling up to play a game right now anyway, he gives Sam a small smile and shakes his head. “N-no, I’ll l-lay d-down on th-the c-couch f-for a b-bit, if th-that’s alr-right.”

His friend frowns and shrugs. “Sure, do as you like. There’s no reason to ask.”

Barry nods and makes his way over to the couch. He doesn’t really intend to interact with any of them right now, he just wants to be among other people.

He listens to them and tries to concentrate on their voices instead of thinking of what has just happened between him and Jay not even an hour ago. The memory alone causes him to feel sick as well as tired to his bones.

Resting on the couch, listening to his friends play, it doesn’t take long for his mind to become heavy, and, before long, he has nodded off.

“Woah…”

Barry, who is currently looking through some of the science fiction novels that are for sale, turns his attention back to the comic section where he has left his nephew. He smiles when he sees that the little boy is completely absorbed in some comic book, and judging by his slightly agape mouth and big eyes he seems to have reached a very interesting part of the story.

After watching Wally for another moment, Barry directs his attention to the clock above the entrance and sees that they still have more than forty minutes before they would have to leave to meet up with Iris on time.

With another bemused glance to his nephew, he turns back to the novels he has been looking through and tries anew to find something that grabs his interest.

The bookstore they’ve entered about twenty minutes ago is rather small and a bit dingy but not badly so, and it is one Barry has visited a couple of times before. It is also not far to the mall from here, so that they still have enough time to look around for a bit longer before they would have to leave.

Wally makes another excited noise, and Barry turns his attention back to him with a fond smile that quickly grows when he notices how intensely focused the child is on what he is currently reading.

The little guy will definitely get this issue seeing how much he seems to enjoy it. Barry just hopes that it is not another one of The Flash, even though he is well aware how likely this is the case due to how much his nephew likes them. Still, he can’t help his slight dislike for this comic, it just causes him to cringe every time he brings himself to read one of them.

The majority of this comic series is plain silly for the most part, and he doesn’t like how goofy they
tend to portray him. Even worse is how they explain most of his powers with magic, and while he has nothing against the people of the occult, this always is able to rub him the wrong way.

“You are such a dork,” Iris told him with a bemused smile after she had asked him why he is so bothered by these comics, and he had tried to explain to her the little he knew about how the speed force works.

Contrary to him, she thinks that the comics about his alter ego are mostly cute and hilarious, and she likes to read them to Wally before bed whenever the boy stays over. She also loves to show Barry especially outrageous parts just to tease him. “Look, this Flash is running on a massiverainbow. Can you do that as well?”

Iris never fails to find his sour and slightly scandalized expression funny, and he is just glad that those issues are gone as soon as they visit the Wests again.

After looking through most of the novels without anything catching his eye, Barry briefly lets his gaze wander through the store without looking for anything in particularly.

Like before when they’ve entered, there are just a couple of other customers around. Two teenagers in the Manga and Anime section and a woman, slightly younger than Barry himself, who is looking through the erotic novels that are offered further back.

The clerk behind the counter is also still reading the same thick fantasy novel which has an elf and a wizard fighting on the cover, and Barry hasn’t missed how that man keeps glancing at Wally with a slightly annoyed and concerned expression, as if he expected the small kid to cause some kind of trouble. This is ridiculous, and it really starts to bother Barry quite a bit as his nephew is probably the most well-behaved and quiet child you can imagine.

Wally, thankfully, hasn’t picked up on it so far, and Barry hopes he wouldn’t as this would inevitably lead to the little boy wanting to leave. His nephew is a very shy and easily frightened child that usually never wanders off too far when they are somewhere else, and it has been a nice surprise that he actually seems to enjoy this place enough to leave his side.

After another not too friendly glance from the guy behind the counter, Barry decides that he would look for new reading material the next time around and decides to go over to Wally and see what the kid has found for himself.

“Hey, Shrimp,” he greets the boy who jumps slightly in response. Wally looks up to him with a wary glance that quickly is replaced by a much happier one once he realizes that it is just him. Barry tries not to frown at this reaction and instead nods to the comic his nephew is holding, asking curiously.

“What are you reading?”

“Of course…”

While Wally is mostly a really quiet child, much too quiet for his and Iris’ taste, he seems to break out of this habit as soon as someone mentions the scarlet speedster, and this time is no exception.

Barry flinches slightly and is not at all surprised when the shop clerk gives both of them another annoyed glance. He ignores him because, really, Wally is just a child, what does that man expect? It isn’t as if his nephew was causing any havoc in here.

“Oh?” he asks with a smile and crouches down next to the boy so that they are on the same eye level. “Do tell, what is he up to this time?”
Wally’s eyes sparkle in giddiness as he starts to animatedly tell him about his favourite hero and what adventure he is having in the issue. Barry can’t help but be infected by the little boy’s good mood even though he is still not happy that it has to be that comic again.

He has been getting the feeling that he sees more and more merchandising about his superhero alter ego every time he goes shopping, and this ridiculous amount of attention that is given to him is simply uncomfortable. Unfortunately, it only gets worse whenever he puts a lot of effort to stay out of anybody’s sight.

At least it isn’t as bad as it is for Bruce, who has to deal with some people currently developing some kind of television show about the Batman, even though they know absolutely nothing about him. His friend’s mood has been down the gutter since they made it official which doesn’t make working together with him any easier these days.

While many of the other don’t really get what Bruce is so pissed off about, Barry can completely understand and is really glad that the Flash is one of the lesser popular heroes. He can only be found on paper so far, whether it be in novels or on comic book pages, and he would be happy if this would stay this way.

Well, there is this Justice League cartoon, of course, but it doesn’t really count as everybody, including Batman and Hawkman, are portrayed rather outrageously cheerful.

It is harmless enough and doesn’t even bother to try and come up with some secret identities for them as some of the novels and comics have tried. Thanks to the current The Flash comic, kids thinks that his secret persona is called Steven Swift, which is just…

The only beef he has with the show is that he doesn’t like how they have made him into the lovable but not too bright jokester of the group which is again something many other interpretations of him share, and something he utterly doesn’t get. At least Iris thinks it is cute, and Wally loves it of course. They bought him the bedding with the show characters on it for his last birthday, and he was delighted about it. Rudolph wasn’t, but that was to be expected, and the man actually let his son gush over the Justice League and especially the Flash for once without telling him to stop.

“- and then he got them to the police station and brought the magic necklace back to the wizard!” Wally ends his summarization of the comic happily, and Barry tries not pulling a face at this story. Though, it probably isn’t one of the more flinch worthy ones as he has had adventures which were at least kind of similar to this.

“Huh, that seems to have been quite some adventure,” he smiles and nods to the issue. “What was your favourite part?”

The small boy seems clearly excited about someone willing to talk to him about his favourite superhero, and he turns the comic a few pages back to show him a panel where the Flash is generating a small twister with his right hand which then proceeds to knock out a couple of the Rogues.

Barry nearly chuckles when he notices the rather inaccurate drawings of the criminals and how they seem to have given the Pied Piper an actual skirt. He notices that Captain Cold is shown without hair once again, something most artists seem to do for whatever reason, which is quite funny as they also keep drawing Heatwave with rather lush ones.

“He defeated the Rogues although they’d sat up a really mean trap for him, and he saved all of Central City’s citizen from being turned into money!”
This storyline is certainly not the most imaginative one, but Wally is clearly enjoying it, and Barry can at least appreciate that.

“That sound like he did a good job at protecting the Twins,” he remarks with a smile, and Wally immediately nods in agreement and turns back to the last page again with a big grin. His expression falls over the next couple of seconds, though, and his eyes become sad as he watches the page. Concerned, Barry is just about to ask him about what is wrong when the kid quietly speaks again.

“I wish he was my friend, maybe he…” He breaks off and closes his mouth, a horribly dejected look on his face, and Barry feels the urge to pull the little boy closer and hug him till he feels better and not so damn sad anymore. It is so painful to see his nephew like that, this wonderful and bright child that is made to believe that he is anything but by his own father.

“Hey,” Barry says in a soft but warm voice and cups the back of Wally’s head. “I’m sure that the Flash would like you very much as well and would definitely want to be your friend.”

The little boy gives him a doubtful look before he shrugs. It is obvious that he doesn’t think so.

“Wally, you are such a great kid, there is no way that he wouldn’t want to be friends with you.”

Again, Wally only shrugs, and Barry doesn’t miss how the corners of his mouth have dropped, and how he is watching the Flash in the last page again with a kind of resignation that a boy in his age shouldn’t know.

“You know, he likes comics.”

This piques his nephew’s interest, and he turns to Barry with a surprised but slightly incredulous look. “How do you know that?”

Barry knows that he really shouldn’t tell him any of this, but he hates to see the kid so sad. He leans a bit closer and starts to speak in a very hush voice which immediately causes Wally to grow more attentive.

“I’ve met him at work before—”

“You have!? ”

“Shhh,” he hushes the kid and can’t stop himself from smiling despite the curious looks they get from the other customers or the glare they receive from the clerk.

“Sorry,” Wally whispers through the fingers of his two hands with which he is covering his mouth now.

“’s okay,” Barry assures him kindly before he goes on. “And yeah, I’ve met him before.”

“How is he?” his nephew asks excitedly, and it’s visibly difficult for him to keep his voice down.

“Well, very nice but rather quiet.”

This causes Wally to look at him in a doubtful way before he turns his eyes back to the Flash on the last page of the comic he has still opened where the hero is waving at the readers with a bright smile. He studies it for a couple of seconds before he turns back to him with a frown. “You sure?”

Barry chuckles quietly and nods. “Yeah, and he told me that he likes comic books and is very interested in science.”
“Like me,” Wally whispers in a wondrous voice and starts to grin widely. “I like them too, Uncle Barry!”

“Yes, I know,” Barry agrees with a bemused smile and tenderly cups his nephews back of his head. The kid returns his smile brightly and steps closer to give him a hug, something he often does with him but hardly with anybody else, not even with Iris.

“I love you, Wally,” he tells his nephew and decides that they would make a small detour to the ice-cream salon down the street before going to the mall-

The small body in his arms is suddenly gone, and so is the comic book store around them. It happens instantly, and Barry is left feeling utterly confused and disorientated for a brief moment before he picks up on something else – voices.

He recognizes them easily enough; they belong to the Rogues after all.

The realization of where he actually is right now, and that he has to have fallen asleep on the couch follows quickly enough. With it, the happiness and warmth he has felt just a few seconds ago is replaced by something cold and heavy, and for a while he just keeps laying there with his eyes closed.

He keeps listening to the others and notices that Len and Roscoe have joined the game, and Digger seems to have left while he has been asleep.

Barry doesn’t pay attention to what they are saying, he feels too groggy and sad to really care, and just having them around is enough. It is nice not being alone, especially now that he has pushed away the last person from his old life who still gave a damn about him.

He doesn’t regret asking Jay to stay away, though, as he really couldn’t deal with this anymore, but it is still painful and frightening. The other man has been a friend for so long, he and Joan have been so important to him, and now they are both gone like anybody else is.

This isn’t really true, though, as they have been gone for a long time already, Barry knows that, but he has been stupid enough to hope that they would welcome him back after he got out of Iron Heights and Jay turned up on his doorstep for the first time.

Like with Wally, he has lost someone very dear to him with this nice older couple.

The dream he has just had wells up in his mind again, the memory of so long ago, and Barry realizes that he can’t deal with that right now and forcefully tries to push it away. He doesn’t want to think of Wally or Iris, or anybody else he has lost. It hurts too much, and he is just too tired.

All of this has haunted him for so long now, why couldn’t it finally let go of him and leave him in peace?

Barry chuckles quietly to himself due to what an idiot he is. As if this would ever go away should he wallow in self-pity long enough.

He takes a deep breath and startles slightly after he has reached up to rub his eyes. It seems like he has started to cry again, and he quickly brushes the tears away as he really doesn’t want one of the others to pick up on this. Heat rises to his cheeks, and he squeezes his eyes shut as he rubs his sleeve over them with more force than necessary.

Has he been crying in his sleep?
Moving causes his stomach to start feeling queasy once more, and he notices how dry his throat has become during his nap. He takes a couple more of slow calming breaths and is relieved when he is able to stop the tears.

After he is certain that he wouldn’t embarrass himself in front of the others, he brushes over his eyes once more and wipes his cheeks before he slowly presses himself up in a sitting position.

A sharp pain flashes through his head momentarily, and he notices how the queasiness grows a bit worse but not badly enough that he has to lay back down. He realizes again how thirsty he is-

“Hey! Look who’s woken up from his beauty-sleep!” James loud voice causes Barry to wince slightly, and he really dreads facing his friends as there is no way that he doesn’t look at least partly as bad as he feels right now.

With a soft groan he gets up and flinches when his back and neck to flare up with pain in response. The couch in the hideout is in a much better condition than the one in his flat, but this certainly doesn’t mean that it is an ideal place for him to rest, and his tensed up muscles let him know all about being foolish enough to fall asleep on it despite it.

“You wanna join in?” James goes on and sounds just as cheerful as he has when Barry arrived which makes him wonder how many of the past games he has won so far.

“We can totally change for cents again!” his friend adds, and while it is a very nice thing of him to offer, it is out of question that the others wouldn’t like this all that much. As if to confirm his notion, Roscoe speaks up next and is audibly less enthusiastic about this prospect.

“Believe me, nobody would mind you quitting so that you can play for cents with him, but don’t drag the rest of us into it, you buffoon.”

“You’re a buffoon, Twirly!” James argues. “And I’m sure everybody would like you to quit and for Barry to join in instead!”

This causes Roscoe to scoff, and Barry decides that he is definitely not going to linger around long enough for them to start some fight he could possibly get somehow involved in.

“I wouldn’t mind playing for cents for a round or two.” Sam, who looks rather bored by their current game, shoots Barry a smirk that quickly vanishes and is replaced by a frown.

“Not really surprised about that,” Mick remarks with a snort as he studies his cards. “Your game’s been sucking the whole evening.”

“Not everybody can be as awesome as I’m! It’s my middle name, you know, James Awesome Jesse!” the blonde interjects proudly for which he earns a number of rather dirty looks.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, just shut up, Tricks.” Mick grunts but doesn’t really seem that annoyed by the other man’s boasting.

James sticks his tongue out at him in return, but his good mood seems to get a damper when Roscoe speaks next in an incredulous and slightly amused tone. “Have you been crying, Allen?”

Barry, who has just made his way towards the exit of the room and was about to walk past them, freezes at Roscoe’s question. He shoots the other man an alarmed and embarrassed look before he quickly shakes his head and utters a negative.

“Did you have a nightmare?” James asks, and contrary to Roscoe, he actually sounds concerned. “I
hate those! You should fetch Hart, and get him to make you some hot chocolate. That always helps me.”

The heat that rushes to his face is uncomfortable, and Barry doesn’t miss how all of them are staring at him now. Len, whom he hasn’t dared to look at so far, has his expression schooled and is just watching him with a slight frown.

It is incredibly embarrassing, and he tries to deny it again, but his throat has closed up. To his utter horror, he can feel how his eyes start itching again so that he gives up and instead simply turns, and more or less flees the room.

His skin feels all itchy again as he walks the dark hallway. He would give anything for a shower, but he feels too embarrassed to risk running into anybody else. He just wants to hide away somewhere and try not to think about how very ridiculous he must have looked to the others just now.

While he isn’t really paying attention to where his feet are leading him, he can’t say that he is surprised when he ends up in front of Len’s room. He spends most of his time here anyway, and he usually uses it as an option to withdraw whenever he doesn’t feel so good.

This time, Barry hesitates to enter, though. He doesn’t know how Len would react to finding him in his room after how he just made an idiot out of himself, and he doesn’t want to risk another fight with him again.

Barry is aware that it is probably silly to worry about this, but even after he and Len smoothed things out between them, he has gotten more apprehensive around him once more. Len hasn’t missed it, and neither of them likes it. Unfortunately, Barry just can’t really help himself.

Still, even so he doesn’t like the notion to move on to the room that has become more or less his own over time. He prefers Len’s over it anytime as long as they aren’t fighting, mostly due to its familiarity and the notion that it is Len’s which is somehow comforting.

Not really willing to worry about this anymore as Barry is just too exhausted, he decides to enter. As expected, seeing that the rooms in the basement generally don’t have the best ventilation, he is immediately greeted by stale air. As his stomach is still feeling quite queasy, he lets the door a bit ajar so that some fresh air could come in, and without tuning on the lights, he walks over to the bed.

He is still thirsty, very much so even, but he doesn’t want to leave again and run into anybody else by accident. Thus he simply lays down and pulls the other man’s pillow close to him, so that he can press it against his chest and bury his face into it.

Len’s smell fills his nose, and he thinks of how messed up his life has become and of how messed up he is, and he hardly notices as he starts to cry quietly again.

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Barry doesn’t remember what he has dreamed this time around, or whether he has dreamed anything at all when he wakes up again. It can’t be more than an hour or so that he has been asleep judging by how exhausted he still feels, but his head hurts rather badly and he is feeling sick to his stomach once again.

A soft groan passes his lips, and he realizes that he is still holding the pillows close to him. A familiar embarrassment settles over him, but just for a second or so before his attention is pulled back to how bad he feels.

The noise of a chair being pushed back causes him to freeze, and for some odd reason his mind
seems to fail him then because he is suddenly a child again, and he is certain that he is going to get
punished. For a horrible moment he is absolutely certain that this is one of his foster parents as his
confused mind isn’t able to remember that they were all long gone from his life.

The person come closer, steps up to the side of the bed to which Barry has his back to and keeps
standing there, watching him quietly. It is a horrible but all too familiar sensation and a scared
whimper passes his lips while he is too afraid to move. He just wants to be left alone, he feels sick,
and he is tired, he doesn’t want to be punished again.

The person next to him moves then, he can hear it, and before he even realizes what he is doing, he
has tightly curled up on himself. He stammers a small protest, knowing all too well how little this
would help, and he just wants to be left alone so badly.

“It’s just me, Barry,” a calm and low voice says which he doesn’t immediately recognize. “You’re
safe.”

“L-Len?” He croaks and starts to cough because his throat has gotten painfully dry by now.

Len hums in agreement, and Barry feels the mattress next to his back sift a bit as his friend sits down.
The fear that spikes through him with a sickening intensity quickly subsides again when his still
drowsy mind starts to take in where he actually is and with whom.

It is a relief, at least till he realizes that he has made a complete fool out of himself again, and he
buries his face in the pillow in his arms again to hide himself away. At least, till he remembers that
this is Len’s pillow, that he is in Len’s room, and that he is far too old for such a behaviour.

With some effort and another soft groan, Barry rolls onto his back and blinks a couple of times as his
sight is blurry in the faintly lit room. It seems that Len has joined him while he has been asleep.

“You want some water?” Len asks, and this sounds like the most wonderful idea to him. He nods
groggily. “Y-yes, p-please.”

His friend hums again before he gets up and leaves the room. Barry looks after him and wonders
what time it is and how long he has been asleep.

It doesn’t take Len long to come back with a bottle of water, and he accepts it with a faint smile. The
water feels amazing on his dry throat, and while the feeling of sickness gets momentarily worse, his
headache calms down nearly immediately.

“Th-thanks,” Barry murmurs after he has downed nearly half of it and hands the bottle back to the
other man.

“You’re feeling better now?” Len eyes him with surprisingly open concern, and Barry wonders how
badly he has to look to worry him that much. He smiles again tightly and nods. “Y-yes, m-much.”

Len studies him quietly, and Barry has the feeling that he wants to say something but isn’t sure how.

In a way he wishes it would stay that way, he really doesn’t want to talk about the reason why he has
behaved this odd, even though Len probably does deserve an explanation.

“I think you should go back to sleep,” Len tells him then before he adds with a slight smirk. “You
look pretty horrible.”

Barry chuckles and smiles tiredly despite how crappy he is currently feeling. “Th-thanks a l-l-lot.”
The other man only shrugs, but there is humour in his eyes when he speaks again. “Truth can be a bitch.”

Barry can certainly assert to that.

“W-will y-you s-stay?” he asks quietly and meets the other man’s gaze in the dim light that falls through the still slightly ajar door.

Len seems to hesitate for a moment which surprises and worries Barry a bit, at least till the other man finally speaks. “If you want me to.”

Things between them are so odd right now. At times they seem alright again, and then, out of nowhere, everything turns uneasy and uncertain.

Barry knows that Len is just as lost as he is when it comes to their relationship and to what it slowly but steadily seems to turn into, and he is also well aware that all their set-backs hurt and upset his friend just as much as they do him.

Slowly, he reaches for Len, and covers the hand that is resting on the other man’s thigh with his own. “Y-yes.”

Even in the faint light he can make out the relief that briefly flickers over his friend’s face. It causes some of the tension to ease away from him, because it helps to see that he isn’t the only one who feels mostly lost in all of this.

Len takes his shoes off, and Barry scoots over to make him room to lay down next to him.

They lay silently together for the next couple of minutes, and the other man’s presence is comforting and calming, helping his mind to settle down and not to go back again to what has happened just a couple of hours ago.

Barry has rolled onto his side, so that he is watching Len quietly as the man is looking up the ceiling with a thoughtful expression, and he wonders what he is thinking.

“You want to tell me what happened that upset you so much?” The question catches Barry off-guard, he has just been about to nod off again, and his cheeks grow uncomfortably warm when he notices that Len’s eyes are on him now.

He isn’t sure whether he wants to talk about Jay’s visit or not. A part of him just wants to forget that this ever happened, even though he knows that he would never be able to. These kind of things follow him around like his own shadow. They never let go, not really at least.

“J-Jay p-passed b-by,” he explains in a hardly audible voice and closes his eyes. “I… I d-don’t th-think h-he’ll d-do s-so ag-again.”

Len stays quiet for a long moment, and Barry prefers the silence to listening to anything that would made any of this any more real. He doesn’t want it to be real, he doesn’t want to lose another person…

“I… I c-can’t d-do th-this…” His voice sounds thin, and he bites his lower lip painfully hard to fight off the urge to cry again. He doesn’t want to be so damn weak all the time, he knows that self-pity won’t get him anywhere and only makes things worse in the end.

Barry feels Len move then, and he only startles a bit when he feels a familiar strong arm find its way around his back before he is pulled closer to him. He doesn’t resist and gladly welcomes the offered
Warm lips brush against the top of his head, and Barry tries to think of nothing. He just wants to concentrate on the warmth that slowly seeps from his friend to him.

“I-I’m s-so t-tired of th-this…” he whispers quietly.

Despite his effort, he can feel warm tears leak from his closed eyes as he presses his face against his friend’s shirt.

Len stays quiet and keeps holding him as he silently cries for the life and all the people that has been taken from him.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys liked the chapter! I'm quite fond of Barry's relationship with Wally, and I love to write these happy moments between them. Unfortunately, it only makes their current relationship all the sadder.

Next chapter will have a rather big reveal, I'm looking forward to posting it! It's not about what caused all of this, though, I don't want to get your hopes up just yet. ;3

Thanks for reading and all your amazing and kind feedback! I'm really lucky with you as my readers. :)
An Unexpected Revelation

Chapter Summary

Barry learns something that catches him completely off-guard.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not edited.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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End of October 3rd year

“You sure you’ll be good without my help?” Axel asks which causes Barry to give the young teen an amused look. He nods. “I th-think I’ll b-be able t-to h-handle th-the r-rest.”

It has been a very calm Monday afternoon so far, after all, and while there hasn’t been much to do, it has still been very nice to have the kid around.

“My, what a wonderful young man you are,” Mrs Ming remarks after listening to them, and it is obvious that she is completely serious about it which causes Axel to preen a bit in turn even though he tries to nonchalantly shrug it off. “Just lending a hand to a friend.”

“Still.” The old woman smiles and walks over to the boy. “You’ve been helping a lot over the last couple of months, and I know that Barry buys you food and sweets as a reward, but I want to give you a little something as a thank you as well.”

Axel, who has been munching on an apple, piques up at that and gives her a curious look. “Well, thanks, but, you know, you really don’t have to…”

The old woman smiles as she hands him ten dollars which isn’t much, but the business hasn’t been going that well, and Barry really hopes that Axel isn’t disappointed. To his relief and slight surprise, this doesn’t seem to be the case at all.

“Cool! Thanks a ton, that is really neat of you, Mrs Ming,” the boy says with a pleased expression as he accepts the money which in turn causes Mrs Ming to laugh and pat his cheek. “You’re such a good kid, Axel, and I’m really glad that you’re helping Barry out at times. You may not think so, but you are a great help, and we both enjoy having you around.”

Axel, who has tried not to pull a face when the old woman patted him, suddenly turns red and sheepishly averts his eyes to the ground while he shrugs again. “Sure, no prob, I live to help and…”

The kid glances at her and then to Barry before looking anywhere but them. “Well, you’re pretty cool as well. For old folks, I mean.”

This causes both Barry and Mrs Ming to laugh which in turn earns them an annoyed huff from Axel, even though he is obviously very pleased by the kind words he has just received.
“Then hurry along, young man. You don’t want to leave your friend waiting, do you?” Axel rolls his eye in good humour at her words, but thanks her again before he takes off.

Currently, Axel and his friends seem to be on very good terms again which means that the teen spends most of his time with them. Barry is glad that this doesn’t stop him from passing by at the store every other day, though, and while he is sure that it is at least partly due to the food he gets for helping, he also knows that Axel simply likes to spend time with him and Mrs Ming.

The boy hasn’t liked the news that he couldn’t stay at his place anymore, and while Eddy and Mary both offered him that he could stay at their places should he have nowhere else to go at nights, he has yet to take them up on it.

Axel was quite bummed when Barry asked him to understand that he could no longer come over to his flat without anybody else around. After Jay’s last visit, Barry is simply too afraid that someone could pass by to check up on him unannounced, and he dreads the notion that they could find out about Axel and the consequences this would bring with it.

The boy only kept up sulked for a couple of days, though, seeing that he did get the reason for his decision and how dangerous their former agreement really was for him. Still, Barry can’t help but feel guilty about throwing him more or less out even so.

“I think I will go upstairs and lay down a bit if you are going to be alright on your own, my dear.” Barry looks back to Mrs Ming and nods.

“Of course,” he agrees before he notices how she is currently pressing one hand against the small of her back. He frowns and asks concerned whether her back is acting up again, a problem she has had more and more trouble with over the past year.

“Don’t worry, Barry,” she assures him with a kind smile. “I have just been on my feet too much. It will be as good as new after I have been able to rest a bit.”

Despite her words, he can’t help but worry. She isn’t exactly the youngest anymore with over eighty years, and she told him a while ago that she has been having troubles with her heart for a couple of years now. The notion that something could happen to her bothers him a lot these days as she has become a very dear friend to him since he started working here.

“Y-you sh-should l-lay d-down th-then,” he advises, and really wishes he could do more. Mrs. Ming gives him a grateful smile in return. “Call me if you need some help, my dear.”

Barry agrees and watches her go upstairs with a clinging concern before he forces himself to turn his attention back to work. He keeps himself busy with taking stock and mopping the floor for the next half an hour or so as there aren’t any customers around.

Afterwards, he finds himself sketching behind the counter for a bit till finally an older couple passes by. They are both around Mrs Ming’s age and friends with the older woman, thus he is rather familiar with them as they tend to pass by every week on the same days. They exchange a few niceties with him, and he promises to give his employer their greetings before he is once again left alone in the store.

Time goes by rather slowly, and, shortly after eight, he decides to sweep the floor once more and do some dusting. Just standing behind the counter makes him feel like he is lazing around, even when there isn’t anything to do and cleaning has become rather redundant at this point.

Finally, when he has been without customers for nearly an hour again, he decides take one of the
magazines and read a bit as he starts to get rather tired. Occupying himself like this, the next half an hour passes by much quicker, and he gets slightly startled by the familiar ring of the doorbell.

His gaze moves to the entrance, partly curious and partly worried who is going to turn up so shortly before their closing hour. He really hopes that it isn’t going to be trouble seeing that after half past nine they usually have hardly anybody passing by anymore these days, and when it still happens, it is mostly drunks or teens who want to buy alcohol and like to make his job a bit more difficult for him.

The memory of the group of late teenage boys from last Monday, who seemed on their way to a party and passed by to grab some cheap wine and beer, is still fresh in his mind. They didn’t break or tried to steal anything, but they have been very uncomfortable to deal with, and it has taken them forever to leave again.

“Hey, Bar,” Eddy greets him with an easy smile as he makes his way over to the counter. “Your favourite personal escort service has arrived.”

Barry feels himself relax as soon as his eyes fall upon his friend, and he returns the other man’s smile readily.

“H-hi, Eddy. You’ve b-b-been in th-the area ag-gain?” he asks jokingly.

“Yup, been busy,” his friend agrees and stops in front of him. “And I thought that you’d like some company on your way home.”

Eddy tends to do that, simply passing by around the time Barry is closing the store and taking the bus home with him. It is never something they agree upon beforehand, and it doesn’t happen regularly, but it is always a pleasantly nice thing of the other man to do.

“S-sure.”

“Great, you wanna play a game of Sixty-Six?”

It isn’t really surprising when Eddy pulls out the fitting card deck just as he asks this seeing that to his friend this game is probably the best invention since sliced bread.

“I’ve the feeling this could be your night,” his friend tells him with a wiggle of his eyebrows which causes Barry to chuckle.

“I’m n-not-toriously b-b-ad at g-games,” he reminds him, but Eddy only waves him off and starts to shuffle the cards. “Not with this one, you aren’t. Fortuna smiled at you when they spread the talent for it.”

Barry feels the urge to roll his eyes at that silly statement but doesn’t correct his friend seeing that he actually has a point. While he is still horrible at Poker and pretty much any other card game, he has an odd knack for Sixty-Six. He thinks that this is mostly due to how it helps that it is rather easy for him to remember which cards have already been dealt and which are still in the game. Thus it isn’t hard to conclude upcoming pairings.

Next to luck, memory is a big factor when it comes to Sixty-Six. This is also one of the reasons why the Rogues don’t like it particularly much. Roscoe is usually the one who wins when they actually play once in a while, and, like most of the others, he is a really horrible winner.

“You grab us two beers? I buy.” His friend shoots him a hopeful look.

“Y-you d-do r-rememb-ber th-that I’m st-still at w-work, d-don’t you?” Barry asks with a slightly
exasperated sigh, but Eddy only shrugs. “So what? There is nobody around, and while I don’t want to crash your hope, it is still more or less a given that nobody will turn up till you have to close for today, anyway.”

Barry shoots the other man an annoyed frown as he picks a card and glances to the clock. Unfortunately, it seems like his friend would be right. With it not even being another half an hour till he would have to start with closing the store, it is unlikely that another customer would pass by tonight. Another look to the door shows him that it has started to rain again as well, something else that would make it more unlikely for people to find their ways here this late.

“Don’t make such a face. This place has never been a customers’ magnet, and you’ve still survived so far, so don’t fret about it,” his friend advices as he studies the card he has picked up and shows it to Barry with a smirk. “Looks like I’m starting.”

Next, Eddy shows a marriage and goes on. “And be glad that it is a slow evening, at least you don’t have to bother with drunken little shits this way.”

Well, his friend does have a point there.

After Eddy’s second turn, he puts his cards down and walks over to where they have the refrigerators with the cooled drinks. Barry doesn’t even remark on him picking up two of the beers.

“Just live a little.” The other man grins when he notices his irked expression. “One beer won’t cause you to become unable to close the store, and you have me as help.”

“I th-thought you’re t-trying t-to c-convince m-me t-to d-d-drink,” Barry snarks with a smile as he accepts the bottle. His friend shoots him a very unconvincingly hurt look. “You and your ongoing tendency to insult me really makes me start to feel unappreciated here.”

They end up playing a game before Barry decides to start closing the store. It’s a bit early for it, but he doesn’t really want to stand around any longer, and Mrs Ming told him that he could do the closing earlier should it be a slow night again.

As he has cleaned everything beforehand, there isn’t much left to do for him other than to lock everything up and turn the lights off.

“The nipper is over at his friends’ place again?” Eddy, who is sitting on the counter, watches him make a last round through the place to make sure that everything is as it should be.

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees as he locks the front door. “H-he s-said a f-friend of h-his is c-celeb-brating h-his b-b-birthday.”

“Well, let’s hope he doesn’t join the navy by accident.” Eddy snorts, and while Barry doesn’t find this particularly amusing, he doesn’t protest. He isn’t stupid and knows how likely it is that there would be alcohol at the party Axel is going to tonight.

Even though he has tried to talk with the teen about being responsible and careful regarding getting drunk, he is well aware of what little of a difference that will really make in the end. Axel is a teenager, a very young one but one who is used to a rough life and likely hasn’t had many good role-models so far.

Barry has never liked any kind of alcohol, mostly due to him learning early on how people can change for the worse when they get drunk, but it’s not the same for his younger friend who will probably want to impress his friends or just feel like he is belonging there.
“Again with that long face of yours.” Eddy quips and slides off the counter while he pulls a cigarette pack out of the pocket of his jacket. “Don’t worry so much about everything, the kid isn’t stupid, and he knows that he will disappoint you should he let it go too far.”

At his doubtful look, his friend shrugs and starts to make his way over to the door leading to the back area. Barry, who has just finished his little round, follows along.

“The kid really thinks a lot of you,” Eddy tells him when they exit into the back alley and shakes out a cigarette from the pack he is still holding. He lightens it up and inhales the smoke deeply while Barry puts the keys away.

“I’m also sure you constant nagging isn’t in vain,” Eddy adds with a smirk when he notices Barry’s doubtful expression, and they start to make their way towards the bus-stop.

“I’m n-not c-const-tantly n-nagging.” Barry’s frown deepens when the other man only chuckles, and he points out. “H-he’s th-thirteen.”

When his friend fails to response other than with a shrug, he decides to let the topic rest. It isn’t like he is surprised that Eddy wouldn’t be particularly bothered by someone as young as Axel getting drunk. In all likelihood, his friend did just that when he was the teen’s age.

They have to wait for about half an hour for the bus to turn up which means that it is nearly twenty minutes late. It doesn’t happen often that it has delay, and while Barry takes it calmly and doesn’t think too much of it, Eddy is clearly annoyed by having to spend any more time than necessary in the increasing rain.

His friend gives the driver a rather dirty look when they finally get on the bus, and Barry has to pull him along to stop him from starting some stupid argument with the older man behind the wheel who is clearly in bad mood as well.

“Y-you’re s-so ch-childish at t-times,” he mutters to Eddy when they take their seats in the back. “It w-was p-probably d-due t-to s-some t-technical d-diffic-culties th-that t-the b-bus arrived l-late.”

Eddy snorts and shoots him an incredulous look but leaves it at that, for which Barry is quite grateful. His friend can get ridiculously upset about the pettiest things at times. He really doesn’t feel like listening to him rant about the lacking of their public traffic system while trying to get him to keep it down at the same time so that he wouldn’t bother the other passengers.

The ride passes by in relative silence after that, and while they exchange a few words, neither of them feels much like talking. Eddy occupies himself with his mobile phone, and Barry keeps watching the world pass by outside the window. He doesn’t notice when he starts to nod off.

He is startled awake again by his friend shaking his shoulder lightly and pointing out the next stop is theirs.

“You look like a racoon with those dark circles under your eyes,” Eddy remarks with a crooked smile. Barry, whose exhaustion has made a leap for the worse now that he has fallen asleep for a bit, grumbles something unintelligible while he rubs his eyes.

“Don’t expect me to carry you,” his friend informs him, sounding much too amused for his liking.

After giving Eddy an unimpressed look, Barry turns back to the window to see where they actually are.

“W-we sh-should g-get u-up.” His voice sounds husky. He coughs slightly and tries again to rub the
sleep out of his eyes. There is no question that he is looking forward to his bed tonight.

The air is cool and moist when they finally exit the bus at the next stop, and Barry takes a deep breath to clear his head a bit. It seems that it has stopped raining sometime while he was asleep, but the ground is still wet. He looks up to the sky and can see a thick layer of dark clouds still covering everything.

“Come on, slowpoke. I like you, but I don’t wanna freeze my nuts off just because you are half-asleep on your feet.” Barry turns his attention back to Eddy who has already climbed up the few stairs to the entrance door, and wonders whether his friend can also sense the odd feeling that sticks to the air. It is as if it’s unusually charged up.

“I th-think th-there’s g-going t-to b-be a l-lightening s-storm.” He has no idea why he points this out, and he feels rather stupid for it when he notices his friend’s amused expression a moment later. “That’s good to know, and the more reason for us to remove ourselves from out here.”

Barry nods in agreement but glances up to the sky again before he makes his way over to where Eddy is still waiting for him.

“You aren’t afraid of lightening, are you?” the other man asks as they enter the building.

“N-no.”

“Really? Because you seemed quite unsettled there for a moment.”

Barry frowns and shrugs as they start to climb the stairs to their floor. “I’m j-just t-tired.”

Eddy glances at him in a way that makes it clear that he isn’t really believing him. He doesn’t comment on it any further, though, and they walk the rest of their way in silence.

The bulbs of their floor have finally been replaced a couple of weeks ago, but neither of them bothers with turning the lights on. They are pretty used to move through the dark to get to their apartments by now, anyway.

Barry isn’t sure why but the uneasy feelings that has nestled itself into the pit of his stomach starts to grow heavier with every step he makes towards his door. He is so occupied by this odd sensation that he fails to notice that his friend has stopped at the top of the stairs and only picks up on it after a couple of steps.

Surprised, he turns back to him. “Everyth-thing alright?”

It seems to take Eddy a moment to answer, long enough that it worries Barry a bit.

“Yeah,” his friend finally agrees, and he draws the word out in an odd way, like he isn’t really paying attention to him or what he is saying but has something else on his mind. Another moment passes by in a strained silence before Eddy seems to snap out of it.

“Yeah, I’m good,” the other man repeats and sounds normal again. “Just remembered something I’ve forgotten to do.”

Barry watches as his friend makes his way over to him in a few quick steps. “Y-you s-sure y-you’re alr-right?”

Eddy waves his concern off. “Yes, I’m good. It was just a long day.”
It doesn’t sound like a lie, but it still seems a bit odd. He decides not to linger on it, though, as he too is exhausted and just wants to get off his feet. Thus he is surprised when his friend stops him as he is about to walk over to his door. “You’ve a moment to spare?”

“F-for wh-what?” he asks a bit confused.

“I need to show you something,” Eddy explains rather lamely, and Barry can’t help himself but gives his friend a slightly annoyed frown. “N-now?”

It is late, really late, and he has to get up early again tomorrow, the other man knows that.

“It won’t take long-”

“Eddy, l-let’s d-do th-this t-tomorrow, ok-kay?” he asks wearily. As far as he knows his friend, he is probably trying to lure him into his apartment so that he could get him to make him some very late snack.

Even in the dark he can make out the odd expression on his friend’s face, then, and he isn’t sure what exactly he sees there but for a moment he thinks it is… worry? Reluctance?

It is gone the next second, so quickly, that Barry thinks he must have imagined it.

“Right,” Eddy says, and he still sounds somehow off, but actually proceeds on to his own door. “Sleep tight and don’t let the bedbugs bite you.”

Barry can’t help but frown, a bit unsettled by this odd behaviour of his friend. After a brief moment, he decides to not worry about it for now and instead turns to unlock his door.

The air of his flat is surprisingly cool as he enters, and he can’t help but wonder slightly frustrated whether the landlady has turned off the heating once again. She tends to do it at times if he thinks the temperatures aren’t low enough to justify the costs of it.

“G-great.” Barry grumbles as he pulls the door close behind himself, and it is just then that he notices that something is off. Instinctively, he freezes up when he spots the open window above his kitchen sink and realizes that the low temperatures aren’t due to his landlord’s stinginess.

Something cold is suddenly pressed against his left temple, and he feels a familiar fear engulf him like a cold blanket.

“Sorry,” a deep voice says that he immediately recognizes as the one of Kenneth. “This is nothing personal, Allen. You’ve just made the wrong friends, and those stubborn fuckers were stupid enough to really upset my client.”

The sensation of the muzzle against his skin makes him oddly lightheaded, and Barry tries to protest, but his voice is failing him once again.

“Maybe this will make them realize that they shouldn’t play hard to get.” Kenneth chuckles softly at that as if he has just said something funny.

Barry realizes in that moment that there are so many things he still wants to do, so much he still wants to amend for, and there would be no possibility for him to do so anymore. He would die as a sick twisted man in the eyes of the people he once held so dear, and he would die without seeing any of his friends again.

His mind jumps to Wally, and the regret is nearly overbearing before the thought of his nephew is
replaced by the notion of Axel, and how the boy would be on his own again after his death. He really doesn’t want this to happen to the kid, and he prays that Eddy and Mary would look after him, maybe even Len.

When the other man comes to his mind, Barry feels an unsettling sadness overcome him which is so intense that his eyes start to itch.

The realisation that he wants to see him again shouldn’t be as unexpected or as intimidating as it is, and he wonders what the criminal would do after he found out about this. Would he be sad about his death; would it really mean something to him?

Probably, by now he has realized that Len seems to feel similar to him, and the thought of causing him pain, of upsetting him as much as Barry himself would be upset should their roles be reversed, makes him feel so very guilty and sad…

He closes his eyes and feels a couple of warm tears run down his cheeks as he takes a shaky breath.

It doesn’t matter, none of this does. He is already a dead man.

Odd, how things sometimes work. He wouldn’t have thought that it would end like this for him-

A knock at the door behind him causes him to nearly jump out of his skin and while his mind is still jumbled, he doesn’t miss how unsettlingly calm the muzzle of the gun stays at his temple.

“Hey, Barry?” It is Eddy’s voice and his stomach makes a sickening lurch. “I don’t wanna bother you, but it seems that I was stupid enough to actually lose my keys. Can you let me crash on your couch for tonight?”

The urge to call out to the other man and tell him to run is nearly smothering, but his throat still feels like someone is choking him. He glances over to Kenneth who is mostly covered in shadows but is able to make out the annoyed way in which he has pursed his lips.

“Don’t be an ass, I know that you’re still awake, Bar. You just went in there like a minute ago.” Eddy huffs, and Barry could kick him for his outrageous bad timing.

Then, the muzzle is gone, and the other man nods to the door.

“Tell him to get lost,” he orders him in a low voice and sneers when Barry fails to comply with it. “Do it, or your buddy will die as well.”

The thought that his friend could die because of him is horrifying, and he really tries to get himself to talk and send the other man away, but he isn’t able to get a single noise out.

“You’re a fucking joke.” Kenneth grunts in annoyance, and Barry grows sick as he watches how he lifts his gun again at him with a dark smirk. “At least you’ll have some company when you bite the dust.”

A small whimper escapes him, and he makes a hurried step back with his eyes fixed on the black and incredibly intimidating muzzle that is pointed directly at his head.

The door opens then, just slightly, and Barry remembers with a dropping stomach that he hasn’t locked it after entering.

It causes Kenneth to glance over to it, and while Barry knows that he isn’t fast anymore and that he wouldn’t be able to overpower him, it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t want Eddy to die because of him.
The prospect of his own death has filled him with dread and a numbing fear, but the notion that this man could also kill his friend jerks at a part in him he has forgotten existed a long time ago.

The movement how to disarm someone come to him without thinking, it is muscle-memory from his time working at the CCPD and as a superhero. It still doesn’t work.

Kenneth is a huge guy, built like an ox, and he is strong as is his grip on the gun. Barry isn’t able to get it away from him, but he makes him lose his balance for a second, and it is enough to bring him to fall with a well-placed shove.

Unfortunately, Kenneth is a professional and his eyes never lose their aim on him, neither does the gun. Barry watches him pull the trigger, and an odd calmness settles over him as he realizes that this is the moment he is going to die.

The bullet never comes, though. Instead, Eddy is suddenly standing in front of him, like he has appeared out of nowhere.

Instinctively, Barry grabs for him and tries to pull him away from the trajectory of any possible shot that would be fired. He tries desperately to tell him to run, but his throat is still not working, and it is so upsetting that he feels new tears wet his cheek.

“-ry. Barry!” Eddy takes a hold of his upper arms in an attempt to keep him still. “Calm down, it’s alright, man. You’re alright.”

Barry shakes his head and desperately tries to get his useless vocal cords to work. The other man needs to leave, it doesn’t make any sense that he hasn’t been shot yet, but should he stay it would definitely come to it.

“For heaven’s sake, calm down! You’re alright, nobody’s going to hurt you,” the other man tries again before he stills briefly and gives him a strange look that is then replaced by one of realisation.

“I’m fine, you idiot, and I’ll stay so if you finally stop freaking out on me, alright?”

It is frustrating how Eddy doesn’t seem to get the danger he is in, and Barry feels the urge to smack him, at least till he catches up with what is actually going on.

He freezes.

There is no way that Kenneth wouldn’t have shot the other man by now, and Barry realizes that he himself should already be dead as well, seeing that killer actually pulled the trigger on him. Without thinking, he reaches for his forehead, half expecting to feel a hole and shattered bones and brain matter.

For a brief moment he is certain this can’t be real, that he is dead and this… he has no idea what this is.

“Woah there, buddy, you are growing rather pale,” Eddy remarks audibly concerned, and Barry doesn’t protest when he is pulled over to the couch next. His gaze goes to where Kenneth has been just a moment before, and his stomach makes a painful lurch when he doesn’t find him there.

His feet baulk, and he stares at the spot in a mixture of disbelief and panic. Eddy huffs in annoyance when he fails to go on, but his exasperation wanes as soon as he notices what has made him stop.

“You don’t need to worry, you are safe.” Surprised, Barry turns to the other man, and he tries to understand how he could be so sure of that. How is he still alive, and where did the hitman go?!
It is then that he notices how Eddy keeps fidgeting slightly, and the nervous way with which he is watching him now.

Something makes click in his head, and he realizes that it must have been Eddy who stopped Kenneth from killing him, and maybe he is also the reason that the man isn’t here anymore. This makes utterly no sense, though.

“Look,” his friend says and seems visibly uncomfortable all of a sudden. “Just let’s get you off your feet, and I will get you a glass of water, okay?”

There are so many questions going through Barry’s head right now, but he isn’t able to formulate a single one of them. Instead, he let Eddy urge him over to the couch.

“You want me to make you some tea?”

Barry frowns at his friend after he has sat down and can’t really decide. His head feels oddly light and heavy all at the same time.

“I can also get you a beer if you would prefer that… or something stronger,” Eddy offers with an unusually uncertain smile.

When he fails to answer again, Eddy simply makes do with snatching him a glass of water. It is as good of a choice as anything, anyway, as he doesn’t feel thirsty right now.

It is when Barry accepts the glass that their fingers touch slightly, and he suddenly feels like he is rammed into a wall. The air is pushed out of his lungs in a gasp as a sensation similar to being electrified overcomes him which is so damn familiar that it is overwhelming and horrifying all at the same time.

The accompanying sickness hits him completely unprepared, and he groans softly as his stomach seems to attempt and crawl its way out of his throat. He hears Eddy hiss when he realizes what is going to happen and quickly makes a step back just as Barry bends over and starts to retch.

Throwing up is as awful as it has ever been, and the notion that it is a good thing that he hasn’t eaten anything since earlier last afternoon briefly crosses his mind. He is really not looking forward to cleaning up this mess.

The air around him feels thick and charged, and while he digs his fingers painfully into his knees and keeps his eyes clenched shut, he still knows that the other man is close.

Thankfully, Eddy stays silent and doesn’t attempt to touch him. Barry doesn’t even want to consider how much worse this would make all of this.

It takes forever till his stomach starts to settle down again, and when it finally does, he groans miserably and just stays still for a long moment afterwards.

“It’s alright, Barry,” Eddy says in an unfamiliar soothing voice. “You’re alright.”

Barry thinks that this is a silly thing to say. Nothing is alright, not for him, it hasn’t been in a very long time.

With another soft groan, he forces himself to sits up again and let’s himself fall back against the back of the couch. His head still feels strange, like it is not really a part of him anymore, and the taste of bile is lingering his mouth which is nasty but better than the nausea itself has just been.
Tiredly, he lets his head drop onto the backrest and takes a couple of slow and deep breathes.

“Wh… wh-what d-did y-you d-do t-to h-him?” He turns his head slightly, so that his gaze can fall upon Eddy.

“K-Kenneth,” he adds and realizes that this name probably doesn’t tell his friend anything. “Th-the m-man wh-who w-want-ted t-to...”

The thought that he would have nearly died is unexpectedly unsettling, much more than he would have anticipated it to be. There have been many times he has come close to death before, and he has always been able to deal with it, knowing that it just was a part of his life.

It has been different this time, though.

“You want me to get you another glass of water?” Eddy meets his look with a calm one and gives him a small smile. “You look really pale, maybe I should get you some crackers or jelly?”

Barry notices the tightness around his friend’s eyes that belies how relaxed he tries to appear.

“Wh-what i-is g-going on, Ed-dy?” His voice is quiet, and he feels so out of place. He starts to think that it is due to the other man, due to his presence.

The sensation of their brief touch comes back to him, and he can’t help it but shudder in realization of why that feeling has been so unsettling to him.

“Y-you… y-you’re a s-speeds-ster,” he states quietly.

It isn’t a question, and he knows how ridiculous is must sound and that it is very likely that Eddy will deny it and laugh it off, but he knows what the speed force feels like. He has been connected to it for nearly a decade.

For a long moment, Eddy doesn’t replay anything but studies Barry. He doesn’t look upset or angry, but he doesn’t seem particularly happy either. He seems worried more than anything else.

Finally, Eddy takes a deep breath and exhales it slowly while rubbing a hand over his face. “You can’t tell anybody about this, okay?”

This is not the answer Barry has expected.

“Y-you’re r-really a s-speedster…” The notion is so utterly absurd that he feels the urge to laugh. Eddy, his neighbour, of whom he is pretty sure that he is involved in some shady business at times but whom he has thought of as an ordinary person, possesses super speed.

“How?”

The other man frowns and again seems to take his time to consider what to say next.

“Look,” Eddy finally answers, and the tightness around his eyes hasn’t left yet which causes him to look older than usual. “I know that this is a lot to take in and probably one of the best reasons there are to freak out but please don’t. I don’t mean you any harm.”

Again, that isn’t exactly the reply Barry has expected. Then again, Eddy can’t know that he himself has been a speedster once, and he most likely expects him to be at least a bit unsettled by discovering that his neighbour has powers.

Well, he is, but most likely not for the reason his friend has in mind.
“Wh-what d-did you d-do t-to K-Kenneth?” he asks because he can’t really think of anything else to say just then.

Eddy’s looks grim and uneasy when he shrugs once more. “I didn’t off him if you worry about that.”

“Th-that’s n-not wh-wh-what I’ve m-m-meant,” Barry protests, even though a small part of him actually has been worried about just that.

“Yeah?” the other man asks with a snort and is clearly not believing him. “Because you may not have notices, but you look like you want do nothing more than bolt.”

Before Barry can say anything to that, Eddy groans and pinches the bridge of his nose. He mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like a curse, and for a long and tense moment an uneasy silence settles between them.

“I’m n-not g-going t-t-to t-tell anyb-body, Eddy.”

His friend turns his eyes back on him, and Barry is pretty sure that he is trying to gauge whether he can believe him or not. It suddenly occurs to him that the other man maybe doesn’t have anybody who knows about his powers, and that notion is concerning and saddening at the same time.

“I didn’t kill him.” Eddy turns his gaze to the still open window and frowns. Barry tenses up when it is closed a second later while the man in front of him seemed not to have moved at all.

This is so damn odd to see and so unsettling that he briefly feels his stomach to revolt once more.

“You are getting sick on me again?” The look his friend gives him is both worried and unhappy, and Barry feels really bad for reacting so openly negative to any of this.

Then, Eddy is gone from his side, just for a split-second, brief enough that he could have missed it should he have blinked, and reappears with a small bag of dried ginger. It is still closed, and Barry is pretty sure that he just whipped the drugstore around the corner.

“This helps,” his friend says after he has opened the small bag and picked one of the dried sliced which he is now offering to him. “Just suck on it.”

Barry hesitates a moment before he accepts it with a faint smile. His stomach feels so queasy he isn’t sure that it would be a good idea to put anything in his mouth right now. Still, this is most likely going to help with settling it, and the other man actually got it for him.

“Th-thanks.”

Eddy only grunts in response before another silence settles between them. It is awkward and uneasy, but Barry knows that it has to be much worse for his friend.

Giving such a secret away, especially if you are not doing so of your own free will, is always extremely unsettling and scary.

“Wh-where’s K-Ken-neth?” He has no idea why he is asking this instead of any of the other honestly more persisting questions he has on his mind. It is an important question, though, and the answer, should the other man give him one, would tell him a lot about his friend.

It takes Eddy a while to replay which isn’t very assuring. He may have told him that he didn’t kill Kenneth, and Barry believes him, but it is never a good sign when someone seems this reluctant about talking about something they’ve done.
“I took him outside the twins’ borders.”

Again, this isn’t what he has expected.

“Y-you…” Barry frowns, and while he is relieved about this, it is also worrying as a man like Kenneth shouldn’t just left running around freely.

“Wh-why d-didn’t y-you t-take h-him t-to th-the p-p-police?” This would have been a more sensible thing to do, at least.

Eddy snorts and shrugs. “I don’t get involved with those fuckers.”

“Y-you c-could h-have l-left h-him in f-front of th-the d-deparment,” Barry points out as he himself did so quite a few times when he started his carrier as the Flash and hadn’t yet decided to make himself known to the public. More often than not, the police had already enough on the criminals to put them away at least for a time, and a guy like Kenneth couldn’t be a dark horse to them.

“Well, believe it or not, that didn’t cross my mind.” Eddy grouses and sounds noticeably annoyed. “You know, why let us not just put down some rules for next time I’ve to save your ungrateful arse.”

His friend’s anger dims again when he notices his hurt expression, and how he has palpably tensed up.

Eddy heaves a frustrated sigh and rubs his eyes again. “Look, he isn’t going to come after you anytime soon again, alright?”

Barry wants to know what his friend means, but he feels tired and is pretty sure that he wouldn’t like what he would learn should he asks him about it again. Instead he simply nods and turns his eyes towards the slice of ginger he still has in his hand.

It looks utterly unappetizing to him, but he pushes it into his mouth, mostly due to the lack of anything else to do.

Another silence spreads between them for a bit, and while he can feel the other man’s eyes on him, he keeps his gaze on the small couch table in front of him. Barry is reminded of his earlier mishap when he picks up the unpleasant smell of his own vomit, and while it causes the nausea to spike slightly again, he decides that he really should take care of it. He slowly gets onto his feet again, carefully stepping around the mess.

“What are you doing?” There is an audible note of concern in his friend’s voice as he gets up as well.

“I n-need t-to c-clean th-this m-m-mes-”

In hindsight it should not have surprised him when his floor is suddenly clean again, but for a couple of seconds he can only stare at the spot and frown in a mixture of exasperation and unease.

“You r-really d-didn’t h-have t-to d-do th-that,” he tells Eddy with a frown.

“I know,” the other man simply agrees with a half-shrug.

They watch each other quietly, and Barry wonders whether Mary knows. He doesn’t think so.

“Th-thank y-you.” He really means it.

“Sure.” Eddy shrugs again and gives him a slight smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “I’ve cleaned away worse that vomit before.”
This really doesn’t set Barry’s mind at ease, but he decides not to think too much about this piece of information for now.

“I also m-mean f-for… f-for s-saving m-my l-life, Eddy. I’m r-really g-gratef-ful.”

The other man looks briefly surprised before he chuckles and shrugs. “I live to serve, Bar, and you are one of the few people I actually like, so rest assured that I won’t let any crazy hitman go after you anytime soon.”

Barry smiles and just like that the mood between them becomes lighter again.

“Y-you w-want m-me t-to m-make y-you s-some c-coffee?”

“You look ready to collapse,” Eddy points out and nods to where his bedroom is. “Go get some sleep.”

The notion to lay down is very alluring, but a part of him wants to talk with his friend of what he has just learned. Eddy seems to notice what is on his mind as he adds. “You can bug me about what I’m and all that jazz after you’ve rested.”

While his friend tries to appear nonchalant about him having found out that he is a speedster, he isn’t succeeding in hiding that it is obviously bothering him.

There is probably something Barry should say to him, something to reassure him and set his nerves a bit at ease, seeing that he really doesn’t mean any harm to his friend.

His mind comes up blank, though, and while there is so much he would like to know, he is also well aware that he is too exhausted to really make sense of anything the other man would tell him.

“Ok-kay,” he finally agrees and doesn’t miss how Eddy appears noticeably relieved by this.

“Good.” His friend smiles faintly. “I’ll keep an eye out for any more potential assassins that are out for your blood.”

“N-not f-f-funny,” Barry remarks drily, which causes his friend to grin.

“I’ll catch you later, then.” Eddy gives him a nod and is about to leave when he stops him again. “Y-you r-really d-don’t n-need t-to w-worry, I w-won’t t-tell anyb-body.”

His friend frowns slightly and studies him with an expression Barry can’t interpret. Whatever he finds on his face, it causes him to relax some more and give him a somewhat more honest smile. “Thanks, Barry.”

Then Eddy is gone, like he has just turned into thin air.

Barry stares at the spot where the other man has been just a second ago and isn’t able to feel anything but a bone-deep exhaustion.

His legs start to grow weak, and he lets himself fall back onto the couch. He would rest here for a little bit and move on to his bed later.
Really hope you guys liked this chapter. :)

This is one of those that make me quite curious how people will react to it. Seeing that the cat is out of the bag regarding his secret powers, I can say that Eddy is connected to Barry and what has happened to him in a way. Can't say more, though. ;3 Also, Eddy becoming Barry's neighbor was no coincident, even if both of them are not aware of it just yet.

Much love, thanks for your wonderful feedback, and till next time, when Len returns, we meet Blacksmith in person, and the Rogues are forced to do something they really would rather not.
It is the day after his unfortunate run-in with the hitman that Barry finds himself mopping up the floor in front of the counter at work. One of his earlier customers has dropped a glass of prickles by accident, and while it means some extra work for him, he isn’t feeling particularly frustrated over it despite his growing exhaustion. Having something to do he can focus his mind on and thus helps him to stop the memory of what has happened last night try to creep back into the forefront of his mind is something he welcomes, especially with the current lack of customers.

The incident has him still very much on edge, and he has kept himself busy since his arrival a couple of hours earlier, unwilling to let himself think too much of anything that occurred or of what he has learned.

Barry knows that he probably should have told Len before leaving for work, but the notion to worry his friend didn’t and still doesn’t sit well with him. Len and the others have been under so much pressure lately. It is obvious every time he stays at the hideout these days, and it worries him to think of how the other man would react if he learned about Kenneth’s visit. He doesn’t want to upset Len and cause things between them to get rough again by accident.

Still, Barry knows that he has to tell him, but he would do so later, after work. Maybe he would even call Sam from the mirror of the store’s restroom after closing and-

Barry is pulled out of his thoughts by the ringing of the doorbell and turns to it with the friendly smile he uses to greet all of his customers. “W-welcome, c-can I h-help you?”

The dark-haired woman, who has just entered and seems to make a beeline to him, returns his smile, and he isn’t sure why, but he immediately gets a bad vibe from her. There is something off about the way she is looking at him as she comes to a halt in front of him, stopping much too close to his liking.

He shifts his weight to the other leg and makes a small step back, not missing the amused glint in the dark eyes of the woman. It is oddly unsettling. He feels stupid for it, but for some odd reason she
remembers him of a cat who eyes him as the mouse. Despite never having met her before, something tells him to be careful around her. It is unsettling, as is the smile she is still giving him, one that shows too many teeth and is clearly fake.

Once again, Barry starts to feel himself tense up.

“Well, I was thinking about making a batch of brownies, you see?” she says in lieu of a greeting, and he picks up on her rather deep but not unpleasant voice and on the oddly sultry way she speaks to him now which causes his discomfort to only grow worse. He also notices her lipstick, a very intense dark purple. An unusual color but surprisingly fitting due to how pale her skin is.

As she stands in front of him, Barry can also not help but notice that she is very tall, even an inch or so taller than he himself is, and there is a confidence to her that is slightly intimidating.

“I was wondering whether you have some instant mix I could use,” she goes on and leans a bit towards him while lowering her voice as if to tell him a secret. “I’m not very good in the kitchen, and I don’t want to embarrass myself by accident.”

The way she looks at him is intense, uncomfortably so, and while she is still smiling and hasn’t done anything to validate his apprehension of her, Barry quickly makes another step back to get some additional distance between them.

“N-n-no, s-s-sorry, w-we d-don’t h-have ins-stant m-mixes.”

Her dark eyes don’t leave him, and he has to fight against the urge to shudder that tries to overcome him.

A very uncomfortable moment of silence passes by between them.

“‘I see,” the woman says and heaves an exasperated and clearly fake sigh. “That’s a pity. I would have liked to impress my friends with them.”

She lets her eyes wander through the shop as she goes on. “They’ve been rather difficult to be around lately. Very stubborn and rather mean, to be honest, and I thought I maybe could smooth things out a bit with a small present.”

Her gaze returns to him, and Barry hardly notices how his grip on the mop in his hands becomes nearly painfully firm. There is something extremely disconcerting about this strange woman, and he suddenly is very much aware that the two of them are the only ones in the store right now.

“Friends can be rather tricky at times. Wouldn’t you agree? Especially ones you’ve known for years and years,” she goes on. “You start to trust them, think that you mean to them as much as they do to you. You help them even if it isn’t in your own best interest.”

Barry tenses up even more when the woman steps closer again, and while he tries to back off once more, he quickly finds the edge of the counter pressed against the small of his back. She smiles in response as she has clearly not missed his reaction.

“And there is nothing worse, nothing more excruciatingly painful, than for them to stab you in the back. For them to make you feel like you’re nothing more than a cheap whore to be used and thrown away afterwards. Wouldn’t you agree?” she asks in that deep sultry voice of hers that holds nothing sexy anymore but only sounds threatening.

“I-I-I d-d-don’t k-know w-w-” he stammers, but she cuts him off with a chuckle.
“Oh, but you do.” Her smile is all teeth now. “You do, Barry, and I’ve to say that I’m honestly surprised about it myself. I wouldn’t have thought that Cold could grow fond of someone like you. He usually is quite firm about his moral standards, but it seems that he has made an exception for you, hasn’t he?”

Barry’s throat has closed up on him again, and he can only stare at the woman in sheer panic and fear.

This has to be like Blacksmith. He hasn’t even occurred to him at first, but now, having her this close, he doesn’t doubt that she is the woman who has caused the Rogues so much trouble.

He also doesn’t doubt that she could kill him easily should she want to, and it makes him nearly sick when he realizes that she would likely do it with a pleased smile on her lips.

“I honestly can’t see what is so special about you. You’re a pretty scrawny fellow, aren’t you? Well, not that I really care all that much,” she goes on as she lets her eyes slowly wander over his body which causes him to feel even more uneasy. “What I care about is that Lenny has been an utter ass again and really wronged me and my new friends for some ugly twisted man whore like you.” Her eyes snap up to him in this moment, and she bores her gaze into his. “I really can’t let him do that.”

The dark haired woman moves even closer then, so much so that her body is nearly touching his, and he automatically draws back when she leans forward with another one of these disturbing smiles on her lips.

“You would be a very good way to tell him so, wouldn’t you, Barry?” Her hand suddenly touches the site of his throat, nearly tentatively so before she cups it. The touch causes a shiver of disgust and fear to run through his body. “I could break your fingers, crack one after the other till you piss yourself in pain. What would you think of that? Wouldn’t you agree that this would be quite an effective way to get my message across to our dear Lenny?”

Barry opens his mouth in a vain attempt to protest, but he isn’t surprised when he isn’t able to produce anything but a very soft whine. It seems to amuse the dark haired woman as she chuckles softly again.

“I really don’t understand Lenny,” she says, and he starts to feel sick when she starts to rub small circles with her thumb across his Adam’s apple. The gesture is so disturbingly intimate, just so wrong that it causes him to shiver again. “Why would he even want to fuck suck a little sicko like you? Judging by what usually happens to people like you in prison, you’ve probably been fucked by enough guys that he’s to worry about catching himself some nasty STD from you.”

Her other hand cups one of Barry’s that are still holding onto the mop, and the grip quickly turns painful enough that he grunts in discomfort.

“Breaking your fingers would probably be an excellent choice to get my message across… but it is always such a pain till they are completely healed again,” Blacksmith goes on with an amused smirk. “If they ever do.”

Barry tries to say something again or at least move, but it is like he is paralyzed. A slight tremble starts to overcome his body, and the woman doesn’t miss it as her smile grows even sharper.

“Maybe the wrist instead?” she asks sweetly and tightens the grip on his hand enough that he whines softly in protest. “I know that you have broken one of yours not too long ago. Maybe the other one this time? Or your leg? There is so much to choose from, isn’t there? So many bones in your disgustingly scrawny little body.”
She leans closer to him them, so much so that he can feel her breath on his cheek and smell the sweet floral perfume she is wearing.

“Though, we both know that Lenny usually doesn’t react all too well when you damage his toys. He is really petty when it comes to this and holds a grudge so easily, that dummy.” She sighs softly and leans in even closer so that her lips are actually touching his skin when she speaks again.

Barry’s body is trembling badly now in response to the forced contact, and he glances over to the entrance door, hoping that anybody would enter and cause her to retreat and stop this, but he only sees the empty space in front of the store and that the sun has disappeared behind clouds again.

Her lips feel soft and warm as they move against his cheek. It is utterly disturbing.

“I don’t want things between us to get even worse. I really want Lenny and his band of misfits. They would be such a wonderful addition.” The lips are suddenly on his, and the repulsion Barry feels in that second is enough to rip him out of his stupor. He shoves her away and suddenly finds himself on the ground not even a second later, her knee painfully dug into his back and one of his arms equally painfully twisted in her grip.

“Tell Lenny that I’m not going to let him treat me like I’m one of his damn little toys!” Blacksmith hisses sharply, her voice nearly distorted in anger, before she bows down, so that she can hiss the next words directly into his ear. “Tell Cold that I’m not one of his little whores, and that I’ll destroy anything he holds dear should he not be able to come to his damn sense. I don’t know what he did to Kenneth, and I really don’t care. Tell him that Cameron send him, if he wants to be pissed at somebody for this little stunt then it is him. He should keep in mind though that, should I decide to come after you, there is nothing that will keep your miserable ass alive, you ugly cheap little cunt!”

Then the grip on his arms and the knee against his back are gone, and Barry can move again. With a suppressed groan, he rolls onto his site while he looks for the dangerous woman, who he can spot close to the entrance door. She is walking at a leisurely pace and doesn’t make the impression like she is worried at all that she could be in any kind of trouble for attacking him just now.

At the door, she pauses and turns back to him.

“You have a really cosy little store here, maybe I’ll pass by again another time.” She winks at him with an amused smile before she finally leaves.

Barry watches her go from the ground and wonders with a growing sense of dread what he has gotten himself into.

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Len stops after stepping out into the hallway that lays outside his bedroom. He turns around to look back to Barry, not fighting the urge to checking up on him once more despite having hardly even left the room yet.

The blonde is still unconscious to the world, sleeping on the bed, buried under a thick blanket and hugging Len’s pillow tightly against his chest. He looks tense up and utterly exhausted even in his sleep. This isn’t new, Barry has always carried his worries to bed with him which is one of the reasons why he has such troubles to find any rest at times.

It is different now, though, as Len wonders how much of it is due to him these days.

Being friends with the Rogues seem to harm Barry more than anything else, especially lately, and Len doesn’t kid himself into believing that he isn’t bearing most of the fault for this.
He turns to face the other man fully and leans against the doorway, resting his shoulder against it as he decides that his talk with the others could wait for a couple minutes longer. Right now, he doesn’t want to leave just yet. Not after learning that he nearly lost Barry last night.

He considers him with a familiar mixture of worry and regret.

This, all of it, is mostly on him. If he wasn’t such a coward…

Len huffs a sigh and rubs his eyes while trying to forcefully dissipate these thoughts. He doesn’t have time for this-

Someone comes in his direction, he picks up on the footsteps, lighter than those of most other Rogues, and he doesn’t have to look to know who decided to join him. He honestly isn’t sure whether he is happy about the unexpected company or not.

He stirs his mind back to Barry and feels a familiar longing settle in his chest as he watches him sleep.

It is still a mystery to him how Barry got rid of Kenneth on his own. He should be dead right now considering the hitman seemed to have come to his place with the goal to kill him, and if Kenneth was anything then it is thoroughly. The killer would have never stand for his prey to get away from him. Len himself has witnessed to what length that piece of shit goes just to fulfil an order.

Barry hadn’t been very forthcoming with any explanation, and he had been upset enough already after everything that Len didn’t pressed on too much. They would have enough time to talk about it later, anyway.

In all honesty, Amunet seeking Barry out at work has him nearly more worried than the damn hitman, seeing that he knows how unpredictable that crazy woman can be.

“So,” Lisa finally breaks the silence after she has been standing next to him for about a minute, burning her disapproving gaze into the side of his head. “Judging by your pissed off expression, I get that you’re up to something.”

He stays quiet and keeps his eyes on Barry, not really wanting to have this talk with his sister. He already knows how she is going to react to the decision he made while lying next to Barry for the last hour or so.

Lisa huffs in annoyance after he’s failed to reply, and Len is certain that she is currently scowling rather impressively at him again. She hasn’t taken well to Barry being threatened either, and, like him, she wants to do something about it. Like him, she does also know that they aren’t really in any position to do so, though, and she worries about him doing something rash.

It should be insulting, really, seeing that he is probably the most level-headed of the whole bunch, but even Len can acknowledge that this isn’t always the case when it comes to something Barry is involved in. The blonde makes things so much more complicated at times by how important he is to him.

“What are you planning to do?” Lisa asks, and it is audible that she has trouble to keep her voice down. “Seek that bitch out again to tell her to fuck off?” She snorts and steps closer, boring her glare into him as he turns his head to face her. “You did so a number of times already and look how well that worked out. And if that fucker Carmon is around as well, you’ll probably end up getting shot.”

He stays quiet, annoyed at her for being so damn honest but somewhat grateful for it all the same. The person he is really angry at isn’t Lisa, anyway. It was he himself who started this whole damn
thing in the first place after all.

Because he is so fucking scared of recognizing what he feels for Barry, and because he feels the damn need to hide from the fact that he has started to think of him whenever he has sex with Izzy or any other whore, or even when he gets himself off in the shower these days.

He is such a fucking joke…

“Len.” Lisa seems close to losing her patience with him judging by the growing edge in her tone. “What are you planning to do now? I don’t want you to get your idiot self killed because you lose your head over-”

“I won’t.” he cuts her off grimly. “I’ll keep it cool.”

Lisa looks taken aback for a moment. There is a slight incredulity to the way she is staring at him now, like she can’t believe that he’s just said that, before she snorts quite unladylike and gives him an amused smile.

“Really?” she asks. “Do I really have to start to put up with your dumb puns again, Lenny?”

He smiles slightly and lets his head drop against the doorway as he turns his attention back to Barry.

Barry hated his puns at first when they still fought each other in costumes. He was way too serious of a fellow to enjoy the ridiculousness they all really embraced by playing this game.

During their visit to Gael, Barry did mention that he started to enjoy his sense of humor after some time, though.

Len wonders sometimes how things would have worked out for them if they had met under different circumstances. Would they have maybe even been able to become friends without all the horrible stuff that has happened to the other man? Would he have been able to simply accept his feeling for him?

Sam has this odd theory about multiple dimensions, multiple earths he likes to go on and on about when he is sloshed enough that he can hardly walk. Len isn’t sure what he thinks of it, but he guesses that it is possible with all the other crazy shit that is going on in their world.

The notion is somehow soothing even because he likes to believe that somewhere on one of these other earths there could be a version of him and a version of Barry who actually are together and live a happy life. It is a corny thought, he would never say it out loud, but it is still nice and reassuring to imagine that there could be a place where things worked out alright for both of them...

“You know that either Blacksmith or Cameron will go after him again if we keep sitting duck.” Lisa has stepped up next to him and is now watching Barry as well.

“Yes,” he agrees quietly, and feels the familiar longing to walk back into his bedroom, crawl back into the bed next the other man, and just hold him close, listen to his slow and even breathing and make sure that he is alright.

Len is quite good at lying to himself, but even he can no longer tell himself that you feel like this for a simple friend.

“So, what do you want to do?” He looks back to Lisa and studies her for a brief moment. She would not like this. Not a single one of them would, and he knows that all of this is on him in the end, but he would take their anger anytime over Barry getting killed because he was unlucky enough that he
got into the crossfire.

“I’ll tell her that we accept.” Len isn’t surprised when his sister’s eyes grow comically big for a moment before the surprised expression is replaced by a much angrier one.

“Are you serious?” She hisses, and she is now clearly fighting to keep her voice down. “Are you fucking serious?”

He finally pulls the door to the bedroom closed, as he really doesn’t want Barry to hear any of this.

“Yes,” he simply agrees and turns around to walk to their living area, where most of the others are currently as well.

“Just like that?” Lisa asks, and there is an audible and biting reproach to the way she speaks. “You decide this just like that, even though the rest of us doesn’t want to have anything to do with that fucking whore?!”

“Keep it down-”

“Damn it, Len. She is a damn psycho, she will get us killed, and if not her, it will be that sleazebag Carmon,” she cuts him off. “They want us to be their fucking dogs! Go fetch whatever they fancy. You really want us to-”

“No,” he interrupts her sharply and turns to face her, stopping shortly before the corner that would lead to the hallway connected to the living room where probably most of the others are. “I don’t want the Rogues to play to anybody’s rules but their own, Lisa, but we’ve to adjust for now.”

It is hard to keep his voice down, hard to not give into the anger he feels because none of this is what he wants for them, and it will complicate their deal with Elias.

Lisa crossing her arms in a very familiar manner in front of her chest that indicates that she is clearly not pleased with him.

“Adjust?” she asks with a deep scowl. “Adjust how? You mean like becoming her damn puppets?”

“I mean like buying us time.” He glares at her, warning her about being such a damn nuisance right now.

“God, Len, you’re such a bastard.” Lisa groans and pinches the bridge of her nose as she squeezes her eyes shut as if just looking at him is frustrating to her. “You really shot yourself in the foot by fucking that bitch, and now the rest of us can pay for it.”

It is hard to argue with her about this seeing that she is right.

“I know,” he tells her and sighs tiredly. This night couldn’t end soon enough.

A brief silence settles between them, and he can hear the sound of the television reach them from the living room as well as Sam laughing and Mick calling the other man a jackass.

They all would be understandably pissed, and it has already been difficult enough to keep them from going haywire as it is.

Even so, every single one of them knows that they can’t go on like this for much longer anyway. They hardly can move around the Twins anymore without stepping either on BV’s or Blacksmith’s territory, and in a way this could maybe even benefit them in the long run-
“I’ll so kick your ass for this later on.” Lisa meets his eyes with a grim but no longer hostile look. “That is, should this decision not get us killed before I’ve the opportunity to do so.”

“I’ve never let this happen before,” he reminds her. “And I won’t start now.”

She smirks and shakes her head in a bemused way. “True enough.” She then nods towards the direction of the living room. “They’ll go apeshit over this, you know that, right?”

“They always go apeshit over anything.” He returns her smirk and pulls his Cold glasses out of the pocket of his parka he put on before leaving his room.

Paying Amunet a visit on her own terrain means to go as his alter ego which is completely fine with him. He likes being Captain Cold, he always has, and the weight of the Cold gun on his hips is a familiar and reassuring company.

“Yes, they’ve certainly never been able to master your level of chill, Len.” Lisa’s grin grows a bit wider when he gives her an annoyed frown in return.

“Let’s bring the good news to them, then,” he says and puts the glasses on.

His sister rolls her eyes but doesn’t protest as she follows along.

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Lisa has to fight the urge to flip Amunet off when that annoying tramp of a woman shoots her an amused and clearly smug expression as she is making her way over to her desk in a leisurely pace. She has just now joined them, after letting them wait for nearly half an hour in her office.

They are currently in one of her many secret trading locations below the Gems, and judging by how busy it has been outside in the big hall, business seems to go just dandy for her. Still, even with how much is going on right now, Lisa doesn’t doubt that Blacksmith has made them wait on purpose, just because she can.

Len always has had a bad taste when it comes to women, and Lisa can’t even hold it against him as he tends to have the worst kind of luck when it comes to find anybody decent for himself. Well, that was at least the case before Barry got into the picture, and should her buffoon of a brother not end up messing this up for himself as well, she really believes that the both could do each other really good.

“What a pleasant surprise.” Blacksmith nearly purrs the words after she has taken a seat behind the mahogany desk, her eyes fixed on Len who stand in front of Lisa. Nothing in the way her brother presents himself belies the anger he has to be feeling as he watches the other woman with an indifferent expression.

“I haven’t expected you to pay me a visit tonight, Lenny,” Blacksmith says, and Lisa really hates how full of shit this woman is. As if she really wouldn’t have known that Len would come over to make sure she doesn’t repeat the damn stunt she pulled today, and not to forget the fact that Carmen sent Kenneth after Barry.

“So your little boy-toy,” she goes on, and Lisa glances towards her brother who doesn’t react at all to these words, at least not outwardly. It is not hard to guess how infuriating these words have to be for him, not only because Blacksmith is calling Barry this but due to how Len is still in a crisis regarding his own sexual orientation. He is such an idiot, as if any of them would care if he is interested in guys.
Then again, the source for her brother’s troubles probably lays deeper than just not wanting to lose his face in front of his Rogues. She lived through the same horrible mess that had been their childhood, after all.

“I take it that he told you about me passing by at his store?” Blacksmith asks with an arched eyebrow and a smile that causes Lisa’s fist to itch.

Roscoe, who stand next to her, shoots her a brief look, and she shakes her head, telling him that she is alright. Well, as alright as one can be in this situation, anyway.

“Yes,” Len answers, voice low and cold.

“So he came running to you afterwards?” Blacksmith chuckles and leans back into her chair, clasping her hands in front of her on the desk as she does so. “I’m not surprised. He clearly is a scrawny little sissy-boy, after all.”

Lisa grits her teeth and glares at that bitch for insulting Barry like this.

“We had an agreement,” Len reminds her, not taking the bait. “You wouldn’t go after him if we get you the data, and we did.”

“We did,” she agrees with a shrug and considers Len with an intense look. “The data was useless, though.”

“Which doesn’t matter,” her brother cuts her off. “You wanted the data, we got it to you-”

“And then you suddenly seemed to have vanish off the fucking face of the earth!” Amunet hisses angrily, her gaze sharp and angry, and Lisa is reminded of what an instable psycho this woman can be. “You fucking disappeared and were nowhere to be found! You’ve any idea how this made me feel?!?”

Next to her other side, Lisa can feel Sam shift a bit, clearly uncomfortable to be pulled into this lover’s quarrel. She shoots him a glance before she looks over to Mick who is standing next to Len and isn’t at all surprised that the man looks mostly bored out of his mind. From all of them, their pyromaniac has had the least trouble to accept her brother’s decision to accept Blacksmith’s offer which was kind to be expected. Mick and Len may lock horns more often than not, but he usually has no problems to follow along with one of his schemes, especially when he can burn things while they are at it.

“We had a deal, Amunet,” Len reminds Blacksmith firmly, seemingly not at all unsettled by her sudden outburst. “You can’t expect us to work with someone whose word we can’t trust.”

This catches the woman off-guard as she stills for a moment, watching Len with a surprised and calculating look as if she was trying to valuate his words.

“You’ve decided to join me.” It’s not a question, and Lisa is surprised to see a deep frown appear on the other woman’s forehead. She has assumed Blacksmith would be elated about this.

Len stays quiet but gives her a slight nod.

“How did you decide that?” she asks then with a scowl and clenches her fists. “That disgusting ugly little maggot?! Are you really telling me that you’re joining me because you want to protect some paedophile who fucked his own nephew?!”

“Does it matter?” Len replies coldly, and while he doesn’t show his anger over these words, Lisa
knows how much they have to irk him.

Blacksmith hisses at Len, like an actual snake, and the intensity of her glare would have set him on fire if something like this was possible.

The fury quickly vanishes from her face again, though, and a much more collected expression returns to it instead as she studies him again.

“He really means something to you,” she states quietly after a long moment of strained silence, and Lisa doesn’t miss the ugly amusement that returns to the other woman’s dark eyes. “I’ve to say, I’m surprised, Lenny. In all these years I’ve known you now, I’d never even have assumed that you could enjoy fucking other men.” Her eyes move from Len to Mick, then to Roscoe before they set briefly on Sam, making it very obvious what she is suggesting by doing so.

“It would be better for you not to try and assume anything about me, then,” Len replies coldly.

The corner of Blacksmith’s lips twitch slightly as she turns her focus back to him. “You really are in a grumpy mood today, aren’t you, Lenny?” She leans back against her chair again and studies him with a look that is both amused and angry. “You’re quite protective of your little paedophile, and I think this is a good thing to know. Very valuable information for our future collaboration.”

Lisa doesn’t like how calm she sounds, it’s never good when that fury gets this calculating, especially when any of them is involved. Blacksmith is a bitch, but she has become the head of the gems’ black-market and someone to be reckoned with for a reason.

“Barry will stay out of this from now on,” Len states calmly but firmly. “The Rogues will work for you for now, but you, your henchmen, and Kenneth will keep your distance to him. If anything happens to him that gives me the slightest indication that anybody of you is involved, I will make sure that there is hell to pay for you.”

The amused expression vanishes from the dark haired woman and is replaced by a much darker, much angrier one once more. It is then that Lisa starts to expect her to lose her shit.

“You really would try to take us on, Lenny? For a prison bitch like that?” There is something audibly hurt in the way she says this and in how she watches Len then. “You would turn on me for that disgusting thing?”

Lisa feels how Roscoe tenses up next to her. She is pretty sure that he too waits for that nutcase to flip out on them which would inevitably lead to a lot of trouble for anybody who is currently present.

Nobody of them wants a fight, they would likely be able to get out, but Blacksmith’s men are numerous and not to be underestimated. She knows so from past clashes with them. She also knows that her brother has hoped that this could go over without a fight, but she wouldn’t be surprised if Blacksmith’s temper would foil any peaceful retreat on their side.

Len stays quiet, he just returns the woman’s hurt look coolly which in itself makes it more than clear where he stands on this.

Finally, after a long tense moment, Blacksmith purses her lips and nods. “Fine. You work for me, and your little whore won’t be harmed by any of my or Carmon’s man.”

This is somewhat unexpected as Lisa has not counted on her to see reason that easily. Blacksmith is usually not someone who gives up till she has gotten what she wants, and a big part of her doesn’t believe that this is the end of it, to be honest.
Still, Lisa relaxes a bit, and as she glances over to the other Rogues, she sees that they do so too. Roscoe, who notices her gaze on him, exchanges a brief look with her, and it is easy to see that he is also somewhat surprised about how they seemingly have just dodged a most likely literal bullet.

“I take your word for it.” Len doesn’t sound particularly relieved but some of the tension that has crept into his voice is no longer there.

Amunet waves him off, looking bitter for a moment before she schools her face in a calm and collected expression once more. “It looks like we both will get what we want out from this agreement, Lenny. No reason to make things more complicated by causing unnecessary tension between us.” Her eyes are still on Len, and Lisa doesn’t miss the longing and sadness that briefly flashes through them. For a second, she nearly feels bad for that woman as she herself knows from experience how painful unrequited love is. The sympathy only last for a brief moment, though.

“I’ll let you know when I’ve a job for you,” Blacksmith says, which is a hard to miss dismissal, and Lisa nearly heaves a sigh of relief. She knows how much worse all of this could have gone everything considered.

Her brother gives Blacksmith a nod and indicates the rest of them that it is time to move.

They do, and Lisa is just about to exit the room behind Mick when the head of the black-market speaks again, causing them to halt once more.

“I won’t forget this.” Her eyes are fixed on Len when Lisa turns to look back to her, and it is a bit unsettling how cold they are or how calm she sounds just then.

This is both a promise and a threat.

Len, who is still the closest to Blacksmith, returns her gaze without a change in his demeanor or expression. It is all show, though, as Lisa knows that this is just as worrying to him as it is to the rest of them. The other woman likely knows so as well.

Without replying or reacting any other way to the obvious threat, Len turns back to them and signalizes them to get moving again.

They do, and Lisa is certain that she isn’t the only one who thinks that it is much easier to breath the moment they’ve left Blacksmith’s office behind.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and I hope you liked it!

We finally met Amunet, a quite psychotic badass, and poor Barry, he really has the worst luck to have a run-in with her just the morning after finding Kenneth waiting in his apartment for him.

Next chapter will have a bit more Mick in it, so anybody who likes our favorite pyromaniac will hopefully enjoy it. ;)

A huge bear-hug for all my lovely readers for taking the time to give me feedback! It really always succeeds in making my day a bit better! :D
Till next time!
These Pretty Flames

Chapter Summary

Barry needs to get some fresh air and stumbles over Mick and his way of damage control.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not edited.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Beginning of November 3rd year**

It is cold outside, enough so that Barry can see his breath turn into mist as he steps into the cool night air, shutting the door to the deserted farmhouse the Rogues are currently using as their hideout. He leans back against it and looks up to the dark sky, briefly taking in the stars he can see through the crack in the thick blanket of clouds. The tiny sources of light seem so much brighter out here on the land than they ever do inside the cities.

Barry lets his head drop back against the wood and inhales the cool air slowly, filling his lungs with it. He enjoys the slight prickling sensation this causes.

Then he notices the faint smell of smoke and looks over to the old silo about seventy feet away from where he stands. This late at night, shrouded in darkness, it looks rather spooky. Most of the area around here actually does, and he isn’t sure whether this is due to the mostly rundown state of the farm, or because he is simply a city-boy at heart.

Whatever the reason, from all the hideouts Barry has get to know over the last two years, this is about his least favourite so far. It isn’t exactly in as bad of a shape as one would think from how it looks outside, but there is some odd sense of desolation sticking to everywhere he goes here that doesn’t sit well with him and that has lacked his friends’ other hiding places so far.

Though, maybe he is a bit unfair as it’s possible that the glumness isn’t really due to the house or the area around it, but due to the whole messed up situation his friends are currently in.

A situation he is mostly responsible for…

The thought is daunting, and Barry forces himself to ignore it while he pushes himself slowly away from the door and start to make his way over the silo.

The wind that has picked up earlier this afternoon is getting stronger, quickly causing him to shiver due to how biting cold it is, but at the same time also enable him to picks up on the sound of music that must be coming from a radio. It seems to originate from the granary and his suspicion about finding Mick in there only confirms itself when the smell of smoke gets increasingly stronger.
Barry hopes that his friend is careful enough not to burn down the place by accident and make them short of another hideout. Hartley would not take kindly to that as the deserted farm house is one of his private ones. The ginger only shared its whereabouts with the others out of necessity as he usually prefers to keep at least a number of safe places to himself.

A strong gust of wind nearly causes Barry to lose his footing and fall just as a nearly deafening cracking sound can be heard from above his head. He turns his face toward the sky again, halting for a moment to study the dark clouds that foretell the coming of another storm.

It has been windy the whole last week and there is some speculation going on in the newspaper he has read that they could possibly end up with a tornado on their hands sometime during the next few days. Fortunately, nothing has happened so far, and he really hopes that it would stay that way because with everything else going on they seriously don’t need something like this to worry about as well.

Barry shake the uneasy notion off and proceeds to make his way over to the silo.

Light comes through the slit under the entrance, and it’s not exactly reassuring when he realizes that he is grateful that it isn’t smoke. He wonders how long Mick has been out here again as he pulls the door open with some difficulties due to the still ongoing wind. Behind it, there is a huge hall that has been used to store corn or other crops what must have been quite some time ago.

The music is much louder in here as it gets amplified by the tall walls of the mostly empty silo, but Barry doubts that Mick hasn’t notices him yet. Still, he makes an effort to not be quiet when he closes the door as he doesn’t want to startle the other man and cause him to use his gun on him by accident. Being burned crispy isn’t on the top of the list of things he wants to do tonight.

Despite the cool temperatures outside, Mick is wearing a simple white wife-beater, thus making it possible for anybody who passes by to view the ugly looking burn marks that are covering most of his arms, shoulders, and neck.

Barry fights the urge to shudder at the sight of it. He knows that the other man wouldn’t be bothered by it, but he still would feel bad for displaying his discomfort so plainly.

Mick’s back is turned to him, though, as he stashed empty boxes and other inflammable things in the middle of the wide room to a growing heap.

For a while, Barry just stands there quietly as he watches the other man work. It is slightly unsettling and a bit sad how meticulously Mick is about it, as if his friend is following an accurate plan he’s keeping stashed away in his mind.

There are dark and burned spots on the ground around where Mick’s newest hearth is currently taking form and which are signs that the Rogue has been rather busy already over the last couple of weeks.

Barry has been long enough around them to know that this is also the reason for increasing animosity between Mick and Len that has started to flicker up these days again. The later has never liked or really tolerated it when Mick is indulging in his little obsession too much, and his patience seems to have only grown thinner with everything else that is going on.

Barry’s gaze moves up towards the ceiling, where two big hutchers are open and showing part of the cloudy sky. This would avoid the silo to fill up with smoke and poison Mick, but it could also easily call people’s attention to their whereabouts, even this late at night, making Len’s worry very understandable.
“Has Prince Charming scared you away again?”

Mick’s question and obvious knowledge about his presence doesn’t surprise Barry. He is pretty sure that the other man has heard him enter a couple of minutes ago, even though he isn’t sure how he knows that it is him as he has kept his gaze on his piece of work so far.

“K-kind of,” he admits with a small smile and starts to walk over to him. “H-how d-did you kn-know it w-was m-me?”

Mick pushes a couple of broken wooden staffs in between the spaces of the boxes and other stuff he has rather skilfully stacked onto each other before he shoots him a smirk. “The others don’t like to hang around when I’m in one of my moods. Clever of them.”

Barry stops next to him and surveys the heap of wood.

“Th-this is qu-quite a l-lot of b-b-burning m-material,” he observes and turns to the other man with a concerned frown. “You aren’t w-worried th-that th-this c-could g-go out of h-hand?”

The pyromaniac snorts and shoots him a bemused look before he turns to walk over to where he has a couple of other boxes and crates stashed, probably for occasions like this. There, next to them, is also a bucket with ice and beer cans in it.

Barry follows him.

“Catch.” Mick throws him one of the cans, and Barry is able to catch it but unable to keep a grip on it as the impact causes a sharp pain to go through his hands and wrists, which in turn makes him let go of it again so that it drops to the concrete ground with an audible smack.

Mick frowns but thankfully doesn’t remark on it. Barry, whose face is feeling much too hot again, is grateful for it. The Rogues have picked up on how little he likes to talk about how messed up his body is and respect it.

Instead, his friend nods to the pile of wood that would soon literally go up in flames. “This’ just a spark, nothing to worry about. I know how to handle my love.”

Barry isn’t sure how to replay to that and feels his face grow warm when Mick gives him an amused and knowing look, clearly aware of the slight unease he is feeling. “You wanna stay and watch?”

It would most likely be a good idea to decline seeing that the other man isn’t exactly the most stable person when he is like this, and Barry knows how out of it he can get around open flames.

There is a morbidly curious part of him, though, that wants to keep around and watch it. The notion to go already back inside again is not exactly alluring either.

“C-could it b-be d-dangerous f-for m-me?” he asks, and he knows what stupid of a question it really is, but he is also aware of how capable Mick is when it comes to keep fire in check even if he usually prefers not to do so. Also, he doubts that the other man would actually harm him on purpose.

Mick seems amused by the question. He takes a swig of his can and shrugs.

“Depends, if you jump into the flames it most likely won’t end well for you,” he explains and turns around to grab a canister that has been resting next to the bucket of water so far. He also takes the air filter mask that has been resting on top of it.

“T-tt-I’m not going to lit you on fire, though, if that is what you’re worried about,” Mick goes on as he
makes his way back over the soon to be hearth. As he stops in front of it, he glances back to him over his shoulder. “At least as long as you don’t try to extinct my pretty flames, Allen.”

The look he gives him then it both amused and a warning, and Barry feels a shiver run down his spine which the other man doesn’t miss.

Mick barks a laugh and turns to dose the heap of wood with the fuel. “No need to wet yourself. I’m just saying, and we both know that you’re clever enough not to mess with me.”

The other man shoots him a smirk before he turns back to his task at hand. Barry is pretty sure that he is doing this just to mess with him. Well, it works.

“You wanna have the honour?” Mick asks after he has finished soaking most of the heap in fuel and walks back over to him. He stashes the now empty canister to its earlier place and pulls a box of matches out of his pants pocket which he then offers to him. He doesn’t seem surprised or annoyed when Barry takes a step back and quietly shakes his head.

“Your loss, buddy.” He shrugs as he puts the mask and nods to the boxes close to the wall. “Takes a seat and get comfy, you’re in for a rather lovely show.”

With that, Mick walks halfway towards the heap and grabs one of the matches. He turns back to him and lifts his eyebrows as if to ask him why he hasn’t taken a seat yet. Not really feeling like arguing, Barry plays along while he silently hopes that this isn’t going to turn into a disaster for either of them.

After watching him sit down, Mick finally lights the match up and snips it to the heap in one single movement. The fuel soaked wood immediately catches fire, and Barry gasps when a nearly smothering heat is suddenly exploding in front of him. He squeezes his eyes shut and lifts his arm to shield them from the bright assault.

This has been a stupid idea.

Len is going to lose it…

And Mick is much too close to the flames!

“M-Mick, c-come b-back, y-you s-stand t-too c-close!” Barry squints to where the other man is standing in front of the blazing flames. It is close enough that it has to actually hurt him. Even so, the other man doesn’t seems bothered by the head in the slightest, and while Barry can hardly make his silhouette out due to how bright it is, he is certain that Mick doesn’t react to his words at all.

Most likely, he hasn’t even heard them.

Seeing that it wouldn’t make any sense to try and get Mick to bring some more distance between him and the fire, Barry ponders the notion to leave, as it is now nearly painfully hot in here. It is also quite frightening to be so close to a small inferno like this, and he is annoyed at himself for having agreed to something as stupid at this in the first place.

Unfortunately, opening the door would cause an increase in the air circulation in this tube-like silo, especially with how windy it is, and the increasing oxygen would boost the strength of the flames enough that he can’t be sure whether this couldn’t get dangerous for the other man. Mick stands too close to the heath as it is, and Barry doubts that he be able to get himself away from it should it flare up even more with how transfixed he is on the fire.

It isn’t as if Barry isn’t aware with Mick’s obsession, but seeing him like this, so out of control, is still outright disturbing and worrying.
In any case, where Barry is right now, is too close to the fire and after another look to the other man, he gets up and walks over to the door. There the heat is palpably less strong and much more tolerable.

He turns his attention back to the flames that are going strong thanks to all the kerosene, creating a ridiculous amount of heat. It would most likely also cause the wood to burn down within the next ten to fifteen minutes, though. He hopes so, at least.

It is quite spectacular to watch such a natural force from this close, and in a way it really does have something mesmerizing and quite beautiful to it, but Barry still decides that this is will be the first and last time that he would ever stay for such a show.

His gaze moves over to Mick again who is still completely entranced, and Barry doesn’t like how angrily red his skin is starting to look. It is out of question that this isn’t only due to the fire’s glow but because his friend currently underway to get some nasty second degree burns.

At least he is wearing his googles, Barry thinks and can’t help but snort when he realizes how silly this really is. He wishes he would have some too, though, as the smoke starts to irritate his eyes.

Pulling the collar of his shirt over his mouth and nose, he sits down onto the ground and waits for the fire to burn down.

It is about ten minutes later that the heath has used about all of its fuel, and Barry nearly groans in relief as this experience has been way too intense and quite a bit too frightening for his liking. Slowly, with some difficulties as his joints feel stiff and a bit painful from crouching at the floor for so long, he gets up and looks over to where is nothing left of the former heap of wood but ashes and a few charred parts. There is still thick black smoke rising from it, though.

After waiting a bit longer to make sure that he is steady on his feet again and for Mick to get a hold of himself, he slowly walks over to him. He notices how his friend is still watching the remains of the earlier heath rather attentively and how utterly relaxed his posture seems. Something else that immediately jumps to Barry’s attention is how angrily red Mick’s skin is on every area that hasn’t been covered and protected from the heat of the fire. He frowns when he notices that there are actual blisters forming on the other man’s cheeks and below his eyes.

“M-Mick?”

His friend hums in response but doesn’t look over to him. He sounds oddly serene, which makes the whole scene so much more bizarre.

“Y-you’re alright?”

It is a redundant question, Mick is anything but alright and this has become very apparent to Barry right now.

Against his expectation that the other man is still rather spell-bound by what is left of his earlier work, Mick looks over to him and chuckles.

“Peachy keen, buddy.” His attention turns back to the blackened ground and he smiles. “What did you think of the pretty little thing? She gave us quite the show, didn’t she?”

When Mick notices his uncertain and worried expression, he snorts but doesn’t seem insulted by his lack of agreement.

“Let’s grab a beer.” Without waiting for him, Mick walks back over where the crates and the bucket
with the cans are standing. Barry follows him after giving the smouldering ground another uneasy glance.

“Here.” Mick hands Barry a beer as he joins him which he returns with a nod before he takes a seat opposite to him. The metal of the can feels warm in his hand, which isn’t surprising due to how hot it has gotten in here, and he startles slightly when a sudden chuckles cuts through the otherwise quite air.

Mick meets his eyes with an amused smirk and shrugs. “Yeah, you can’t keep shit cool around fire. No matter how much ice you stuff into a bucket, it will never be enough, and the beer will always taste like piss afterwards.”

Seeing that Barry doesn’t intend to drink it anyway, it isn’t really a problem for him. He just wants something in his hands as he still feels a bit nervous by what he has just seen, and as usual when he feels like this, the urge to scratch himself is quite strong.

“Y-you’re h-hurt,” he points out.

“’m fine.” Mick huffs a laugh and takes a swig from his can which causes him to pull a face. “Shit’s nasty like this.”

“You d-do h-have a s-s-suit th-that w-withs-stands r-ridiculous h-high t-temperature,” Barry reminds him with a frown. He knows that this hasn’t been the first time that Mick burned stuff up to satisfy his own urges, but he can’t help himself but feel a bit irked by how careless the other man is. “Wh-why d-didn’t y-you p-put it on?”

Mick takes another sip of his beer and eyes him with a bemused glint in his eyes. “You know, you can be fucking annoying for such a meek person.”

“I s-still h-have a p-point.”

The other man grins and turns to look back to the still smoking area.

“Maybe,” he agrees and pulls his goggles up so that they are resting on his forehead. This way, it becomes much more apparent how upset the skin around his eyes actually is. Despite this, Mick doesn’t look like he is even feeling it.

They fall silent for a while and, without the crackle of the fire or any other source of noise, the howling of the wind, which seems to have picked up even more over the last twenty minutes, fills the otherwise quiet hall.

“Snart’s going to have a fit when he finds out that you’ve stayed for one of my little episodes,” Mick points out, still sounding calm and in a surprisingly good mood.

Barry, who is watching the sky through the open hatches in the ceiling, shrugs. “Wh-when d-does L-Len n-not g-get w-worked o-over s-someth-thing. I’m n-no ch-child, h-he d-doesn’t n-need t-to w-worry s-so m-much.”

Mick hums, whether it is in agreement or only to indicate that he is listening, Barry isn’t sure of but when he glances to the criminal, he sees that he is grinning again. “He can be such a dick.”

Barry feels a bit guilty for smiling at this as Len means well. He is under a lot of pressure with Blacksmith and everything else going on, but he still makes it difficult to be around him at times.

Len really puts an effort into not letting his frustration out on him, though, and Barry can really
appreciate it. It doesn’t make it any easier to be present when he is ready to bite anybody’s else head off at any moment, especially with how tensed up and frustrated all of the Rogues currently are.

This is also the reason why he took a break from the poker game that is going on in the kitchen of the farm house right now. Having Len and Lisa spit curses at each other isn’t exactly something he wants to be around to see.

“D-does h-he kn-know th-that y-you’re p-playing f-firebug in h-here?” Barry asks and pushes the uncomfortable thoughts away as he turns his attention back to Mick.

“What do you think?” The other man shoots him a look as if Barry was being silly on purpose. Then, he shrugs and looks up with slightly pinched expression. “He hasn’t stopped bitchin’ about it, but he isn’t stupid. He prefers it when I burn down some stuff in here instead of the shack.”

Barry’s alarmed look causes Mick to bark another laugh. “We’re all getting skittish with the fuck that’s going on, and we aren’t the most stable bunch to begin with. This is damage control on my part, and Snart knows it even if he doesn’t like it.”

“Y-you’ve s-started t-to f-fighting a l-lot,” Barry remarks after a brief moment of silence.

“Yeah, well, being stuck together with those jackasses all the damn time can do that to you.” Mick snorts and leans back against the wall. “We’ve to play according to that crazy bitch’s rules for now, and every one of us hates it.” He studies the can in his hand with a surprisingly sullen look as he goes on. “We also itch for a real heist.”

“Y-you d-did one j-just a c-couple of d-days ago,” Barry reminds him, but he knows what his friend means.

“It was a fucking joke.” Mick sneers and shoots him a dark look. “We were the distraction, nothing more. Being beaten up by those fucking speedsters so that others can get some data or whatnot isn’t what the Rogues do.”

There isn’t really anything Barry can say to that.

Due to the current deal Len struck with Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet, they are more or less their henchmen, and Barry knows that he hasn’t been the only one taken aback that Len would agree to this after how he was hell-bent on not doing so in the first place. While nobody has said anything about it to him, he is pretty sure that he is the actual reason for this and that the others know so as well.

Barry jumps slightly when the other man chuckles again and looks over to him with a somewhat wary expression.

“You’re an idiot,” Mick tells him. “Stop feeling so fucking guilty about everything. You think we could have kept up that stupid hide and seeks game with that nutcase for much longer as it was? We all knew from the get-go that we have to make a treaty with that cunt.” He shrugs. “Shit like this happens, bigger fishes come around and you have to swim with them for a while and buy your time before you can get rid of them again.”

Mick take another swig and grimaces.

“Y-you’ve had th-this k-kind of t-trouble b-before?” This isn’t completely new information to Barry, but he hasn’t thought that his friends would have had to deal with such a serious threat on a more regular basis.
It isn’t uncommon for criminals to lock horns with each other when they become big in a city, but he has always believed that the Rogues never had much of a problem holding their position in the twins, mostly because they are rather lenient towards other thugs on their turf as long as they stayed out of their way.

“Yeah, couple of times,” Mick agrees and has his gaze locked on the still smouldering area in front of them. “Comes with the job, there are always others who don’t like having competition around.”

Barry wonders what they are going to do about this, about Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet, because it is out of question that Len hasn’t already some kind a plan to get rid of them. He hasn’t asked him about it and he isn’t going to as he knows that Len prefers him not knowing and, in all honestly, he does so too.

The notion of an upcoming confrontation between his friends and Blacksmith, and the Blue Velvet doesn’t sit well with him, and he tries not to think about it too much. It makes it hard not to face the truth about who the Rogues actually are, no matter how much he tries to forget about it at times, and it is always a daunting realisation that causes him to feel both guilty and miserable.

He and Mick are startled out of their thoughts when the otherwise silent room it filled with the sound of the entrance door to the silo being pulled open.

“Yo! Here you are!” Axel greets and curses when the wind causes the door to smack into his back.

“What is it with this freaking weather?! The damn shack’s whistling from every angle like a cheap wind chime, and I’ll bet good money that that sad excuse of a roof won’t survive another storm. So much to Piper’s awesome super-secret boltholes. It’s a damn death-trap!”

Axel jogs over to them and grabs one of the crates to push it closer to Barry before sitting down. He looks over to the where the left-overs of Mick’s fire-pits are and shoots the other man a wary look.

“You aren’t going to kill us in our sleep by burning down the farm, are you? Hartley would be totally pissed.”

“A-Axel,” Barry starts with a sighs, but Mick cuts him off. “Nah, I don’t wanna have to hear him bitching my ears off in hell.”

Axel snorts at that and is about to reply something when he notices Barry’s warning look, which causes him to reconsider. Barry then turns to the other man next with a grim expression. “W-watch y-your l-language around h-him.”

“For fuck’s sake, Allen, he is a street-kid. Let me tell you from experience that words like fuck, shit, piss, dick, and cunt are not new to him.” Mick grunts while Axel is audibly cracking up.

“You s-still d-don’t n-need t-to use th-them around h-him,” Barry argues. “I’ve n-no p-problem w-with any of you using th-th-them w-when you are am-mong yours-selves, b-but h-he’s s-still a k-kid.”

Mick seems more amused than annoyed by this. “You do know how unlikely it’s for him to stay over here without overhearing one of these bad words, right?”

“Y-you c-could a-at l-least t-try.”

“You’re the one who’s bringing him over.”

Barry frowns but lets it rest after that, seeing that Mick does have a point here.
“Hey, he is also here, and he is not stupid, okay?” huffs Axel and gives them both the evil eye.

“You could have fooled me there, brat?” Mick snarks.

“Shut up, lobster-face!”

“A-Axel, y-you’re n-not m-making any p-points h-here,” Barry reminds him wearily.

“He started it!”

“Did you just come here to annoy us, brat, or is there an actual reason for it?” Mick asks, but it is easily to see that he isn’t bothered by the teen’s presence.

“Well, I didn’t come for your ugly mug, that’s for sure,” Axel grumbles which causes Barry to pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration. “A-Axel-”

“Yeah, right, sorry.” The kid huffs and crosses his arms in front of his chest in a defiant manner. “The others are playing poker, and they said I could join in for the next game if you play as well.”

His expression turns from stubborn to pleading when Barry hesitates to agree. “Come on, Barry, please! I won’t swear either, I promise!”

“What a compelling bargain,” Mick remarks and outright laughs when the kid flips him off.

“This wasn’t swearing!” Axel quickly points out before Barry can berate him for it. “And I won’t do this or any of the other stuff you don’t want me to do either if you come along. I promise!”

Barry rubs his eyes and sighs softly. He knows that he can’t really hold it against the boy, and he usually is much better when it comes to his manner, at least when he isn’t around the Rogues.

“F-fine,” he finally says. “B-but n-no c-cheating, alright?”

“What are you talking about?” Axel asks with a confused expression that is clearly fake. “I’m no cheat.”

“Like hell, you little shit.” Mick scoffs and gets up. “That’s the reason why we don’t want you to join, you’re even worse than Digger and Scudder together.”

“I’m not.” Axel grins. “I’ve no idea what you’re babbling about.”

“Y-you’re c-coming a-along?” Barry asks Mick as he stands up as well.

“Sure, I don’t wanna have Snart hunt me down for staying out here too long.”

“You did produce a lot of smoke,” Axel points out, and Barry doesn’t miss how he is eyeing the bucket with the cans of beer. “D-don’t even th-think ab-bout it.”

“I wasn’t thinking about it! Whatever it is you are referring to!” The boy glares at him before he stomps over to the door.

“Yeah, I’m sure he has no fucking clue.” Mick shoots him amused glance before they follow Axel outside.

Chapter End Notes
Hey my lovelies, hope you enjoyed the chapter! :)

I initially was thinking about cutting this part due to the flow of the story, but I decided against it in the end because I love Barry and his interaction with the Rogues, and he and Mick didn’t have much of an opportunity to share the spotlight so far.

Sorry if there are more errors than usual in it. I’m really quite busy and just now went over the story once again before uploading. I will probably turn back my uploading schedule for a bit after next week due to work and study being so very time consuming right now.

I feel really bad about it because I love to put this story out there, and I don’t like to make anybody who likes it to wait. I don’t want to upload a half-assed chapter just so that I get something up once a week, though, and there are other stories I want to update also at least every couple of weeks or so. I hope you guys can understand that.

Next chapter will re-introduce someone special, and something rather nice will happen to Barry for once.

Hope you’ll all have an amazing Christmas with your family and friends!

Much love and many hugs! :)
Some Bonds Are Meant to Be

Chapter Summary

Barry gets a surprise at work.

Chapter Notes

The lovely Obsessed helped me to edit this chapter, so many thanks for your assistance, sweetheart! :)

Mid of November 3\textsuperscript{rd} year

Barry is restocking boxes of rice when the radio over at the counter turns static again. He stops briefly to glance in its direction and ponders the notion to try and get it back to work or let it be for now. Seeing that it is on a low volume anyway, and there are no customers around, he turns back to the shelf again just as the doorbell rings. Figures.

With a friendly smile on his lips, he turns to the entrance to greet whoever has just entered and freezes when someone suddenly flings their arms around him.

“Gramps!” Bart, who seems hell-bent on squeezing all the air out of him, broadly grins up at excitedly. “It’s so great to finally see you again! It’s been forever!”

Before Barry, who is both utterly taken aback and terrified by having the kid suddenly in his presence, is able to replay, Bart starts zipping through the store, looking around with curious eyes and not paying any heed to the fact that anybody who walks in through the door or is just close to the windowed front of the store would be able to see him.

“B-B-Bart-“

“Hey, I think that is broken!” The kid has gone from the sections with the sweets over to the counter in the blink of an eye and is now frowning down at the old radio in his hands. He tries to get it to work again by turning the dial in every direction, and Barry isn’t in the least bit surprised when the boy suddenly has the knob in his hand as the old thing certainly hasn’t been made to be used by people with super speed.

“Oops…” Bart shoots him a worried glance before he quickly puts the radio back down and zips back over to him. “The sign on the door says that the store is open from Monday to Saturday. Do you work here every day?” the kid asks, but once again doesn’t give him any time to answer when he goes on with a frown as he looks around. “There are no customers around. Is it always this empty? Is it because it is still early? There haven’t been many people in this area when I’ve run over. Isn’t that boring? Do you get bored when there are no customers around? What are you doing when you are bored? I love to play video games, but Max nearly never lets me which is totally mean and unfair because it isn’t my fault I’m not good in school. Do you like video games? I definitely have to
show you my collection! Maybe you could come over—"

“B-Bart,” Barry cuts him off when it becomes apparent that the kid would just go on and on should he let him. “P-please, c-could y-you c-calm d-down f-for j-just a s-s-second?”

Bart does stop but an odd expression crosses his face, a mixture of surprise, worry, anger, and so many more emotions that he isn’t quick enough to pick up on.

“Why do you stammer?”

The question catches Barry off-guard, and for a moment he can just look at the boy without being able to come up with an actual answer. Then the shame hits him, and he remembers what Jay has told him, that the kid thought that he is still a hero. Barry has to be quite different from what Bart has expected to find here. The notion of this child being his supposed grandson still is a bit uneasy in a way, which in turn makes him feel guilty all over again as it is most likely not Bart’s fault that he has been stranded in the wrong time or wrong dimension and has to deal with this wrong version of his grandfather.

“Not that it’s bad! I mean, it is cool! Well, not cool, but it’s okay!” the boy adds hastily, as he seems to have picked up that his former question has made Barry uncomfortable. “There’s nothing wrong with it, many people stammer, and I don’t have a problem with it!”

Bart is obviously trying to make him feel better, and while Barry still is afraid that his presence could have severe consequences for himself, he can’t help but feel touched by the notion that the boy really cares about him that much without actually knowing him.

“It’s f-fine,” he assures him. “I und-derstand and I’m n-not ang-gry at y-you.”

Bart gives him a grateful smile in return, but Barry doesn’t miss the guilty way in which he keeps looking at him.

“Wh-what are you d-doing h-here?” A brief glance to the clock over the entrance causes Barry to frown. “D-don’t you h-have s-school t-today?”

The kid, who doesn’t seem able to stand still as it is, starts visibly to fidget even more and suddenly seems reluctant to meet his eyes.

“Kind of but, you see, I thought that I could spent the day with you instead,” Bart explains a bit reluctantly and shoots him a hopeful glance. “I haven’t really seen you at all so far, and I just want to talk to you a bit. I’ll totally go back to school tomorrow—I promise—and I’ve never skipped it before, well other than when it was for Titan business…”

He trails off and shrugs.

This is going to cause him so much trouble, just having the kid here at all, Barry is certain of it. Still, at the same time, he feels bad for Bart and wonders how hard it has to be for him, sent back into a past that isn’t even his, away from anybody he knows. It is understandable that he would want to seek him out, this shouldn’t be such a big surprise for him, but the sad truth is that Barry has spent hardly any thought on the child. After Jay told him that he is staying with Max, he had been sure that this was it for them, that they would never let him see the boy again. He didn’t consider the possibility that that Bart could take matters in his own hands.

“B-Bart, I unders-stand th-that you w-want t-to m-meet m-me b-but th-this c-could g-get b-both of us in t-trouble—”
“No! Nobody will realize that I’ve skipped school and came here! I promise, I don’t want to cause you problems, grandpa! Their doing a trip to the museum today, and Mrs Nolan won’t call Max till after it, and till then I am home again, and I will just tell him that I went to the mall!”

If Barry has ever heard a faulty plan it would be this one, and he wants to point out to Bart that there is no way of him knowing that his teacher hasn’t already contacted Max about his absence, but the boy looks up at him such pleading eyes, like this means the world to him. He knows that there probably won’t be another time for both of them to see each other, at least till Bart is of age should he stay around for that long, and even though it is painful to look at him and know that this could have been his and Iris grandson should things not have turned out so horribly, there is also a part of him who does want to get to know him a little better.

It is very unlikely that another opportunity like this would arise again anytime soon, they wouldn’t allow it and just thinking about this causes Barry to feel so damn angry and sad, and, mostly of all, helpless again.

“I’m at work, B-Bart, you c-can s-stay f-for n-now if you d-don’t c-cause any t-trouble-”

“I promise! I promise! Awesome!!!”

Barry flinches due to how loud Bart is and is glad that no customers are around right now.

“C-calm d-down p-please,” he tells him but has to smile over how happy the boy seems by this. It is unexpectedly nice to have someone react so blatantly delighted about him being around.

“You c-can s-stay f-for t-two h-hours, sh-should y-your g-guardian n-not h-have sh-shown up t-till th-then, w-we w-will c-call h-him.” He quickly lifts his hand to indicate Bart to stay quiet when it is obvious that he is about to protest, and Barry gives him a stern look. “M-Max w-will w-worry if h-he d-doesn’t k-know w-where you are and th-this w-would b-be a r-really th-thoughtl-less and m-mean th-thing t-to d-do.”

It stays unmentioned that it is unlikely that the older speedster wouldn’t choose this as one of the first locations to look for the boy.

After considering this for a second, Bart seems to have made up his mind and nods in agreement. It isn’t to miss that he isn’t all that happy about the compromise, but his dimmed mood vanishes nearly immediately again much to Barry’s relief. The kid starts to pelt him with questions instead.

The next hour flies by much quicker than Barry has expected. A couple of people passing by, but generally it is a very slow morning, so he can spend most of the time concentrating on Bart, who reminds him a little bit of the energizer bunny as he doesn’t seem to slow down at all. It is nice to have him around, though, and while the kid keeps forgetting that it isn’t a good idea to show his powers in a public place like this, he obviously tries to not do so, and Barry can appreciate that. While he has lost his connection to the speed force nearly a decade ago, he can still remember all too well how difficult it can be to stay in this slow pace that is normal for any ordinary human. The speed force is a very alluring thing, constantly calling to all of them, and it has to be even worse for someone as young as Bart, who seems to be a very energetic child as it is.

“What is your favourite ice-cream flavour?”

Barry smiles and looks up from his spot at the floor where he is currently retightening the screws of one of the shelves that has started to wiggle a few days ago. Bart has been a real help emptying it beforehand, even though he kept muttering that he could do so within a second without anybody noticing if he was allowed to use his speed. Still, he seems quite proud when Barry commended him
The boy’s questions have been numerous and never really followed much of an order. He asks him about one thing, waits for his answer, and tells him his own point of view on this matter before he jumps to whatever crosses his mind next. Barry’s initial fear that he would ask about Iris or what happened to him hasn’t come true so far, as Bart mostly kept to very simple things like his hobbies, things he likes and dislikes, and work. He is obviously mostly interested in getting to know him a bit.

“H-hazelnut and p-pistachio.” The disgusted face Bart pulls in response causes Barry to chuckle, and he lifts an eyebrow in question. “You d-don’t l-like p-pist-tachio?”

“It’s green,” Bart tells him as if this would explain everything, and to a kid like him it most likely does.

“I-have you ever t-tried it?” he asks and his bemused smile grows when Bart gives him a look as if he was a bit slow.

“It’s green, of course not!”

“It’s r-really t-tasty, you kn-know.”

“Says you.”

Barry chuckles and turns his attention back to the shelf.

“You l-like h-hazelnut, th-though?” He isn’t surprised when the kid quickly agrees.

“Of course,” Bart says, "Everybody likes hazelnut.”

It is funny how matter of fact he states this, and Barry has to think of Hal who would have probably eaten a living larva before taking a lick of hazelnut ice-cream. The thought of the other man has come up unexpectedly, and he quickly forces it away again before he can really start to think about his past friend.

“Even Tim likes it,” Bart points out, and by how he makes it sound it is obvious that he is still quite baffled by this fact.

“Is h-he a f-friend of yours?”

“Yeah, he’s Ro-” The kid cuts himself off, and Barry doesn’t miss the alarmed and guilty expression that crosses his face which in turn causes his stomach to sink.

A brief tense silence follows before Bart start to shuffle in palpable uneasy. It’s obvious that he feels bad about what he has nearly said. Barry is pretty certain that he knows now who this Tim is, as he himself had once been part of the superhero community and also had a young sidekick who, naturally, befriended the ones of his colleagues. Somehow, it is odd how some things seem to stay the same for different generations.

“I’m g-glad th-that you’ve m-made f-friends,” he tells him honestly. Bart shoots him a surprised look that quickly turns grateful before he grins and nods. “Yes, they’re great!” His smile slips off his face again, and he frowns slightly as he adds somewhat uncertain. “But… could you not tell Max about me telling you about them?”

“Of c-course,” Barry agrees. “B-but y-you’ve t-to b-be m-more c-caref-ful a-about th-this k-kind of th-things.”
“I am, honestly!” Bart protests and turns his gaze to the ground, suddenly looking rather morosely. “It’s just different with you.” He shrugs and starts to scowl unhappily. “It’s stupid that I have to keep secrets from you.”

Barry really doesn’t want to touch upon this, not with the kid, not at all. He watches Bart quietly for a moment before he hesitantly reaches out for him and gingerly touches his lower arm. He meets the boy’s surprised look with a small smile.

“You c-can s-still sh-share a l-lot of other th-things about yours-self w-with m-me. L-like, wh-which ice c-cream f-flavour is your f-favourite one?”

Briefly, Bart considers him with another slight frown before it vanishes and replaced by a genuine smile. He seems to have come to the same conclusion, for which Barry is quite glad as he would prefer the time they are able to spend together to be on a light and happy note. It is also not fair to Bart to burden him with his own problems.

The time to call Max arrives much too early to either of their liking, and while Barry has made it clear to Bart that he would call the older speedster two hours after his arrival, he lets an additional twenty minutes pass by before he finally brings himself to do so.

Bart’s sad expression with which he is standing close to him while he is making the call starts to lift again when nobody picks up at neither the landline nor at the mobile phone number he has provided him with.

“Something has probably come up,” the kid remarks with a shrug and wide grin when Barry finally puts the phone down again after calling each numbers two times and leaving a message at both the answering machine and the mobile box for Max.

Bart is most likely right; it could be very well the case that there has some business come up for the older man to attend to whether it be superhero related or not. With Max not expecting the kid to be anywhere else but at school, it will most likely take some time till he will pass by to pick him up. Barry’s worry about this development of things is cut short when Bart remarks on it being nearly noon.

“I’m hungry, do you want to eat lunch?”

As if on a cue a young mother with three small boys enters. It isn’t to miss what Bart thinks of that, and Barry smiles when the kid huffs quietly in annoyance. “It’s f-fine, you d-don’t h-have t-to w-wait f-for m-me.”

The boy insists on it though, and, as if this has somehow jinxed them, they have a steady flow of customers over the next two hours. While it isn’t really that busy, and Barry could have eaten at the counter while keeping an eye on the people in the store, he thinks it would be something impolite to do and waits for their unexpected pick up in business to end again. He tells Bart a number of times that he could take his lunch in the small backroom he himself sometimes uses for his breaks when Mrs Ming is around to take over for him, but the kid insists on waiting, even though it is obvious that he is growing rather hungry.

“H-here.” Bart, who has stayed at the counter while Barry has helped an older woman with picking out ripe kiwi fruits, turns his gaze from the section with the sweets to look back to him and lifts his eyebrows when he spots the apple that is offered to him. The sceptical way he studies it causes Barry to chuckle as it remembers him quite a lot of Axel, and he wonders whether this dislike for anything healthy is something every teen has by default.
“You’re h-hungry, aren’t you?” he asks with a kind smile and puts the fruit down on the counter in front of the boy.

“But it’s an apple,” Bart points out and gives him a look as if he had just been insulted.

“It’s a s-snack.”

“No, it is fruit,” the kid corrects morosely, and causes Barry to laugh out loud.

“P-please t-tell m-me you are act-tually eating f-fruits and v-vegetables,” he asks amused, which causes Bart to huff and glower darkly at the apple as he nods.

“Of course, Max always cooks things with lots and lots of disgusting green in it. Like broccoli or carrots!” The face the boy makes, makes his dislike for anything edible grown by Mother Nature rather obvious, and Barry suddenly feels quite some sympathy for the older speedster and his task to get his charge to eat anything other than sweets or fast food.

Any further discussion on the topic is stopped when the old woman, whom he has helped with the kiwi fruits, turns up at the counter to pay. She is one of the talk-active ones, and Barry spends the next ten minutes listening patiently to her telling him about her two kids who are somewhere in Europe, and her little dogs at home who are most certainly worried about her not having returned yet. Seeing that there aren’t any more customers around or anything else he has to take care of, Barry doesn’t mind it, as she is a very friendly but obviously lonely person and it doesn’t hurt him to lend her an ear for a bit.

Next to him, he can feel Bart start to grow more and more restless, and is rather glad when the old woman finally takes her leave as he is worried that the kid will do something that could give him away by accident.

The apple is gone when he finally turns to Bart again, and he can’t say that he is surprised. He is pretty sure Bart would have started to gnaw on the counter should this have taken any longer. Feeling a bit guilty about it, he decides that he would let the kid pick a sweet after their lunch as a treat for his patience, something he sometimes does to reward Axel when he has been helping him or behaved especially good.

“Can we eat now, please?” Bart asks pleadingly and sighs in relief when Barry nods in agreement.

As nobody else is around to keep an eye on the store, they stay at the counter. It doesn’t seem to bother the boy at all who is already putting out his lunch in front of him, which seems to have taken up most of his backpack’s space. There are a number of nutrition bars next to one container with pasta, another one with sandwiches and another one containing mostly chopped vegetables and fruits. The last one is only acknowledged with a very brief glance before Bart pushes it the furthest away from the rest.

Barry can’t help but be amused by the childlike display, and he wonders how old the kid actually is. He hasn’t asked him so far but guesses that he would be around twelve, maybe close to thirteen, but in any case not too far behind Axel.

It is a bit unexpected when Bart goes for one of the bars at first as they don’t look all that appetizing, even to Barry.

“They are supposed to take care of the worst of my hunger when I’m starved,” Bart explains when he notices his curious expression. “They have like 4000 calories each, and I can enjoy the other food much more this way.” Bart points to the container with the pasta and grins.
“I love spaghetti with meatballs,” he tells him excitedly, and Barry doesn’t miss how he actually start to bob up and down a bit in excitement of the meal. It is quite adorable, and he has to smile. “Then enjoy your meal.”

With another bright grin, Bart does just that, and it doesn’t even take him a blink of an eye before two of the three bars are gone, and he starts with the pasta. It seems that the bars have done their trick as he does eat the dish in a much slower pace, at least for a speedster.

Bart does just that, and it doesn’t even take him a blink of an eye before two of the three bars are gone, and he starts with the pasta. It seems that the bars have done their trick as he does eat the dish in a much slower pace, at least for a speedster.

Barry gets his own backpack from below the counter and takes out his own box with his packed lunch as well as his thermos bottle with tea. He doesn’t miss the curious way in which Bart keeps watching him, or how he starts to frown slightly when there isn’t anything else added to the one single container.

When the kid actually gasps as he opens the lid to give view to a simple ham and cheese sandwich and a couple of slices of raw carrot, Barry chuckles and turns to him with a smile. “You don’t know that I don’t have to eat that much anymore, right?”

Bart doesn’t look convinced.

“You can have some of my sandwiches,” the kid offers before he glances down at his pasta and adds. “If you want, we can also share the spaghetti.”

“Th-that’s a very generous offer from you but I’m really fine with my lunch.” It is endearing to Barry how willingly Bart seems share his food with him, but at the same time he wonders what the boy actually knows about him if he isn’t even aware that he doesn’t need that much nutrition anymore. Probably not a lot, seeing that he is probably like a sour spot nobody wants to touch upon in the superhero community, and most of Bart’s questions are most likely fall on deaf ears.

“You sure you don’t need to eat more?” Barry turns his attention back to the boy and is a bit surprised by the question. “Yes, why do you ask?”

For a long moment, Bart doesn’t answer and instead studies him with a wary expression Barry doesn’t particularly like. Finally, the kid just shrugs and turns back to his pasta while glancing uneasily at him. “It’s nothing.”

This seems very unlikely, and Barry has the uncomfortable feeling that he knows what this is about. Over the last couple of months, despite everything that is currently going on in his life, he has been able to gain a few pounds. He is quite proud of it, but he is also aware that this likely makes not much of a difference to his appearance just yet, and Bart has undoubtedly notices how thin he is.

Despite not really being all that hungry anymore thanks to this uneasy realisation, Barry picks up his sandwich and starts to eat.

“Did Max prepare the food for you?” Barry asks after another minute went by in strained silence between them. Bart immediately relaxes a bit and nod with a relieved look on his face. “Yes, he usually does, and he is really good... well aside from all the vegetables he usually uses to spoils all the food with.”

A dark look is directed upon the container with the chopped greens then, and Barry feels his mood lift a bit again as he watches the kid. It really seems like it can’t be easy to get him to eat healthy.

“Vegetables are good for you, B-Bart.”

“Yeah, I know but... they are disgusting.”
Barry chuckles at the disgruntled face Bart makes and reaches for one of the raw carrot slices in his own box. After throwing a quick glance to the door to make sure that nobody is about to enter, he adds. “Th-they also h-help you w-with b-being a b-better h-hero.”

Frowning doubtfully at the orange slice of carrot, the boy still nods morosely. “I know, Max keeps telling me that as well…”

That he doesn’t believe this claim stays unspoken.

“Wh-what if I eat an ad-ditional one of y-your s-sandw-wiches and you eat s-six p-pieces o-of y-your v-vegies?” It isn’t really a fair offer as Bart wouldn’t really gain anything for it other than losing part of his meal to him, but Barry doesn’t want the green go to waste because the boy doesn’t like them.

“Okay,” Bart agrees readily, and catches him off-guard by how he doesn’t hesitate at all. He would have expected him to either protest or decline outright.

“But you have to eat also six pieces,” the kid goes on and frowns when he looks over to the vegetables. “The paprika, okay?”

“You d-don’t l-like p-paprika?” Barry asks even though the answer is rather obvious.

“It is the most disgusting of them all,” Bart proclaims with an actual shudder.

Despite wanting to point out that paprika is one of the healthiest vegetables one could eat, Barry doesn’t, as he can still remember his own dislike for it quite well when he himself was just a child. He acquired a taste for it not before he was nearly out of his teens, and even then he preferred it cooked and in combination with something else, despite how he usually hadn’t been a picky eater at all.

“Alright,” he agrees and reaches for one slice of the red paprika. “B-but you add t-two s-slices of apple t-to yours.”

“What?! But I just ate a whole apple.” Bart whines and gives the veggies another reproachful look.

“D-did it r-really t-taste th-that b-bad?”

“... no,” Bart mutters and huffs. “It was alright, but I still prefer cookies or sweets.”

Barry chuckles and nods. “Okay, th-then, h-how is th-this, you eat all th-the v-vegetables and f-fruits other th-than th-the p-paprika and I’ll b-buy you a b-bag of c-cookies of your ch-choice in r-return?”

This causes Bart’s mood to immediately change for the better, and he doesn’t seem bothered at all by the prospect to have to eat all of the greens Max has chopped for him.

Instead, the food is suddenly gone, everything, including the pasta, most of the sandwiches expect for two, and all the sliced vegetables and fruits other than the paprika stripes. Barry knows that he should have seen this coming after offering the boy sweets in return of eating his meal, but he still feels a bit caught off-guard by it.

“Sorry,” Bart apologizes with a guilty look when he notices his frown. “I should have waited for you… Max always tells me that it’s impolite to eat so quickly, but you said I would get cookies and…”

He shrugs helplessly and gives him a sheepish grin.
Barry smiles slightly in return and is aware that this is pretty much on himself. “You can go and pick your cookies but you will eat them slowly.”

“Sure!”

It dawns on him, as he watches Bart zip over to the isle with the sweets, that he should have pointed out as well that he should keep to the ones under three dollars, but this would most likely be the only time for a long while before he could buy the boy anything again, and he decides to just let him pick the one he likes the most.

Bart returns with a bag of peanut butter cookies, and Barry cringes a bit when he realizes that those are the expensive ones. At least the kid would have a fond memory, and it is nice to see him so happy about the little present.

Barry takes another ten minutes before he is done with his food, and he feels uncomfortably stuffed afterwards, as he has eaten quite a bit more than he usually does. He declines the cookie Bart offers him and is glad when an older couple enters their shop to distract his mind from eating.

The afternoon picks up regarding their number of customers, but Bart is like a shadow, sticking to his side and using any moment they have to ask him things or tell him something about himself. Around four, business slows down again, and Barry, while knowing that this would come back and bite him later on when he has to buy food for himself, tells Bart to pick something else as a snack before they retreat behind the counter once more.

Another hour goes by with them talking and sharing the cookies the kid has chosen this time as well as the tea he has brought along from home. The feeling in his chest grows heavier and heavier the later it becomes as this means the time for them to say their goodbye is getting closer, and while he has been reluctant to let the boy stay in the morning, he knows by now that he is going to miss him very much. The notion that he wouldn’t be able to see him again is quite saddening.

It is five to five when the entrance to the store is opened and Max enters, a grim and concerned expression on his face that lifts as soon as his eyes fall upon Bart, who is currently helping Barry with labelling a box of canned fruits from the storeroom.

The other man walks over to them in a moderate pace even though he seems tensed up, and Barry doesn’t doubt that he wants to get the kid away from here as fast as possible.

“Max!” Bart looks excited when he notices the older man, at least till he remembers where he is and with whom. He becomes much more subdued after that.

Max stops in front of the counter and gives Barry a nod before turning his attention to the boy with a stern look on his face.

“Bart, we’ve talked about this. You can’t simply disappear without telling anybody. You know very well that this could mean that you are in grave danger, and if it weren’t for your grandfather’s call, I would have Jay and the others looking for you by now. Didn’t you consider what kind of trouble you would cause all of us by being so irresponsible? Let aside that you had school today as well. Your teacher was quite worried about you not turning up for your class excursion, and I had to explain to her that my charge seems to have decided to take the liberty to give himself a day off out of the blue without informing anybody about his whereabouts.”

Bart, who has started out meeting Max’s stern gaze stubbornly, seems to have more and more troubles doing so and starts to look guiltier and more crestfallen by the second. It is obvious that he hasn’t intended for causing anybody any sort of trouble, but that he has simply not thought this idea
Barry feels bad for the kid, even though he knows that Max has every right to scold him. Still, in some way it hasn’t been only Bart’s fault and while he wouldn’t point this out to the older man, he is pretty sure that he knows so as well. He tenses up when Max suddenly turns to him and immediately braces himself for any following allegation regarding his time with the boy, which he has hoped wouldn’t come but has still expected.

To his surprise, the older man doesn’t seem angry but actually grateful despite the grim expression he is still wearing.

“Thank you for the call. I probably would have feared for the worse if you haven’t told me that Bart is here. He can be quite a challenge at times, especially with how little he seems to take other people into regard of his little schemes.” Max turns back to Bart with a deep frown. “You’re under house arrest for the next month, no television and no games either-”

“What!? No!” The kid cries out clearly upset. “I’m sorry that I sneaked here without telling you, but you would just have forbidden it again!”

“Yes, and that you disregarded this doesn’t give you any points. You know why you are not supposed to see him-”

Again, Bart cuts Max off.

“This is wrong! I’ve told you already that my grandfather is a hero, he would never do such things! He is innocent! How can you believe that he would-”

“Enough, Bart!” The boy actually jumps due to how loud his guardian has momentarily gotten, but he is only taken aback for a second before he starts to glower angrily.

“No! You don’t want to hear me out! You never listen! You always tell me to be quiet and do as you say, but you are wrong! You’re supposed to be the heroes, but you are just as bad as the people we fight!”

“That is enough, we are not going to have this conversation here. We can talk about it at home-”

“You’re a liar! We aren’t going to talk! You’ll just send me up to my room again!”

Barry feels sick as he listens, sick and ashamed. It is odd, having someone defend him, especially a kid he knows next to nothing about, and it is unsettling to realize how much he really seems to mean to him, even though they have basically been nothing more than strangers until this morning.

“We will talk,” Max repeats firmly, and Barry is surprised to see actual regret in the older man’s eyes as he does so. He wonders whether anybody has ever taken the time to really listen to Bart. So far, he would have assumed so but maybe it hasn’t been the case. His alleged betrayal has been difficult for many people, he doesn’t doubt that he is still someone most of his former friends would prefer to forget about and having to deal with a child that comes from another universe where he has been a hero most likely hasn’t been easy to handle for anybody.

This notion is saddening, and seeing how Bart has grown agitated enough by now that he is actually visibly vibrating makes Barry feel even more sorry for him and guilty for actually being the cause for all of it.

“You’re a liar!” Bart cries furiously as he points an accusing finger at the other man while his eyes start to well up. “You’re all horrible people, and I hate you!”
Before Max has the opportunity to open his mouth again, the kid is gone, causing the magazines and fliers on the counter to litter the ground in front of it due to the draft of his movement.

For a brief moment, both he and Max keep staying there in a surprised and alarmed silence as neither of them has expected this kind of reaction. Barry stares after the boy, or at least in the direction he assumed he has left, and feels the urge to go look for him even though he knows that he wouldn’t be able to. His eyes move back to the older man, who has also turned back to him.

Max appears very tired all of a sudden, and he is studying him briefly with a guarded expression that causes Barry to grow increasingly nervous.

Would he accuse him of being responsible for this?

In a way he probably is.

“I’m sorry for the trouble Bart may has caused you. He’s a good child, but he has difficulties finding his spot in this time.” This is not what Barry had expected, and judging by how Max smiles faintly in amusement, it is plain on his face. The older man sighs and rubs a hand over his face before he meets his eyes again. “I have to go after him and make sure that he doesn’t get himself into any more trouble.”

Barry only nods, unsure why he actually tells him so in the first place.

“Did he break anything while he was here? I’ll compensate you for any damage in case he did.”

“N-no, h-he w-was a g-good k-kid. H-He h-help-ped m-me a l-l-lot.”

Something crosses Max’s face, a look Barry isn’t sure how to interpret, and it takes him a moment to realize that the other man hasn’t heard him speak with his stammer before now. They haven’t really been close back then, nothing like he and Jay were, but he has worked together with him a couple of times, and he has liked the older speedster well enough. Now he wishes he would just leave again because he feels like such a joke again.

Thankfully, Max doesn’t mention it and instead gives him a wry smile. “I’m glad to hear that. Thank you again for informing me about his whereabouts.”

Barry’s throat has closed up on him, and he only nods.

It is an immense relief when the speedster is gone a second later, just as quick as his young charge, and he is left behind, feeling confused and sad.

He closes his eyes and swallows around the lump in his throat while trying to take a deep and slow breaths to calm the tumult of emotions in his chest.

The ringing of the doorbell pulls him back into the presence much too soon. He puts a smile on as he opens his eyes to faces his next customer.

Chapter End Notes

I realized that I probably promised you too much by saying that this chapter would make Barry happy… at least in an outright way. I don’t know why, but in my memory it ended on a much happier note.
Maybe I’m just unable to write happy when it comes Singularity?

But despite the somewhat downer note it ended on, Bart’s re-introduction to Barry’s life is something very positive. :)

And Max returned as well! Yay, I love that older speedster so much and the sometimes wise mentor role he took up for Bart and Wally in the comics. He is coming up rather soon again, and you will learn a bit more of what happened that night when Iris died.

I’ve decided to change something in the upcoming part of the story (again) which means more re-writings, but I think this will benefit the flow and coherency of it. This will also slow down my updating-schedule in most likelihood, I don’t wanna bore you with that, it is just hard for me to estimate how quick I’m with rewriting due to everything else is going on, but I will try not to take too long. ;) The next couple of chapters are pretty much fine as they are, and thanks to my new beta Obsessed, the next one is already edited and prepared to go up. I will possibly still upload it the Sunday after next one, just to give me some more time for the one after that, but it could also be the following Sunday.

I’m really excited how the story is progressing and that we are actually reaching a more interesting part of the first half of Singularity. :3

Anyway, I rambled on for long enough!

I wish all of you a great day, and a Happy New Year in Advanced!

Cheers! <3
Repercussions

Chapter Summary

As Barry has feared, Wally isn't pleased about his interaction with Bart.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by the lovely Obsessed! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry watches Len quietly, feeling exhausted after the last day, and glad that he can be with him tonight.

Since the Rogues have started working for Blacksmith, something that still causes a heavy guilt settle in the pit of his stomach, they have been kept rather busy which in turn means that he has seen way less of Len and the others than he has grown used to over the last year.

Tonight, they don’t have another job to take care of, though, and judging by the dark circles under his eyes, Len is probably just as glad about this as he is.

They are both in the other man’s bed right now, Barry is resting on his side, the thick blanket pulled up to his shoulders, while Len is sitting with his back resting partly against a pillow, partly against the wall, reading some file he must have gotten from Blacksmith and which probably contains information about their next job.

Barry’s initial reluctance to share a bed with Len has waned over time, and by now he even finds comfort in being this close to him and in such a way that isn’t frightening to him despite its obvious intimacy.

Moments like this one are something he especially likes. They remind him of how it was when he still lived with Iris, when Iris…

He liked sharing a bed with Iris, being close to her. He was a big cuddler, he loved touching her, giving comfort and receiving it back that way. Having anybody close who loved him just as much as he did them was exciting, soothing, and just plain perfect.

It would have been, at least, if it hadn’t been for the sex. He was never any good at it, he never liked it, not really. He tried to, but he was a rather disappointing partner in this respect, he is well aware of it, and he was painfully aware even back then. Iris was kind to him about it, though. At least before everything in his life started to crumble under its own weight, and even then she was never really cruel just… frustrated.

Barry frowns and pushes that thoughts away. It makes him feel uncomfortable that his mind has suddenly decided to go down this path, someplace he tries to stay clear off as good as he can.
It is probably due to how tired he is, and due to Bart’s visit today at work.

Bart, who is the grandchild of another him and another Iris, from a world where not everything went wrong.

It is still so odd to think about it…

“What’s on your mind?”

The question comes out of nowhere, and Barry can’t help but tense up even though he knows it is just Len. He looks up to the other man who is currently studying him with a thoughtful expression.

“N-nothing,” he answers slowly, averting his eyes as he feels a familiar unease overcome him.

Len hums and keeps watching him but doesn’t press on.

Barry licks his lips nervously, pulling the blanket a bit closer around himself and wonders whether Len would understand what it has meant to him to share a day with a grandson that is supposed to be his own but isn’t.

“I… I had a v-visitor at th-the s-store t-today,” he finally explains somewhat reluctant. Len has enough to worry about as it is, he doesn’t want to burden him with this as well. He knows him, and he knows that he cares a lot about the people he holds close despite what his behaviour indicates at times.

Especially when it concerns him…

“A visitor?” There is a sharpness to Len’s tone, something aggressive and wary, and Barry quickly realizes that his wording may not have been the best considering everything is not going on right now.

“N-not s-someone b-bad,” he assures quickly and looks up at the other man again with a rather guilty expression. “B-Bart… m-my… th-the b-boy f-from th-the f-future… w-well, th-the f-future o-of an-another earth p-passed b-by at w-work.”

The tension eases away from Len’s shoulders as he relaxes again, studying him with a mixture of surprise and amusement.

“Right, your grandson from another dimension,” he agrees and smirks slightly. “I’m still not sure what to think about that, to be honest.”

“Y-yeah, m-me n-neither.” Barry nods and shifts a bit, so that he can face Len easier. He frowns. “It’s j-just s-so s-strange.”

Len lowers the folder he has still been holding and eyes him quietly for a moment.

“You want to talk about it?” he finally asks.

Barry bites his lower lip and shrugs half-heartedly.

“I’m n-not s-sure wh-what…” he breaks off and shudders, not sure why he feels so upset all of a sudden. He swallows and starts again slowly, not really meeting Len’s gaze as he speaks. “H-he s-skipped sch-school t-to v-visit m-me. H-he j-just w-wanted t-to g-get t-to kn-know m-me a b-bit b-b-better…” His eyes start to itch and he closes them, coughing slightly as his voice has started to sound a bit coarse. “He… h-he is a g-good k-kid. F-full of energ-gy and unab-ble t-to s-stand s-still f-for l-
Barry rolls onto his back and covers his eyes with a hand.

It hurts…

Thinking about Bart, about what a nice kid he is and how he really wanted to get to know him. How he went against his guardian’s order to visit him and…

“H-he j-just w-wanted t-to g-get t-to kn-know m-me a b-bit…” he whispers softly as warm tears start to run down the side of his face. “H-he w-was c-curious a-and… I…”

He breaks off again and presses his lips together, angry at the world at large for how messed up everything is.

Bart is a good kid, a really sweet one, and he would love to get to know him but today was probably the only chance he got for a long time before he would be able to see him again.

“H-he w-was ups-set b-because… wh-when M-Max, h-his g-guard-dian c-came t-to p-pick h-him u-up… h-he g-got s-so a-angry and… I… I th-think h-he f-feels l-lost and… h-he j-just w-wanted t-to g-get t-to kn-know m-me a a b-bit…” Barry squeezes his eyes shut, embarrassed for crying again, especially in front of Len.

The mattress shifts as the man next to him moves, and he shivers when he feels him lay down next to him, close enough that he can actually feel him.

Len touches his arm lightly, nearly hesitantly, and Barry nearly sobs as the pain in his chest briefly intensifies. “He sounds like a nice kid.”

Barry nods, eyes still covered by his own hand, and huffs a laugh. “H-he is… h-he sh-shared h-his l-lunch w-with m-me b-because he w-was w-worried th-that I’m s-so th-thin…”

“Smart kid,” Len remarks, and Barry has to chuckle, smiling despite himself.

The comfortable warmth that settles over him for a brief moment is gone much too soon again, though, and he sighs tiredly as he lets his hand slip from his face. He unhappily frowns up at the ceiling.

“Th-they w-won’t l-let m-me s-see h-him ag-again,” he explains quietly and talking hurts due to the lump in his throat. “I d-didn’t w-want h-him t-to s-stay at f-first b-because of th-the t-trouble th-this c-could cause me.” He still feels guilty and horrible over it. “H-he m-must b-b-e l-lonely and s-scared… and I h-hardly th-thought of h-him at all o-ove th-th-e l-last c-couple of m-months…”

“You had your fair share of things to worry about,” Len points out and gives his arm a light reassuring squeezes. “And you shouldn’t add this to the list. The kid is taken care of, and there is nothing more you can do for him right now.”

This isn’t exactly what Barry wants to hear, but even he knows that he couldn’t offer anything to Bart he wouldn’t get from Max as things stand right now. The boy has a much better life under the other speedster’s home as it is.

What could he really offer him after all?

“I d-don’t w-want h-him t-to s-start t-to h-hate m-me,” he explains quietly.
“He won’t,” Len replies, sounding so sure of it.

Barry really wishes that he is right.

The notion that there is family left for him, even if it wasn’t really his own, is so very comforting, and Bart really seemed to have liked him a lot.

“You’re a good person,” Len goes on and shifts a bit so that his head is resting on his pillow as he watches him. “Everyone who hasn’t their heads up their ass knows that as soon as they meet you. The boy is already aware of it, he worries about you, and there is no more obvious sign that you care for someone than that.”

The hand on his arm moves his shoulder before back down again, starting to caress him lightly. Barry can’t help but shiver slightly in response even though the feeling doesn’t make him uneasy but is surprisingly comforting. He meets Len’s eyes.

“Thank you,” he says quietly and reaches for the other man’s hand, covering it with his own.

Len smiles, lazily and easy, and Barry feels a familiar warmth settle in his chest, something that reminds him of home, of belonging somewhere, to someone.

This here, he thinks, is home.

***

“You know, I don’t wanna pest you or anything, but I haven’t eaten dinner yet, and I would give you my undying gratitude should you make me one of you amazing omelettes.”

“Now?” Barry can’t keep the incredulity out of his voice as he shoots Eddy a meaningful look. “It’s nearly one in the morning, Eddy, and I’m tired.”

His friend, who is climbing the stairs next to him, and who is just as drained to the bones as he is due to the unexpected rain shower that started shortly after they left Mrs. Ming’s store, shrugs and shoots him a broad grin. “So what? I came all the way over to your store to fetch you.”

“You told me you were in the area,” Barry points out and smiles when Eddy huffs and crosses his arms. “What’s more important to you, some stupid beauty-sleep or having your friend fed and looked after?”

This causes Barry to laugh as, even though the other man’s behaviour is ridiculous and somewhat annoying, he is mostly just joking around, and they both know it.

“I think I’ll have to live with this king of guilt, then.”

Eddy snorts reaches into his jacket pocket for his cigarettes. “Would you at least invite me in for a cup of coffee?”

Barry gives his friend a slightly exasperated glare and wonders why he has to be so difficult tonight because it has to be rather obvious how dead on his feet he feels by now.

It has been two days since Bart’s visit, and Barry hasn’t been able to catch much sleep as his mind has started to bother him again with all possible things he would preferably rather not think about the moment he was alone and has nothing left to distract himself with.

He is pretty sure that Eddy has picked up that something has happened and after failing to get him to
open up in a normal way, he has now fallen back upon trying to annoy him into yielding and telling him what is going on.

Barry feels a bit bad about not wanting to tell his friend about what has happened, especially because he told Eddy already about Bart before, not all of it but something at least.

Since that night with Kenneth, their relationship has changed, though, and Barry isn’t sure what to make of it.

Or maybe change was not the right word, because Eddy insists on behaving as if nothing has happened at all, and Barry can’t bring himself to try and make his friend talk about what is obviously an uneasy topic for him. He hasn’t missed how tensed the other man has been around him for the first couple of days after he saved his life and gave his secret away, and it has only been when Eddy realized that he wasn’t going to press him on that matter, that he started to behave really like himself again.

Even so, despite both of them pretending that nothing has changed and that night never happened, there is something uncomfortable looming around in the background whenever Barry is around Eddy these days. It isn’t like he is worried or wary of his friend, but he is uncertain how to deal with all of it. He knows Eddy means him no harm, but he wonders what the other man does whenever he leaves the city for a week or just vanishes for a couple of days.

Being a speedster means that someone can do a lot of harm, much more than most other people could, and he really doesn’t want his friend to get in trouble with Jay, Wally, or any of the other heroes. The notion alone that Eddy could also end up like he has is upsetting and troubling…

“W-would i-it k-kill y-you t-to w-wait t-till t-tomorrow m-m-morning?” Barry tries to fence the gloomy thoughts off that has started to creep back into his mind and turns to Eddy with an annoyed frown that is mostly fake.

“Yes.” The other man says this in such a serious tone that Barry can’t but chuckle. “You’re s-such a d-dork, y-you kn-know?”

“That’s what my charm is based on.”

“Wh-what ch-charm?”

“Don’t be like that, you’ve become addicted to my personality months ago,” Eddy declares with a smirk which is suddenly gone and replaced by a frown when he turns back to their floor they have just stepped onto. Barry, who notices his change in demeanour, follows his gaze and feels a mixture of slight annoyance and concern overcome him when he notices the person sitting in front of his door.

It has been a while since he has seen Evan last. The other man has used his flat as a temporary shelter a handful of time but stopped passing by a while ago. Barry has actually been a bit worried about him as he was a decent enough guest whenever he had been around and never tried something stupid. Seeing him sleeping in a sitting position in front of his flat is somewhat of a relief, but at the same time it doesn’t really fill him with anything close to joy.

He hasn’t been joking to Eddy when he told him that he is tired, and he had never been able to sleep well with Evan around.

As if on a cue, Barry watches how the resting man tenses up for a second before he lifts his head and blinks his bleary eyes a couple of times.
“Another one of your friends?” He looks over to Eddy, who is still looking at Evan with a not so amiable expression on his face. Barry isn't sure how to reply and only shrugs, which causes his friend to give him a slightly exasperate glare. “What is it with you and attracting crooked fellows?”

“You of all p-people sh-should kn-know th-that I’ve a t-talent f-for th-this,” he replies with a wry smile that causes Eddy to roll his eyes and snort. “Touché.”

“Bar’?”

They turn their attention back to Evan who is currently getting up while rubbing his eyes with one hand. Barry notices that he has a rather ugly looking bruise on the right side of his face which seem to be about a week old by its colouration. Again, he wonders what the man usually does with his time but reminds himself that this is none of his business.

“Sorry fur turn’ up lik’ this again bit Ah wid need a place tae bade fur th’ night. A wullnae cause ye ony trouble, ah wull juist kip oan th’ couch lik’ usual.” Evan sounds drowsy and slightly out of it as he speaks, and Barry notices how unstable he seems on his legs, as if he was drunk. That would just be perfect.

“What the fuck did that dude just say?” Eddy asks as he scrutinizes the other man with a frown. “It sounded like gibberish with some English words thrown into it.”

“Awa’ an’ bile yer heid, bahookie , yi'll waant trauchle?” Evan grouses, and it seems that he has just now realized that there is someone else around aside Barry. He gives Eddy a dirty glare, who in turn just looks puzzled.

“What?” His friend shoots him a confused and irked look. “Did that jackass just insult me?”

Barry doesn’t feel up to any of this and sighs quietly as he tries to decide what to do.

“Evan, are y-you d-drunk?” It is a blunt question, but why beat around the bush? He is not going to let the other man stay should he be intoxicated, and he is too tired to be patient right now.

“Na! Just tired, havn' gottn a lot o’ kip th' lest tae o’ days,” the Scot explains hastily, and Barry studies him carefully as he does so. He sounds a bit slurred and seems unsteady on his legs, but both of this could be very well symptoms of exhaustion, along with his bloodshot eyes.

Insomnia is no stranger to Barry either, and he knows how ugly it can get when you are gone with hardly any sleep for more than a couple of days.

“Are you kidding me?” Eddy meets his surprised look with an angry one. “That dude is most likely a rummy or a junky! Are you seriously considering letting him staying in your flat which, by the way, lacks any locks to your freaking bedroom? He could stab you in your sleep, you moron!”

“Pick a windae, yer leavin’!”

“Screw you, arsehole! Learn English before you try to get funny with me.”

Both men glare venomously at each other, and Barry is certain that he would have a fight at his hands should he not interfere. The notion to leave them to it and simply disappear into his flat is alluring but instead of doing so, he makes his way over to where Evan is still more leaning than actually standing against his door.

“B-both of you, b-be q-quiet, it’s l-late and th-there’re p-people t-trying t-to s-sleep.”
People being noise at night isn’t unusual in their apartment complex, but he still doesn’t like to be cause for such disturbances. Aside, he would go crazy should those mules start a fight right now.

“Y-you c-can s-stay, Evan, b-but only if you m-mind t-the r-rules, alright?” He gives the other man with a stern look as he comes up to him and steps towards the door to unlock it.

“O’ coorse,” Evan agrees readily and is obviously relieved by being allowed to spend the night somewhere else than on the street.

“Barry, what the fuck!? You let that bum stay? Seriously?!” Eddy gives him an utterly incredulous look, and Barry starts to feel a bit bad for how upset he sounds. He is just worried about him, after all.

“Eddy, h-he h-has s-slept on m-m-my c-couch b-before-”

“Good,” Eddy interrupts him sarcastically,” why not just give him another chance to cut your throat while you’re asleep?”

Barry groans softly as he pushes the door open and turns back to his friend with an exasperated look. “You w-want t-to s-stay over as w-well and k-keep an eye on h-him, b-be m-my g-guest, b-but I’m n-not w-wasting any m-more t-time I c-can u-use t-to g-get s-some s-sleep.”

Eddy meets his gaze with a dark glare, and while Barry hasn’t been sure what to expect, it is certainly not him nodding curtly and walking past him into his flat.

Barry thinks about pointing out of how ridiculous this is but decides against it because he does know that his friend’s has a valid point. Since the night in which Kenneth tried to kill him, there have been no more assassination attempts on him, most likely due to Len making the deal with Black, but even then it is rather reckless to let a man stay over whom he hardly knows.

“Sae... Ah kin bade?” Evan asks, and prompts Barry to turn his attention back to him. The Scot seems uncertain about whether it is really okay for him to enter or not and, somehow, this makes him appear much less like a threat.

“Yes,” Barry agrees tiredly and adds with a small smile. “B-but you a-and Eddy d-decide on y-your own wh-who g-gets th-the c-couch.”

Eddy doesn’t miss his words as he replies quickly from the inside of the flat before Evan can even open his mouth. “Already calling dibs on it!”

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**Late November 3rd year**

It is close to eleven at night on Saturday, five days after Bart has visited him at Mrs Ming’s store, when Wally suddenly turns up in Barry’s flat, seemingly out of nowhere. He is wearing his Flash costume, and he is so charged up that the air around him is crackling due to the raw energy he emits.

For a brief moment, both of them are simply watching each other, Barry with wide eyes and a feeling of horror and dread, and Wally with an expression that gives nothing away. There is a sense of grim anger to him, though, something that doesn’t presage anything but trouble and pain.

Then, without any warning, Barry’s throat is in a painful strong grip as he is smashed against the wall hard enough that his back sears in pain and his breath is knocked out of him momentarily. His hands automatically reach up and try to pry the fingers away that make it nearly impossible to get any
air into his lungs, but it is to no avail.

Wally isn’t playing around, he is furious, despite how utterly calm he appears on the outside, Barry can feel the anger and other dark emotions circulating underneath his skin.

“Listen to me,” the other man starts in a deep voice that sounds so very different to what Barry can remember the boy and later young man sounding like he took in as a child. It is like an actual stranger is standing in front of him, and this notion is so disheartening.

The hand around his throat momentarily tightens its grip, and Barry starts to see black spot dance across his vision before Wally allows him to take a breath again.

“Listen, because this is the only warning I’ll ever give you.” His nephew speaks quietly, but it couldn’t have been any more frightening if he had been yelling at him. “You’ll keep away from that little idiot, you’ll not let him get close to you again.”

The fingers start to dig into his neck painfully enough that Barry starts to tear up. Due to the white lenses it is impossible to make Wally’s eyes out, and he is glad for it as he is sure that he doesn’t want to see how the younger man is looking at him right now.

“He may still be too young to be able to grasp what you really are, but it doesn’t matter. I know, we all know, and if you think even just for a moment that you could do to him what you did to me, I’ll make sure that there is nothing left of you to put back into a cell.” Wally pulls him closer, so that Barry can actually feel his warm breath on his face as he lets his passive mask slip and scowls at him. “You aren’t going to hurt anybody anymore.”

The grip around his throat tightens again, worse than before, and he is certain that his nephew would kill him, that he would choke him to death.

There is so much he wants to say, so much he wants to asks. He just wants to understand what happened to Wally. He wants to apologize so badly for not protecting him, and, more than anything, he wants him to understand that he would have done anything to protect him and Iris, and that he is regretting nothing more than having failed at that.

His vision grows dark and bleary, and he realizes that he would never get the possibility to say any of this.

Then, the grip is gone, and Barry slumps to the ground, coughing and choking as he desperately inhales air into his burning lungs. The area where Wally has hold him feels sour to the touch and after taking his first couple of greedy breaths he gingerly lifts his head, despite how the adrenalin that is currently circulating through his body wants him to get up and get away from the other man.

There is no other man anymore, though, as he has half expected, and while he is flooded by an immense relief over it, it causes a choked sob to escape his lips as well. He tries to calm down, to tell himself that he should be used to this by now.

The problem is, he isn’t, though.

No matter how much times passes by, he seems unable to accept that Wally really hates him, and it is such a painful realisation time and time again.

The sound of the bathroom door being pushed open reaches him, and he glances over to it.

Axel stands there, eyes big with confusion and fear, and Barry is so grateful for the boy to have stayed in there during the brief visit Wally paid him. He knows that he has been ridiculously lucky
that the boy had to use the bathroom just as his nephew decided pass by. Otherwise, he most likely would not be here anymore.

It’s a daunting notion.

Barry lets his head drop, so that his forehead is resting on the cool ground, and he tries to regain just a little bit of composure because Axel really doesn’t need to see him break down right now. He is probably freaked out enough by what he has just witnessed as it is.

Slowly, he presses himself up into a sitting position and rubs his hand over his face a couple of times before he turns to the young teen, who hasn’t moved from his spot by the bathroom door yet. He gives him a wry smile.

“S-s-sor-”

Talking turns out to be not a good idea. His throat flares up in pain, and he has a coughing fit that causes some of the tears to fall, he is desperately trying to hold back.

This seems to get Axel out of his stupor, as the kid quickly comes over to him. He stops close to him but doesn’t say anything. It is palpable that he is uncertain what to do or how to help.

Barry really feels bad for him having to be in this situation in the first place. It is his rotten luck that Axel would turn up tonight in front of his door because of another fight with his friends. Still, he knows how much worse this could have turned out. In that regard, he has gotten away very easy.

When the coughs finally stop, he doesn’t try to speak again. He isn’t sure whether his windpipe is hurt or not, he hopes it is just a bit sore, but he thinks it would be better to not to take a chance.

Instead, he tries to get back onto his feet, which works out better than he has expected. Axel keeps hovering close to him and looks like he wants to step closer and help him but doesn’t dare to. Barry is glad about it, he can’t have anybody touch him right now, not even the young teen. His skin feels much too small for him again and the urge to scratch at it is nearly overwhelmingly strong.

Trying to get his mind off of it, he meets Axel’s eyes and gives him another tentative and hopefully reassuring smile before he nods to the kitchen table. The boy hesitates for a moment before he finally nods in agreement, and they both make their way over to it.

While getting up hasn’t been such a challenge, it turns out that walking actually is, as Barry feels unsteady and slightly dizzy. Thus he lets himself drop onto the closest chair he reaches and presses both of his hands flat onto the table to try and stop the world around him from rocking so much.

“Do you want some water?” Axel asks in an unusual small voice. “I could get you a glass.”

Barry smiles again but doesn’t look over to the kid that is still standing next to him. He feels a bit sick and drinking something isn’t on top of his list of things to do right now. Still, he knows that Axel is quite upset by what has just occurred, and it would help him to do something and feel useful.

Thus, Barry nods wordlessly while he tries to keep his eyes focused on the spot between his hands and stop the dizziness from growing any worse.

It is unlikely for Wally to come back, but Barry feels unsettled and frightened by the notion of what would happen should he do just that and this time discover his guest all the same. He tentatively tries to swallow again and winces when the pain in his throat immediately flares up again.

“Shit, man...” Axel puts the glass of water down on the table next to him, and while Barry is still not
moving his gaze, he can hear how upset he actually is.

“Shit, that… that was the Flash,” the boy goes on, and it would be hard to miss how he seems to have difficulties to wrap his mind around this. “He attacked you.”

Barry closes his eyes which isn’t a wise thing to do as the sensation of the world spinning around him starts to intensify immensely so that he has to open them again just after a few seconds.

“Why would he do that?” The boy sounds confused and while he tries not to let it on, there is also a slight note of fear in his voice that is quickly overshadowed by a mixture of annoyance and anger as he speaks again. “Isn’t that jackass supposed to be one of the good guys?”

There isn’t anything Barry can say right now to explain to Axel that Wally is one of the good guys, but that he had something really horrible happened to him and that he thought him responsible for it. He couldn’t tell the kid that or anybody else without making himself appear even more suspicious.

“You don’t look so good,” Axel remarks, and his anger is once again replaced by worry and uncertainty. “Do you want for me to look whether Mary is home?”

Eddy is currently out of the twins for a week or so, for some private business and this would only leave Mary or the Rogues for Axel to go to for help, and while the boy likes the later ones well enough, he obviously trusts the Romanian woman more.

Barry doesn’t like the notion to bother his friend this late at night, but he is really worried about being with Axel alone right now. By getting Mary to join them, there would be at least someone else around should Wally or anybody else turn up again.

“Okay, I’ll be back in no time, so don’t drop dead on me or anything,” the teen orders after Barry has agreed to his offer with another slight nod. Despite how crappy he feels he can’t help but smiles at that.

Tiredly, he lets himself slump down onto the table. The dizziness and sickness have waned a bit, and he tries to close his eyes once more as the brightness of the room causes his head to ache.

A soft touch to his shoulder startles him up with a frightened yelp in what seems like just a second later. Judging by how bleary his vision is and how groggy he feels, he must have nodded off while Axel was gone, though. It does take him any time to remember where he is or what has happened, and thus he is able to stop himself from freaking out even before he is able to focus enough to make Mary out next to him.

“Sorry for waking you, Bar,” she speaks in a soft voice and adds with a small apologizing smile. “I’m just worries that your back would have let you known about what it thinks of you falling asleep in this position otherwise.”

She has a point, not that Barry would have been mad at her in any way. It is in the middle of the night, and she most likely has already been sleeping judging by the pajama she is wearing. If anybody has a right to be annoyed, it is her.

“Axel told me that you have been strangled?” Barry meets her eyes in surprised that is quickly replaced by embarrassment, but before he can attempt to protest she hushes him with a worried frown. “It is alright, really. I’m glad he got me.” She studies his throat for a second and a pained expression settles over her face as she makes a small sympathetic and noise. She looks worried when she meets his eyes again. “Do you have troubles breathing?”

Not wanting to provoke another coughing fit, he only shakes his head in negation and watches how
his friend relaxes a bit at that.

“Good.” Mary sounds relieved and gives him a comforting smile. “I’ll make you warm milk with honey, it will help your throat. Do you think you can get up on your own? It is probably better for you to lay down in your bed before you fall asleep on the table again.”

Aside from feeling very tired right now, Barry thinks that he will be fine. Well, other than for the pain in his back, but he is not going to point this out right now. At least, the dizziness is completely gone and his stomach feels only a little bit queasy anymore, so that he is able to get up without much trouble.

Axel follows him with some distance to his bedroom but stays back at the door and watches him quietly as he walks over to his bed. Barry wants to tell him that it is alright and that he doesn’t need to be worried or frightened. He feels so drowsy, though, and before he even realizes it, he has already clumsily drop onto the bed.

It only takes a couple of seconds for him to be fast asleep again.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it!

I was thinking about posting this chapter next Sunday, but I got sick after New Year and had some time to go over some of my writings while resting in bed, so why the heck not. :) I always enjoy putting new chapters up as it is!

And we got a brief glimpse of Wally again, who was clearly not in the most happiest of moods. I feel so bad for the poor guy, he is still so scarred from what happened to him during his youth, and he is reminded of it every time he has to think of Barry. It kills him to think that Barry is out of prison again, and while he doesn't like Bart all that much, he doesn't want that the boy gets hurt. Btw, just in case anybody is curious, Wally went to therapy for a long while after Iris' death, he is just not good with dealing with what happened.

Also, Barry is seemingly unable to get a break. Poor guy, he definitely needs a lot of hugs now.

Till next time! <3
“What is the fedelho doing here again?” Marco grouses as soon as he spots Axel entering the room behind Barry and Sam. The Latin turns an annoyed gaze towards the blonde. “You have to bring him over every time you pass by now?”

“Because I’m so desperate about meeting your charming personality again.” Axel scoffs with a sneer which causes Marco to get up from his spot at the table in a rather threatening manner. A couple of the other Rogues snort and chuckle at the boy’s cheekiness, and Mick tells the Latin to sit down again with a smirk. “Leave the brat alone, Mardon. It’s entertaining to have him around.”

“About as entertaining as having a rash,” the Latin grunts and gives Axel another hard look before his attention is caught by something else. His studies Barry for a second and lifts an eyebrow. “You look like crap, Allen. And what is with the scarf, you caught yourself a cold?”

“Hehe, caught yourself a cold there, Barry?” James parrots, who sits next to Mick and opposite to Marco. He shoots Barry a wide grin. The other men groan in response, and Digger tells him to shut up.

“He sounds like crap.” Sam mentions as he makes his way over to the others and takes a seat next to the Australian. “S probably some bug that is going around right now.”

Mick reaches for his beer and studies Barry with a frown. “If I catch something from you, I’ll kick your ass for it. I don’t need the fuckin’ sniffles.”

“Oh shush it.” Lisa huffs from her spot on the couch and gives her teammate a rather dirty glare. “If he’s really sick, he’s probably feeling crappy enough without you being a total ass about it.”

“So, it’s fine for me to feel like crap just so he doesn’t?” Mick asks with a smirk and takes a sip of his beer before adding his wager for the round. “Don’t understand why he bothers to come over at all if he’s sick.”

“Because he likes us, and we make him feel better, nitwit,” James points out rather gleefully which
earns him a glare from the taller man. “Call me a nitwit again, and I’ll shove this bottle down your throat.”

James shrinks back a bit and seems to decide that it is probably the best to heed the warning as he stays quiet.

Barry watches them absentmindedly, wondering whether it would be better to make up an excuse about not feeling too good and ask Sam to get him back to his flat. It has been stupid to come over, and he mostly did so because Mary has to attend to a customer today and Axel insisted on staying with him. This makes his own flat not to the best choice to be right now, especially after what has happened last night.

Wally’s surprise visit still has him very much on edge and unsettled. Maybe he could get Len to agree and let Axel stay here for a bit, just until tomorrow, when Mary could keep them company again.

“Don’t mind those imbeciles, honey.” Barry glances toward Lisa and needs a moment to realize what she is talking about. Her warm smile dims a bit when she picks up on how distracted he seems. “Are you alright?”

Before he can answer, Len’s voice beats him to it. “What happened now?”

The other man enters the big room that has formerly been for storing food below the farm house and meets Barry’s uncertain gaze with a frown. “Did somebody bother you again?” Len walks the few steps from the entrance up to him and studies him with a tight expression.

“N-no,” he protests and hates how hoarse he sounds. He coughs briefly before he goes on.

“I’ve j-just a s-small c-cold.”

Axel makes a small incredulous sounding noise, something that lays between a scoff and a grunt, which causes Len to look over to him. Barry shoots the young teen an annoyed and warning look but the kid huffs and defiantly crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“You want to add something, brat?” Len asks in a calm voice that still succeeds in sounding somewhat threatening.

“Wh-what’s th-there t-to add, I’ve c-caught m-mys-self a b-b-bug.” Barry can’t help but feel annoyed. He knows that he can’t be angry at Axel, the kid is simply concerned about him, but he has thought that he understood when he explained to him why it is a bad idea to bring his little run-in with the Flash up in front of the Rogues.

“You seem quite nervous for a fellow who has nothing to hide,” Mick remarks amused, and Barry notices that all the men at the table have paused their game to watch them for entertainment. He starts to really regret his decision to come over.

“I’m f-fine,” he insists.

“You don’t look fine,” Len argues with a grim look, and Barry doesn’t like how he is eying the scarf he is wearing.

“Len, for fuck’s sake, stop being such an annoying twerp.” Lisa huffs. “He’s sick. He’s feeling bad enough without you getting all creepy interrogator on him.”

“Be quiet-”
“Oh, shut up. Don’t you be quiet me, jackass, who the hell do you think-”

“It was the Flash.”

It is like a switch has been turned and everyone pauses for second after Axel cut Lisa off. Barry closes his eyes. He really should have stayed at home.

“What?” Sam is the one to break the nearly tangible silence and actually chuckles for a moment before the amusement wanes from his voice when he notices how grim Axel looks and how pale Barry has gotten. “Shit, fucking Red came after you?”

“No, it-,” Barry tries to protest but is startled badly enough that he cries out in protest when Len suddenly reaches for the scarf around his neck and pushes it down. He deflects the other man’s hand and backs away from him.

“D-don’t t-touch m-me!” He sounds furious for a second, then his throat protests due to the misuse and he has another coughing fit.

Len doesn’t touch him again. It takes Barry a minute till he is able to breathe more or less normal again, and he really dreads to but he lifts his slightly blurred gaze to meet the other man’s.

“You didn’t tell me you have trouble with the Flash.” There is an edge to Len’s voice, he is clearly angry about this, and Barry resigns himself to them having another argument coming up.

“Yeah,” Mick interjects and puts his cards down. He, like most of the others doesn’t seem particularly interested in the game anymore. “What business does someone like you have with that fucker?”

The suspicion is hard to miss as is the sudden animosity and wariness he sees on the other men’s faces.

He is an ex-cop. Even after everything that happened to him, this will never change, and they seem to remember this as well. It shouldn’t be surprising that they are suspicious, and it isn’t. It’s still dejecting, though.

“Hey, back off, jackass!” Axel hasn’t missed how the mood towards Barry has changed and doesn’t seem to like it at all. “The Flash attacked him! They weren’t buddy-buddy, okay?”

“Why the fuck would a speedster be interested in a disgraced ex-cop?” Marco wonders out loud, and while he studies Barry now with a scowl, he does seem conflicted about what to think.

“As far as I know, Red has never been interested in the sorts like him. The speedsters likes them even less than the rest of us,” he goes on, and it is painfully plain what he means by that.

Barry starts to cough again due to the lump that has started to form in his throat and irritates it as a result. His eyes are itching, and he turns away from the other as he doesn’t want to see how they are looking at him now. Like a potential enemy, a threat to be wary of.

Something dirty.

Gone is the sympathy they have held for him just a few minutes ago.

This shouldn’t hurt so much.

Of course this had to happen. Barry couldn’t have something good like this in his life.
He is such an idiot…

“The brat’s right, Mardon, you all should back the hell off!” Lisa shoots the Latin a dirty look as she gets up from the couch and walks over to where Barry and Len are still standing. She meets Barry’s surprised gaze with a wary but not hostile look.

“It’s alright,” she says in a soft and calming voice as she steps closer to him, and he seems about to back off. Slowly she lifts her hand and reaches for his scarf, all the while holding his gaze. “I’m not going to hurt you, Bar.”

He shudders when her fingertips touch his jaw briefly before she pushes the soft garment down to uncover the nasty looking mark from last night’s run-in with his nephew.

A small unhappy noise escapes her as she watches part of the damage that has been done to him, and Barry suddenly feels uncomfortably exposed. He can’t help but make a step back, so that she has to let go, and he is out of her reach. Lisa looks back up to him with a concerned expression. “What did you do to make this fucker so damn angry at you?”

“Red thinks he killed someone close to him.” Barry isn’t the only one who turns to Len in surprise.

“What the hell, Len?” Lisa frowns at her brother. “How do you know that?”

“Who the fuck cares about that,” Marco interrupts and he doesn’t seem to like this piece of information one bit. He scowls at Len before he nods over to Barry. “You knew that he’s a potential bait for that damn fuck all along?”

“Shut up, Mardon.” Len doesn’t raise his voice. He doesn’t need to. Barry is certain that he isn’t the only one who gets that this is not something the other man is willing to start an argument about and that he would make the person pay who tries to nonetheless.

There is an odd dynamic to this group. At times they seem close like friends, like drinking buddies, even like family. They laugh, fight and get pissed at each other but generally display a closeness in a way only people who know each other for ages are able to.

Then, at moments like this, the air between them shifts, and they become a gang of criminals again, dangerous and someone to be wary of. It doesn’t happen that often, at least not when Barry is around, but he always can feel the shift, it is like something makes click, and they are again the Rogues he fought so long ago.

Marco gets up with an angry scowl on his face, and Barry just knows that the other man will start a fight with Len over this.

“You’re so full of yourself, Snart. You know that this can come back and bite us in the ass! Right now we’ve more than enough to chew on thanks to you. We don’t need to worry about that pedófilo and his fucking baggage-”

“Shut your damn trap, Mardon,” Len cuts him off, and his aggression and anger are nearly palpable as he glares at Marco. “You keep yapping and bitching about how you don’t like our current situation, but as always you fail to come up with any solution to do something about it.”

“Vai-te lixar, Snart, seu maricas cobarde! You think you are so fucking tough, don’t you?!” Marco sneers, and he looks so tensed up, so full of suppressed anger that he reminds Barry of a viper that is
ready to strike. “You’re in control, aren’t you, Len? You always are in control. You always have a plan for fucking everything! At least that’s what you tell yourself while you’re just as much out of your depth as the rest of us is, but you are too fucking much of a pussy to admit it. Instead you make us run loops and do tricks for Blacksmith as if we’re her fucking lapdogs! Just so that your precious little fuck-buddy doesn’t get hurt!”

Barry feels utterly mortified by what the other man has just said, but his embarrassment is replaced by alarm when Marco suddenly draws his weather wand. A couple of startled and angry yelps come from the other Rogues at the table who scramble to their feet and try to get distance between themselves and their friend.

Len is quicker than Marco, though, and a beam of bright white light passes Barry that is so cold that it seems to solidify the air around him for a moment and causes his skin to prickle uncomfortably.

Marco cries out in pain and let loose a string of very furious sounding words that Barry doesn’t understand but are most likely Portuguese swears. He feels horrified when he notices that the Rogues hand is covered in a thick layer of ice up to his elbow, as well as the wand that is held in his firm grip. That had to hurt like hell.

He turns to Len with a startled expression and can’t help but think that he hasn’t even noticed that the other man has the weapon with him.

Len doesn’t look in his direction. Instead, he makes his way over to the table behind which Marco has now dropped to his knees and is still hissing angry curses in his native language. The others have retreated a bit back and neither of them tries to stop him. They just seem intent on watching what is going on with a nervous grimness.

Barry jumps when someone grabs hold of his elbow and stops him. It is then that he realizes that he was about to follow Len over to Marco. Lisa meets his eyes with a serious expression and tells him to stay put.

“You don’t get between us if we have a beef with each other and need to take care of it,” she explains quietly and her grip briefly firms before she lets go of him again and looks back to her brother who has reached Marco by now.

“We’re in this together,” she goes on and doesn’t look nearly as alarmed as he thinks she should, considering what is currently going on. “We may not like it, Barry, but we all know that we’ve to be patient right now. Marco just needed to get some frustration off.” She snorts softly, and Barry notices how she briefly clenches her fists. “We all do, but he has the rotten luck of owning the infamous southern temperament, and he’s never been good at biting down on his anger instead of spewing it out.”

He frowns and looks back over to the two other man. They haven’t started trading punches yet, which in Marco’s case would have been difficult anyway but likely not impossible, and he is relieved and somewhat confused to see that Len has crouched down next to the other Rogue and is now speaking to him with a grim and intense expression on his face. Barry isn’t able to make out what the other man is saying but judging by how Marco glares furiously at Len, it is not something he likes to hear.

Then, to his utter surprise, the Latin’s expression becomes less hostile and angry, and the stiff line of his shoulders start to relax a bit. He still doesn’t look anything close to calm or happy but whatever Len is telling him seems to take the worst off his anger.

“Man, I thought they would start a brawl,” Axel says, and Barry realizes with a slight panic and guilt
that he has briefly forgotten about the kid. Thus it takes him a couple of seconds before he notices how disappointed Axel actually sounds. Lisa seems to notice this as well, as she snorts in amusement and shoots the teenager a smirk. “Believe me, you don’t want those wankers to go after each other. They don’t give a fuck about collateral damage when they are in these kind of moods.”

“L-Lisa,” he croaks in frustration, and she winks at him in good humor. “It’s the stress, Bar, otherwise I’d have totally minded my language.”

He doubts that very much, and while he knows that she tries to get him to relax a bit, he doesn’t feel any less tired and miserable than just a minute ago. His gaze turns back to Len and Marco. The bad aftertaste of what has just happened still lingers strongly in the air around them, and he realizes that it would be for the best if he would make himself scarce. For a while, at least.

It has been reckless and stupid of him to come by today. Marco has been right, with Wally having regained some interest in him, it would be just a matter of time till he finds out about his relationship to the Rogues, and this wouldn’t end well for either of them.

As if he can hear his thought, Len looks over to him. A guarded expression on his face.

Barry realizes then, that he needs some fresh air.

It is about twenty minutes later that Len finds him next to the half rotten wooden stairs that lead up to the old farm house, watching the cloudy sky with a sombre look on his face. The air is cold and dry, but Barry is pretty sure that a storm would be come along within the next two hours. There is this tingling sensation all over his skin he usually gets before one.

Barry glances briefly to Len when he stops next to him. He isn’t sure whether he wants to talk right now.

With a soft and tired sigh, he pulls his legs a bit closer and lowers his head, so that his forehead is resting on his knees. He is sitting at the dirt ground as crouching is something he can hardly keep up for more than a few seconds due to his knees and hips, and while the stairs may have seemed like the better solution at first, he knows from experience that the wood is made up of nothing but splinters anymore.

“You found yourself a cozy spot.” Len finally says after he has studied the sky above them for a moment.

Barry snorts and hates how he feels more like crying than laughing. He takes a deep breath and looks up to him. “Th-there’s a l-lot m-more d-d-dirt around sh-should y-you w-want t-to j-join m-me.”

Len smirks and sits down next to him with a small grunt.

They fall silent after that, and Barry reaches for the ground with a hand and starts to circle his fingers across the dirt in an absent minded gesture. It feels cool and hard under his fingers.

“Marco’s been pissed for weeks.” Barry glances to Len next to him, who is not looking at him but over to where the silo is. He notices how grim his expression is once again.

“At me,” Len adds and meets his eye with a crooked smirk. “They’re all fed up with working for Amunet and they fault me for it.” He rubs a hand over his face before he takes a deep breath and exhales it slowly. “Not that they don’t have a point there.”

Len’s brown eyes seek his out again then. “Marco’s anger has nothing to do with you. You were just
unlucky enough to give him a target to get rid of some of it.”

“Y-yeah…” A cool breeze picks up and Barry shivers slightly. He knows that Len is probably right and that Marco just needed to get some steam off. Unfortunately, he also knows that the Latin has had a very valid point.

“H-he’s r-right, th-though… I’m n-not s-safe t-to b-be ar-round y-you r-right n-now…”

Maybe not ever, for either of them. He doesn’t speak this part, though. Len most likely is well aware of it as it is.

His friend watches him with one of these unreadable looks he gets when he is pondering something that bothers him and he doesn’t really want to touch upon it.

“Yeah,” Len finally says. “He is.”

Despite what Barry has said before, it is still a bit unexpected to hear Len agree like this without trying to at least partly deny it. Then again, it is Len, and if this man is anything, it is someone who doesn’t beat around the bush.

Barry frowns and nods as he tries not to feels so damn disappointed and miserable.

“It doesn’t mean that we won’t see each other again,” Len tells him seriously. He has obviously picked up on his unhappy mood.

Not really feeling like talking and not sure that he even could with how his throat is closing up on him again, Barry simply nods quietly and turns his gaze to the dirt in front of him. He can feel the other man’s eyes on him and imagines what he has to look like to him. Usually, he tries not to think about his appearance, he knows how unattractive he is, but right now he can’t help it.

There is no reason for Len to want him around, he doesn’t bring anything to the table regarding the Rogues. He is an ex-cop, he has presumably done horrible crimes, and he is a very odd fellow to begin with due to his stammer and jumpiness.

Frustrated, he pushes his fingers through his hair and grits his teeth.

Why did Len let him stay around? He knows that he has been the Flash once, he can’t be not bothered by it, can he? Why hasn’t he said anything to the others so far?

Barry swallows and takes a deep breath. He feels once again how his skin starts to itch and seemingly becomes too small for him. It is such a disturbing feeling.

“For fuck’s sake,” Len sounds both concerned and exasperated, and meets his eyes with a frown. “We’ll take care of the business with Amunet, and then we’ll see what we can do about the Flash—”

“N-no! Y-you’ll n-not d-do anyth-thing ab-bout h-him,” Barry interrupts more alarmed than angry. “Y-you w-won’t h-hurt h-him, L-Len!”

For a second, Len seem about ready to punch something again. He doesn’t, though, and instead pinches the bridge of his nose before he exhales a humorless chuckle. “You know the rules, Red, no killing any damn speedsters. So stop being such an idiot.”

Barry frowns and looks away. “D-don’t c-call m-me th-that, L-Len. P-please.”

They fall silent again after that and for the next couple of minutes they sit together quietly in the
sallow light of the cloudy afternoon.

“D-do y-you… d-do y-you r-regret…” The words are out of his mouth before Barry really is sure whether he wants to speak them. He can’t bring himself to finish the question, though.

What he is feeling right now, next to the hurt and uncertainty, is hard to grasp, even for him. Barry sighs softly and covers his eyes with one hand.

Len stays quiet, even though he thinks that he probably understands what he means, what he wanted to ask.

A touch to his wrist causes Barry to jump slightly, and he looks over to the man next to him.

“No,” Len says in a low and firm voice, and while he looks grim, there is also a clear warmth to the way he is watching him now. “I don’t.” The fingers, that loosely grasp his wrist, give it a slight squeeze. “I never have.”

After they have watched it other for a long moment, Barry nods slowly and turns back to the area in front of them. “Th-thank y-you.”

Len stays quiet, and they fall back into a more relaxed silence.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

It is ending on a rather down note, and I hope you won't get too upset about Barry and Len being separated again. It won't last too long, though. ;)

The next two chapters will be a bit on the lighter side, we will get to see some more Axel and James, and after that we start with a part of the story I've been looking forward for a while now. ;)

Let me know what you think!

Till next time! <3
An Unexpected Kindness and One That Is Not

Chapter Summary

Barry hates being sick, especially when his recover seems to take forever. It helps him to realize something, though.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my lovely beta Obsessed! Thank you for taking the time to do so despite your busy schedule, sweetheart! <3

Early December 3rd year

Max Mercury visits Barry on the first Saturday in December.

It is close to half past six in the afternoon and Barry initially thinks that it would be either Eddy or Mary passing for one of their check-ups on him now that he is trying to fight off the flu. He has been bedridden for the last couple of days due to being unlucky enough to get infected at work.

It hasn’t really come as a surprise to him due to the current flu epidemic that is going around and how he usually tends to catch about anything. He probably has caught it from one of their customers or many of the other sick people he has met while travelling to or from work.

Mrs. Ming has told him to not to worry and assured him that it would be fine for him to stay home. She sounded much more concerned about him having gotten sick than having him not around for the rest of the week. When he tried to assure her that he would be certainly able to come back to work on Friday, she told him no uncertain terms that she wants him to stay at home and in bed till at least next week.

“Jamie is around right now, anyway,” she added when he was about to protest. “He will be able to help me out till you are feeling better again, my dear. It is just a pity that you aren’t around, he actually told me that he was looking forward to seeing you again. You seem to have left a very good impression on him.”

The warmth was audible in her voice, and he remembered the Asian man whom he hadn’t really thought of a lot over the last couple of months.

Briefly, as he opens the door, he wonders whether he would maybe have the possibility to see his employer’s grandson sometime before he once again has to go for one of his many business trips. James seems to be a really nice guy as it is, and he doesn’t give off any vibes that cause him to feel wary around him, which hardly ever happens with other men.

All the thoughts of Mrs. Ming’s grandson are gone when his look falls upon his late afternoon visitor. A heavy feeling sets into his stomach, and he can’t fight off a slight panic that briefly grabs
hold of him.

Wally’s visit comes to his mind, and he wonders whether Max has passed by to give him another reminder that he had no business to be around Bart, no matter that he didn’t chose so to begin with.

“Hallo, Barry,” the older man finally says after a rather tense moment of silence has passed between both of them during which Barry has just stared at his unexpected visitor with visible alarm. “I’m sorry for bothering you at this time, but I was hoping that we could talk?”

Max’s smile is clearly meant to be reassuring, as if he was trying to tell him that he is no threat. He wonders what the other man thinks, whether he has picked up on how nervous he is. It’s likely, he can feel how his palms become clammy as he starts to grow a bit sick again. “S-sure,” he answers quietly in a raspy voice and steps aside to make Max some room. He notices the frown with which the other man is studying him now and tries to ignore it.

Max walks into his living area far enough for Barry to close the door before he turns to him again. “I don’t want to bother you if you don’t feel well. I can come back another time.”

It is a bid odd, to think that the other man would care about this. Barry only shrugs and tells him that it is fine. “I-I j-just c-caught m-myself a b-bug.”

He smiles faintly before he makes his way back over to the table. Max follows him after a moment.

“Y-you w-want a c-cup of c-coffee or t-tea?” There is already a can of freshly prepared tea but it is mucolytic and rather bad tasting. He doesn’t think his guest would appreciate it.

“Thank you but you don’t need to bother,” Max tells him and nods to the tap. “A glass of water is fine.”

Barry nods, silently happy about his choice as it likely means that he doesn’t intend to stay long. He tells him to take a seat while he goes to fetch him his drink.

“Thanks.” Max accepts the water a minute later, and Barry takes a seat opposite to him. “Since when have you been sick?”

“C-couple o-of d-days.” It is a strange thing for the other man to ask, and Barry wonders whether this somehow could get him in trouble. “You’ve been staying home from work?”

This causes him to bristle slightly, and he shoots Max a wary look.

What is it to him? Why would he ask him about this?

Not knowing the other man’s motives makes him nervous, but he knows that he has Eddy and Mary who can attest to him having been home during the days he kept from work. The notion is a bit comforting, at least.

“Y-yes b-but I’ll b-be b-back on M-Mond-day.”

Max smiles at him, a strangely sad smile that fits the strangely sad expression in his eyes, and

Barry realizes that he wants the other man gone. He doesn’t need his pity. His or anybody else’s. As if they have any right to pity him.

“I wasn’t trying to imply that I thought you are up to something,” Max explains. “I was just curious.”

Feeling angry and very uncomfortable all of a sudden, he only nods quietly and turns his gaze to the
mug in front of him that holds his tea. As if on cue, a coughing fit overcomes him out of nowhere, and it takes the next minute to get his breathing under control again. He hates how his lungs are still burning, and while they are doing much better already, he knows that the persisting pain means that he should not go back to work in just another two days. He hopes that his health will make an unexpected leap of improvement when he stays in bed the whole day tomorrow and keeps drinking a lot of this disgusting tea.

When he looks over to Max again, he doesn’t like who the other man is studying him right now.

“That sounds rather bad. Have you seen a doctor?”

Barry fights down the urge to snort. It would be mean and uncalled for, and Max is obviously concerned about him. Why he would be is unclear to him, but he can appreciate the sentiment.

“I’m d-doing f-fine,” he insists even though his raspy voice betrays him.

Max frowns at him in a way he is sure is similar to how the older man looks at Bart when the boy is especially stubborn again and insisting on something that is obviously not true. The thought is somehow amusing despite everything.

“Is it because of the money?” Max makes it sound like a question, but Barry doesn’t doubt that he already knows the answer. All the faint humour he felt just a second ago is gone again without a trace.

“I’m d-d-doing f-fine,” he repeats curtly and tries to keep another coughing fit at bay.

“Barry,” starts Max. “If you need financial help you just need to say something.”

Barry realizes that he has started to grit his teeth when a sharp pain flashes through his jaw joints. He shoots the other man an angry glare and can’t help but hate him a little bit for telling him this to his face.

“T-t-to wh-whom?” He starts to cough again but is able to get it under control again before it can turn into another fit. His skin starts to itch due to how the other man is now watching him now. Like he is a sad excuse of a person you have to feel sorry for.

“To Jay or me,” Max replies. “I know that you probably think that you are on your own but-”

“I’m on m-my own,” he hisses and another cough overcomes him. He tries to fight it down again but fails and the burning sensation in his lungs causes his eyes to tear up.

It takes the urge to cough about a minute to subside again, and it leaves his chest and throat hurting and his temples throbbing. The lukewarm tea helps to relieve the pain a bit and, after taking a couple of small sips, he turns his gaze to his couch, as he doesn’t want to meet the other man’s eyes anymore.

Barry doesn’t understand why he is so angry all of a sudden, or why Max’s intent to help him bothers him so much. He really doesn’t care, to be honest, he just wants to lay down. It isn’t as if the other man meant anything but trouble, and now, once again unable to contact Len or any of the other Rogues, he is left unexpectedly vulnerable and lonely. Not that his friends would have been a particularly big help in this matter.

“I’m really sorry that you believe that,” Max says after another minute of tense silence has gone by between them. He sounds honest, and Barry has to stomp down on the urge to smile grimly because it would be disrespectful.
“It isn’t the case, though,” the older man goes on, and Barry closes his eyes tiredly, before he leans back against his chair. “You aren’t.”

“W-why h-have y-you c-come h-here, M-Max?” Barry cuts him off without looking at him, and he can feel the itching and burning sensation start at the back of his throat again. He isn’t patient enough right now to be polite. In a way, he thinks bitterly, politeness is worth a damn where he is right now, not with these people.

There isn’t a replay for a couple of moments, and he wonders whether Max is growing angry with him. It is then that he notices how little he is actually bothered by it. The exhaustion he feels right now has latched onto his bones, and he doesn’t care what the other man thinks of him, he just doesn’t want to listen to this nonsense anymore.

It hurts.

“You look tired,” Max remarks, and Barry once again doesn’t understand why he sounds so calm. He tries not to think about Wally’s last visit, but the memory is like a cold shadow that follows him around in the back of his mind.

“I think, it will be better for me to pass by another time, when you are feeling better.”

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and nods. His eyes have started to itch, and he can’t bring himself to look over to Max. He suddenly feels so close to losing it again, and he really doesn’t want to embarrass himself in front of the older man.

Max hesitates briefly before he gets up. “Thank you for the water.” He sounds sincere as he thanks him, and there is still this note of concern in his voice that confuses and upsets Barry all the same.

“Y-you’re w-welc-come,” he says quietly and gets up to bring his guest to the door. He wishes he never came to begin with. The throbbing behind his temples has spread to his forehead, and he just wants to lay down again.

“Get some rest,” Max advices, and while Barry is still not meeting his eyes, he has the uncomfortable feeling that he is watching him now with a sombre and concerned expression.

“I-I w-will,” he croaks, and it is like a weight is lifted from him when the other man is finally gone again.

With a growing headache and a queasy feeling stomach, Barry decides that it is time to go to bed and lock the rest of the world out for tonight.

He goes to quickly brush his teeth, as he has been having a rather bad taste in his mouth due to his coughing for the whole afternoon already, and washes his face. The cool water feels good on his skin, and he scoops another handful of water onto his once again too warm forehead before he moves the still wet but cool hand to the back of his neck to cup it. A soft groan escapes him, and he feels his stomach sink due to the realization that he is running a fever again.

Barry is pretty sure that he can his former guest thank for it. The brief anger he feels over this quickly subsides again, and he is left feeling exhausted and pretty much embarrassed for how hostile he has been before. Max obviously hasn’t meant to make him feel uncomfortable but his concern has rubbed him the wrong way, similar to how it has been with Jay. Maybe more so, now that he is feeling like crap anyway.

The notion that these men could now bother to worry about him while they let him rot in the Heights is upsetting, and while he knows that it is stupid, on a level he cannot afford to indulge in, he doesn’t
want to accept this sudden kindness either.

Why now?

With another soft groan, he rubs his still cool and moist hand over his face once more and straightens up to leave the bathroom.

Barry has just walked over to the kitchen table to pick up his mug of tea when there is another knocking at the door.

He isn’t sure why, but he isn’t all that surprised when he finds Max standing in front of it once more when he opens it a moment later. Briefly, he wonders whether he could have forgotten anything but seeing that the other man hasn’t brought anything with him other than his jacket, it is rather unlikely.

Then, he notices the white plastic bag in Max’s right hand and his stomach drops.

“Th-th-that’s n-not n-nec-c-” His voice breaks off when it grows too coarse, and he starts to cough again. His lungs hurt significantly worse than they have just about twenty minutes ago, and he can’t get rid of the feeling that he isn’t able to take deep enough breaths. It is like yesterday all over again, and he feels the sheer frustration that comes with this realisation nearly smothering him for a second.

“The epidemic that is going around right now has already gotten people in the hospital,” Max points out as soon as his coughing has subsided again. “Do you really want to take a chance on this turning into an outright pneumonia?”

Barry knows that he is right and rubs his forehead while he studies the half-visible drugstore logo on the white bag that is complete unfamiliar to him. He wonders where the other man has picked this up, and his skin starts to itch again at the notion that he could have zipped over to the other site of the twins with still enough time to spare to come back in the time he has been gone.

“I’ll p-pay y-you b-back,” he insists and meets Max’s eyes stubbornly. He knows that it would be idiotic to refuse the medicine, not just because he is worried about not being able to go back to work on Monday, but because he fears that this really could turn into something worse and more serious. Still, he is not going to be a freeloader, and he doesn’t want him to think so either.

“I know.”

This catches him off-guard, and his unhappy frown turns into an expression of surprise and uncertainty.

“You can pay me back when you have the money together,” Max goes on with a slight smile, and hands Barry the bag who accepts it somewhat gingerly. “I’ve got you a coughing syrup and something against the fever and your sinusitis as well as some vitamin pills. They can’t hurt around this time of the year, but the best medicine against the flu is still a lot of rest and hot liquids.”

Barry, still feeling somewhat dumbfounded, not sure how to repay this display of kindness.

The other man didn’t need to do this.

“Th-thank y-you,” he rasps quietly after a tense and somewhat uneasy moment passed between them. He glances down to the bag in his hands and tries to not feel so damn unsettled and touched by this.

“Of course.” There is this sadness again the way Max is looking at him, but Barry is no longer sure whether there is really also the pity present he thought he could make out so clearly before.
“Just catch some sleep and get better. I’ll pass by in a couple of days again.”

Again, Barry only nods quietly and watches Max leave. He stays there, at the open door for a bit longer before he closes it again and decides to make use of the medicine he has just received.

***

Barry finds out that trying to will yourself healthy is an entirely hopeless endeavor.

Monday comes and goes, and he is still sick. At least, his lungs start to stop hurting on Tuesday, and he is able to breathe without pain again and thus finally really catch up on some sleep.

Mrs. Ming is as understanding as before and tells him to just rest and get better. He is so damn glad to have her as an employer but can’t help but feel bad for forcing her grandson to give up his holiday to take care of his work.

“You keep making such an unhappy face and it will get stuck,” Eddy remarks as he inspects the soup that is currently cooking on the small stove in Barry’s kitchen.

The smell of it is nice and spicy, and he is curious about how it will taste even though he doesn’t feel particularly hungry.

“You are still looking like a sad clown, dude,” his friend points out after he has glanced over to him. “You sure that is the set of mood you wanna be in? You do know that it will speed up your recovery if you at least try not to be Johnny Rain Cloud, right?”

“I’m f-fine,” Barry grumbles and takes a sip from the cup of tea he has made himself before Eddy has come over a bit ago.

“Yeah, you look like life itself.”

Barry smiles slightly and decides that, while his friend can be quite a pain at times, it is good to have him around.

“Well, look at that, there seems to be still hope for you.” Eddy hits the spoon he has used to stir the soup against the edge of the pot with a soft cling and lays it down next to the heating plate. He turns down the heat a bit and walks over to the table to take a sit opposite to Barry.

“How is your head doing? Still feeling like something tries to burst its way out of it?” The other man only chuckles when he receives a clearly not amused glare in response.

“Come on, you’ve been miserable for days now. You’re already doing better, appreciate that,” Eddy advises with a smirk and takes a sip of his beer.

“I’m ap-preciating it,” Barry mutters before another light coughing fit suddenly takes hold of him and leaves him pretty much gasping for air afterwards. He notices the concerned way his friend is studying now.

“It’s f-f-fine,” he assures him, still somewhat out of breath and gets up to get the medicine Max brought over a couple of days ago.

“Stay put,” Eddy says as he gets up as well. “I’ll get it.”

Barry thinks about protesting but decides against it. He feels a bit lightheaded and weak on his legs, and actually appreciates his friend’s help.
“You know,” his friend starts as he comes back with the medicine. “You would likely be on your feet again and not in debt to that guy if you’d told me that you were not doing better. I would have grabbed you this stuff days ago.”

“I w-was d-doing b-better.”

“Like hell you were.” Eddy looks seriously annoyed for a second before he huffs and chuckles again. “Stubborn idiot.” He puts the bottles in front of Barry on the table.

“I get it,” he says and meets his eyes with a crooked smile that doesn’t seem all that happy. “I do, really. You don’t want those fucks to get involved with your life and cause you any more pain. It’s the smart thing to do, surprisingly so for you.”

His friend barks a laugh at his slight scowl and bumps his knuckles lightly against his shoulder. “I’m just speaking out of experience, Bar, and you know it.” His expression becomes more serious then. “Me and Mary are a completely different story, though, okay?”

“Y-yeah,” Barry agrees quietly and turns his gaze back to the mug in front of him. Meeting Eddy’s eyes is difficult, he doesn’t want the other man to think that he doesn’t believe him.

He does. Really.

The problem is just that he has to think of Len and the others, and how they are once again gone. They have hardly been good people or people it is healthy for him to be around, but they have allowed him to stay, similar to how Eddy and Mary allow him to stick around in their lives despite how messed up he is.

Now they are gone and while Len told him that he would see them again, it is hard for him to really believe it.

People usually leave, for one reason or another. He knows this, and it is a daunting thing to take place because it hurts every single time, no matter how much he tries to tell himself that it is to be expected.

“Hey,” Eddy interrupts his thoughts, and Barry looks up when he cups his shoulder, an unusual gesture for his friend to do, who usually isn’t much for touching either. “Enough with these long faces. My amazing soup will be done in about ten minutes, and I expect you to appreciate and enjoy it.”

Despite the heavy feeling in his chest, Barry smiles. “S-sure.”

“It will also help you with your flu. It is spicy enough to get your temperature up, makes you sweat all the nasty stuff right out of your body,” Eddy explains before he grins rather obnoxiously and adds. “Only drawback is that it burns both ways like a bitch.”

Barry pulls a face which causes his friend to laugh outright.

After a slight squeeze to his shoulder, Eddy pulls his hand back and makes his way over to the stove again to look after the soup. He grabs a spoon out of the drawer and tells Barry to catch it before he throws it to him.

“For your coughing syrup,” he says with a nod to one of the bottles in front of him.

“Th-thanks.” Barry smiles when Eddy winks at him and thinks about telling that his presence is probably helping a lot more than any the medicine in front of him ever could. It does sound rather
cheesy even in his own head, though, and he fears that his friend wouldn’t appreciate the words, so he keeps quiet.

Later, after they ate, and Barry is sipping a glass of milk because the soup has been ridiculously hot, which amuses Eddy even though he doesn’t comment on it, they sit down on the couch.

With a full stomach, Barry can feel how the drowsiness catches up on him again, and he appreciates it when his friend makes him enough space that he can lay down with his knees tucked up. The spices of the soup are already doing their work as he feels uncomfortably hot and can feel how he breaks out in a light sweat once more.

“The magic of ginger and lots of pepper.” Eddy grins as he pulls out the familiar worn out package that holds his deck of cards they usually use to play Sixty-Six. He gets the cards out and starts to shuffle them. It is either that or smoking for the other man when he wants to have something to do with his hands during calm times like this one.

They fall in a companionable silence after that. It is nice having his friend around, and Barry feels how he starts to grow drowsy again. He is just about to nod off when he hears Eddy start to hum a low melody, and he forces his eyes open again, slightly frowning.

For the next few minutes he listens to the noise of the cards being shuffled around and watches his friend who keeps making small tricks with his deck. He starts to drift off in his own mind, and it takes him a moment to notice when Eddy starts to hum to himself.

An odd sensation starts to spread in Barry’s belly, and he feels how the back of his throat seems to swell up a bit while the familiar itching sensation of his eyes returns. It isn’t exact sadness that overcomes him, more like nostalgia and a nearly forgotten believed longing.

“Hey, you’re alright?” Barry blinks and turns back to Eddy, who has stopped to play with the cards and is now watching him with a concerned frown. “Is your head bothering you again?”

“No.” He coughs lights as his voice sound close to giving out again and quickly brushes his fingers over his eyes before he averts his gaze to the ceiling above them. “N-no… th-the m-melody y-you hum-med, d-do y-you kn-know it’s n-name?”

This question seems to catch Eddy off-guard, and he gives him an odd look before seems to consider it. After a moment, he shrugs and shakes his head.

“No, it is just something...” He breaks off and frowns again. Barry hesitates a bit before he slowly nods. “M-my m-mom used t-to h-hum it t-to m-me wh-when I g-got ups-set... I th-think.”

Eddy gives him a funny look and snorts. “You think?”

“I w-was v-very s-small, b-back th-then,” he explains and can’t help but sound defensive as he does so. He can’t even remember the face of his own mother, nor does he know her real name, and it unsettles him to this day.

Still, he can remember other things that nearly make up for it. The color and texture of her hair, how it felt under his fingers, her laugh and the sound of her humming this melody to him when he got upset. Most of all, he remembers her smell. Sometimes, not often, he smells it in his dreams, in the good ones. It is always calming and makes him feel safe.

“You lost your mother early?” This question causes Barry to freeze, and he keeps staring at the ceiling above him without answering. Eddy studies him now, he can feel it, and he regrets that he had to start this topic to begin with. He should have kept his mouth shut.
Now there are just going to be uncomfortable questions about things he doesn’t want to think of.

“I lost them early.” Surprised, Barry looks over to his friend who is watching him now with an unusual somber expression. “I don’t know the name of the melody, but it was hummed to me when I was also very small. I can’t remember by whom anymore, though.” Eddy gives him a faint smile that doesn’t reach his eyes and turns back to shuffle his cards. Barry lets his gaze move back to the ceiling, and he takes a deep breath before he exhales it slowly.

“I d-don’t kn-know m-my p-par-rents, n-not r-really… th-there are j-just b-bits and p-pieces of a m-man and a w-woman, b-but I’ve b-been v-very y-young w-when th-they… l-left.”

The shuffling of the cards stops and for a long moment they are both quiet.

“They left?”

Barry hums in agreement and closes his eyes. “I th-think s-so, at l-least everyb-b-body s-said s-so. Th-that d-day is k-k-kind of h-hazy in m-m-my m-mind.”

It has been raining, a lot, but it wasn’t cold. Cars has been driving by and a dog has been barking somewhere close. He has been confused and afraid, and then the old lady in the blue gown and the big glasses came and started to ask him questions he didn’t know any answers to. She called the police then and after that the memories become hazier and hazier.

“They abandoned you?” There is a mixture of disbelief and horror in Eddy’s voice as he asks that. Barry can’t help but think that that a man like his friend really shouldn’t be surprised by how life works at time. He shrugs and swallows around the lump in his throat.

“D-don’t kn-know f-for s-sure, I w-would r-rather th-think th-that it w-wasn’t l-like th-that bb-but… r-realit-ty c-can b-be r-rather h-harsh at t-times.”

It doesn’t surprise him that his eyelashes are wet when he brushes over them again. He doesn’t like to think about his parents or anything related to his childhood. He has been an idiot to touching upon this at all.

“Sorry, man,” Eddy says quietly, and he does really sound it. Barry feels how his throat closes up for a second, and he has to take a couple of deep breaths while he presses his palm over his eyes. Thankfully, the urge to cry passes just after a couple of moments.

“You should try to catch some shuteye,” his friend suggests somewhat hesitantly, and Barry can’t bring himself to look at him again.

“Y-yeah.” He agrees quietly and tries to think of nothing.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it!

I’ve to correct something I wrote after the last chapter, there will be another three chapters before the part of the story will start that I’ve been mentioning before. I kind of forgot two of the upcoming chapters the last time around.

The next one will have Mrs. Ming’s grandson James in it again, the one after that is
another one with Max that will go a bit more into what happened the night Iris died, and the one after that is sorta about a family (?) dinner (and a bratty Axel :).

Till next time! <3
The Spaghetti Monster and The God of Mochi (or James’ questionable humor)

Chapter Summary

Barry and James have a small indoor picnic.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is now edited by the lovely Obsessed! Thanks for finding the time to go over it, sweetheart! <3

December 3rd year

“H-here’s y-your ch-change, M-Mrs. Donovan.”

“Thank you, Barry.” The old woman gives him a kind smile as she accepts the money. She is one of their regulars, a friend of Mrs. Ming, who is always friendly and polite towards him. “You have a nice day, my boy.”

“Y-you t-too, m-mam.”

She turns to the little dog next to her. “Come, Jake, let’s go home and make you a special treat for your birthday.”

The little pet that is most likely a senior in its own regard, has obviously no idea what she is talking about but still happily wags its tail and follows her out of the store.

Barry watches them go with a faint smile before he turns his attention to the other two customers that are currently present. Two teenager boys, a bit older than Axel, and he knows from experience that it is better to keep a close eye on them when they stick around as long as these two have so far.

It also isn’t a good sign that they keep glancing in his direction every other second as if to catch the right moment when he has his attention on something else.

“Hey.” The voice catches Barry completely off-guard, mostly because he has totally forgotten about James being around today.

He feels his face grow hot as soon as the yelp of surprise has left his mouth and his embarrassment only grows worse when he notices the amused looks of the teens who haven’t missed his reaction.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” James comes over from the doorway that leads to the back area of the store. He has been upstairs, visiting his grandmother for the last couple of hours as she is currently having another cold and is not feeling too well.
“It’s f-fine, I’m j-just w-way t-too j-jumpy.” Barry gives the other man a wry smile before he turns his attention back to the teenagers. Both don’t seem all too happy with him keeping supervising them so attentively, and one of them actually scowls at him.

The static of the radio, which has hardly been working at all today, gives way to the news and Barry picks up something about Lex Luthor’s president candidacy but doesn’t pay too much attention to it as he watches one of the teen’s pick up a pack of batteries for the third time within the last minute.

“Well!” This time it isn’t only Barry who is startled by James’ voice. “If you two decide to steal anything, you can be sure that you’ll spent the rest of today at the KCPD.”

Both teenagers eye James up for a moment. They seem to consider whether it is worth to try their luck or not but, other than Barry, James is obviously in good physical shape and most likely would be able to catch up with them should they try something stupid. James is also quite tall, nearly six feet by what Barry can tell, and while he doesn’t look outright threatening in any kind, he certainly isn’t someone people would want to pick fights with.

The teens seem to come to the same conclusions. After exchanging a brief look with each other, the one with the batteries, throws them back into the basket with the rest and shoots both of the adults a dirty glare before he and his friend leave.

“Nice fellows,” James remarks drily before he shoots him a grin and puts a bag onto the counter Barry hasn’t noticed him holding so far.

“Th-thank y-you.”

“No problem.” The other man takes out two elegant looking boxes. “I’ve been helping out at the store quite a lot when I was younger. I know what kind of problem those brats can be.”

He pushes one box over to Barry and hands him two chop sticks that look nothing like the cheap wooden ones he usually gets along with his food when he buys take-out. They are elegant looking, of a dark wood and with some delicate engravings at the top.

Before Barry has the chance to ask him what this is about, James explains with a slightly sheepish smile. “We still haven’t had the dinner I promised you.”

At his surprised and slightly alarmed look, the other man quickly goes on. “I mean, for helping me with laying the parquet floor in my apartment. I promised you dinner, remember?”

Not sure what else to do, as Barry does indeed remember, he only nods and turns his gaze to the two boxes which he recognizes now as Japanese bento boxes. “S-so y-you b-brought me l-lunch instead?”

Another sheepish smile crosses James’ lips, and he nods. “Yeah, I hope you don’t mind. I know that this comes kind of as a surprise, but I still can take you out for lunch or dinner.”

“N-no, th-that’s f-fine. Th-this is m-more th-than enough,” Barry assures him and can’t help but feel a bit uneasy by the notion that James could take him out to dinner to some probably rather fancy restaurant.

The idea of a homemade lunch is much more appealing to him, anyway, and it is nice to think that the other man actually put the effort into making something to eat for him.

James nods to the bento box in front of Barry. “I prepared it this morning, and while I’m no chef, I think that it turned out pretty nicely.” He gives him a rather pleased smile then, and Barry can help
It is made of a matt black material with red Chinese characters at its side and has smooth round edges. It is about eight inches long, four inches wide, and four inches in height, with a two-inch-wide band of red cloth wrapped around it, which also has a couple of characters stitched on. Barry tentatively touches it and shoots a questioning look to James.

“Open it,” the other man encourages as he pulls his own lunch closer but doesn’t open it yet as as he seemed much more interested in watching him.

After hesitating briefly, Barry does slips the red band off the lunch box before pulling the top part off which feels surprisingly smooth under to his touch.

Barry laughs in surprise when he sees what the other man has prepared and can’t but stare in wonder at the dish for a long moment.

The bottom of the box, or at least the first section as he assumes there is another one below, is covered by fresh green lettuce leaves on which a number of cute Onigiri has been put. They are mostly shaped in form of cat and bear heads, and are all smiling up at him, partly winking, partly making other funny faces, and Barry doesn’t miss the eye for detail the other man put into every single one of these little creations. In between the rice balls, there are small octopuses made of cut and fried sausages which also got funny and happy expressions, along with a number of vegetables, some boiled like broccoli and some raw like tomatoes and carrots.

It looks incredible, and he makes a small appreciating noise after he has taken everything in.

“Th-that l-looks amazing.” Barry shoots James an impressed look and chuckles when he notices that the other man seems to actually preen in pride for a moment at his praise. “D-did you p-prepare th-this all b-by y-yourself? Th-this h-had t-to t-take f-forever, n-not th-that it d-didn’t t-totally p-pay off.”

James shrugs but doesn’t seem able to get rid of the grin on his face. “Preparing this kind of Bento lunches is actually a hobby of mine. It helps me to relax.”

Barry hums in understanding. He imagines that, in a way, this is probably quite similar to him sketching when he wants to get his head free. Something you can do with your hands and, at the same time, be able to stop thinking and just let your mind calm down.

“There is actually a section below it as well,” James remarks. “You can just pull this one out.”

He does so and hums in appreciation once more when he sees that it holds a very appealing looking salad with shrimps, avocado, cocktail tomatoes, and cut cucumber. It looks delicious, and his stomach agrees with a low rumble that causes his cheeks flush in embarrassment.

James seems quite pleased by his reaction, though.

They stay behind the counter while eating lunch so that he can keep an eye on the store and take care of any customers passing by. Other than for a small group of construction workers that are currently redeveloping one of the older buildings close to the bus station that Barry uses every day, they are left to themselves for the next half an hour.

“Did you make onigiri yourself before?” James asks after they’ve talked a bit about how he created all the cutely shaped rice animals.

Barry, who is nibbling on one of the rice balls that look like the head of a Teddy bear, nods with a faint smile as he thinks back to his early adventures with Japanese cuisine. “Y-yes, b-but j-just s-
simple ones, you know, the ones in form of triangles.”

Asian food has always been his favourite. He is by no mean a picky eater, as long as there is food on his plate, he will eat it, but if he had the choice, he would probably choose it over other cuisines more often than not.

“Did you prepare them with fillings?”

“No… well, once with smashed avocado but it didn’t turn out so well and…” Barry swallows and shrugs. He shoots the other man a nervous glance.

Prison has come more or less between him and trying to improve his skills to prepare onigiri with fillings, and while Iris always found them interesting and handy as she could simply pick the rice up without any extra utensils, she had been hardly around towards the end, and he just couldn’t bother to prepare them for himself.

“I like the sweet filling,” James says after an uncomfortable silence has settled between them for too long. “Like red bean-paste and such.” He is leaning against the counter with his hip while he holds the box in one hand and uses his chopsticks with the other. He is now watching him with a thoughtful gaze, and Barry wonders what he is thinking about.

“You ever tried some of those?” James asks.

“No.” He did try different kind of Japanese sweets when he was over there a couple of times for some superhero business, but he never had the opportunity to try this sweet. “I tried mochi, though.”

The twinkle is back in the other man’s eyes, and he smiles. “I love mochis. You’ve no idea how much I adore to have them for dessert.” He chuckles and eats another piece of avocado before he goes on. “If I had the possibility to choose, I would definitively want to be reincarnated as one.” He sounds so earnest when he says this that Barry has to snort in amusement, for which he gets a mock-glare in return. “You doubt the amazingness of mochi?”

Barry chuckles and rolls his eyes. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“You better not.” James nods with fake seriousness. “Mochis deserve their own religion, like the flying spaghetti-monster.”

Barry lifts an eyebrow at that but doesn’t disagree. He himself likes the idea of the flying spaghetti-monster and what it stands for. It came up shortly after he had gone to prison, and he just learned about it after his release. He briefly wonders what James’ stance on this point it but he decides against asking. Politics and religions are two topics he doesn’t like to discuss in general and especially not during a meal with someone he hardly knows.

“How’s your art coming along?”

Surprised, he turns his attention back to James. “You mean my sketching?”

“Yeah.”

Barry shrugs and picks up some of his salad. “Fine, I guess.”

He can feel the other man’s gaze on him now and keeps his own at the bento box on the counter. He hasn’t been aware that James knew of his little hobby. His grandmother probably told him about.
“You’re pretty good.” Barry shoots his current companion a wary look and isn’t sure how to respond. He settles on another shrug.

James is frowning, Barry doesn’t have to look over to him to know so. People generally react to him that way when he tries to block them from starting a conversation on a topic he doesn’t feel comfortable about and they don’t get why.

“Do you take commissions?” James asks out of the blue, which is another question that catches him off-guard.

“Wh-what?” Barry looks back to James with a frown. He starts to get a bit irked that the other man doesn’t let the topic rest and is uncertain whether he is making fun of him or not.

“You see,” James explains and puts his lunch box down on the counter before he pulls his wallet out. “Lao lao’s birthday is in a month, and I’d love to get her something special.”

Confused and curious, Barry watches how the other man picks a small photo out of his wallet. He studies it fondly for a moment before he hands it over to him. Barry accepts it and sees that it is a seemingly very old black and white picture of a woman in traditional looking Chinese dress with a man next to her, wearing a Chinese suit. They both look very young, maybe late teens or early twenties, and while the young man looks very serious, the woman doesn’t seem able to stop smiling.

“Th-this is y-your g-grandmother and… g-grandf-father?”

“Yes,” James agrees, and Barry notices the fondness with which the other man is looking at the old photo in his hands. “It was taken on their wedding day, and it is the only picture my grandmother has left of grandfather.” He lifts his gaze then and meets Barry’s. “I’d like you to draw them in a bigger scale. I don’t care which medium, whether it’s with pencil, acryl, or such. I’d just like to have it in a size so that I can frame it and give it to lao lao as her birthday gift. You’d get paid, of course.”

This is quite an unusual request.

“Wh-why d-don’t you s-scan it and increase it in s-size. I’m p-pretty s-sure th-that w-would l-l-look m-much b-better, J-James. I’m n-not a p-professional, and I f-fear th-that y-you th-think I’m m-much more t-talented th-than I r-really am.” Barry really doesn’t want to disappoint the other man or his grandmother. The thought alone makes him feel uncomfortable as both of them have been so nice to him.

“I’ve seen you sketch before,” James points out, seemingly undeterred. “You may not be a professional, but you’re very good, and if I really wanted to get it done by someone who does this for a living, I’d have gone to them in the first place. My grandmother likes you, though, she thinks a lot of you, and I’m sure it would mean much more to her should it come from you. No matter whether it is perfect or not.”

The notion that he really could mean so much to Mrs. Ming is touching. Barry knows that she likes him, and that he, in a way, probably is kind of a surrogate grandson as James isn’t around very often. Still, he sometimes has a hard time to really believe it.

“So,” James asks somewhat hesitant after Barry has studied the photo quietly for a long moment. “Are you interested in doing it? I’ll definitely pay you for your time-”

“N-no,” Barry interrupts him, and when he notices how his face falls, he quickly explains. “I m-mean, I’ll d-do th-the d-drawing b-but you d-don’t n-need to p-pay m-me. It w-will j-just b-be p-pencil, th-though, I’m n-not r-really g-good w-with anyth-thing else.”
There are a couple of pictures he did with acryl so far, and he likes them well enough, but he isn’t really used to that medium and for a black and white picture pencil would be a better choice, anyway.

“Barry, I want to pay you for the effort you’ll put into this picture. I may not draw or paint, but I can imagine that it’s quite a time-consuming process, and I don’t want you to invest your free time into this and get nothing in return.”

The frown is back on James’ face as he tells him so, it doesn’t seem to be due to annoyance, though. He seems concerned instead, and Barry doesn’t like this much either.

“Y-your g-grandmother h-has b-been v-very k-kind t-to m-me f-for th-the l-last e-couple of years, l-long b-before I f-found anyb-body else, and I’ll n-never f-forget th-that,” he explains. “If th-this p-picture m-makes h-her h-happy th-then th-that’s all th-the r-reward I n-need, th-there isn’t m-much else I c-can d-do f-for h-her, anyw-way.”

Barry doesn’t miss how the other man seems about to protest for a moment but, thankfully, he decided against it. Instead, he rubs his forehead and briefly studies him with a rather sombre expression before he smiles. “Then, the present will be from both of us, and I’ll bring over some more bentos, just to make sure that you are up to the task.”

“Y-yes, b-because d-drawing is s-such an exhausting end-deavour.” Barry smiles.

“Of course it is,” James agrees readily and nods to the photo. “You can keep it while you do the picture.”

“I’ll t-take g-good c-care of it.”

The other man returns Barry’s serious expression with a smile of his own.

“I know you will. Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys liked it!

This is a comparably short chapter, I was thinking about putting this and the next one together, but it would have been over 10k words as the next chapter will be rather long, and I wanted to post you something this Sunday.

It is kind of an in-between chapter as it is on the shorter side and just focuses on James interacting with Barry, but James will get a bigger role as another supportive character in future, and I wanted to keep this part because it shows the beginning of it.

Next week will have Max return, and you’ll learn a bit more about what happened the night Iris died (and how the JLA handled the whole thing).

Till next Sunday! <3
Looking Back at It, I Would Much Rather Forget

Chapter Summary

Barry knows that the past is set in stone and that some things can’t be undone.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my the amazing Obsessed! Thank you, sweetie, I know that you’re super busy right now, and you still found the time to help me with this! <3

It is really due to her that I was able to upload today. I got super sick this Wednesday (sinusitis, my eternal enemy) and while I’m much better again, I don’t think that I would have been able to get this chapter up without her help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Max Mercury passes by at work one late evening in early December. It is just a couple of minutes before Barry generally starts to close the shop, and there are just two customers around, two elder sisters who are regulars of them.

Barry’s mood takes a dive for the worse as soon as he notices the other man, and he can’t help but start to feel nervous about his unexpected visit, as it seems rather unlikely that he would pass by to do some of his shopping.

Max nods when their eyes meet, a calm but slightly guarded expression on his face, and makes his way over to him.

“Is that a friend of yours?” Marina, the older of the two sisters, asks and adjusts her glasses as she watches Max come closer. She has picked up on his worried expression.

“An acquaintance,” Barry explains and quickly puts the rest of the older women’s shopping into the grocery bag for them.

“He looks good,” the other woman says with an appreciative small smirk.

“Edith,” Marina chides and shoots her sister an exasperated look. “Really, now.”

“We are old but that doesn’t mean that we can’t still enjoy looking,” Edith counters, clearly amused by her sister’s discomfort.

“You’re impossible,” the older woman huffs before she accepts the shopping bag from Barry with a kind smile. “Thank you, dear.”

“You’re v-very w-welc-come, M-Mrs. Asiemo.”

“Don’t worry, Barry, you’re still our favorite,” Edith assures him with a wink just as Max joins them. The annoyed glare she receives from her sister doesn’t seem to bother her in the
least.

“Good evening, then,” Marina says, and Barry isn’t sure how to feel about the dark look she gives Max in passing.

“Don’t overwork yourself, Barry,” Edith adds but has her eyes on Max, whom she gives a sugar-sweet smile and a gallivanting wink before following her sister. They are hardly three feet away when Marina starts to berate Edith for her ridiculous behavior.

Max watches the women leave with a mixture of surprise and amusement.

“You’ve quite interesting customers,” he remarks with a chuckle as he turns back to him.

“Yes, Edith can be quite unorthodox for her age,” Barry explains with an awkward smile. “But I think she’s mainly flirting with any man they come across to annoy her sister…”

His expression turns more serious then. “You came by to talk?”

Max’s grin dims and he nods. “Yeah, I was hoping that you’d have time after work.”

“You could have met up with me at my apartment,” points Barry out. The notion to talk with the other man anywhere other than his own flat doesn’t sit well with him. Neither does the thought that he would have to spend an awkward bus ride home with him.

“Your closing at nine tonight, and it will take you likely another half an hour till you are home,” Max gives him a tight smile, and he is obviously not sure whether it has been a good idea to come here either. “I thought I could quicken this a bit up for you by taking you back to your apartment after you’ve finished here.”

Barry’s heart nearly jumps up his throat as he hears this. The notion of Max using the speed force around him is unsettling enough on its own, but his offer of taking them back to his flat is just outright upsetting. He quickly shakes his head. “No, that’s fine!”

Even though there is a counter between them, he makes an alarmed step back, feeling crowded all of a sudden in the nearly empty store.

Max looks taken aback by his reaction and both stare at each other in a tense silence for a couple of seconds.

“Okay, no super-quick trip to your flat, then.”

Barry frowns in confusion. He hasn’t expected the other man to just let go of his plan like this.

“Can I at least give you a hand?” Max asks. He looks around the store meaningfully before he lifts an eyebrow.

“You don’t have to do that,” Barry argues while he makes his way around the counter to lock the store and change the sign. He feels like an ass for how anxious he is about not coming too close to the speedster as he does this. Max clearly picks up on it as well judging by his concerned expression.

“You can go to my apartment and wait there, I’ll hurry… or you could p-pass
b-by t-tomorrow.” Tomorrow, he has initially planned to spend most of the day at
Mary’s place, but he is sure she would understand. If he could choose, though, he would prefer for
Max not to pass by at all.

“It would be no trouble for me to wait.” Max sounds sincere as he says so, and Barry, who is still
standing at the now locked entrance, glances outside and wonders why nobody could pass by just as
he closes the shop to get some last minute shopping done as it is usually so often the case. He doesn’t
want to be alone with the other man. He doesn’t want to have him around in the first place. With a
quiet sigh, he reluctantly turns back to Max.

“L-look, I k-know, b-but you d-don’t h-have t-to. I’l-l f-fish up h-here, a-and th-then I’l-l m-meet you
at m-my f-flat.” Somewhat hopeful, he adds. “B-but you c-can p-pass b-by another t-time if you d-
don’t h-have m-much t-time t-tonight.”

Max hesitates for a moment. “No, I’ve got time, but it is alright if you prefer for us to talk tomorrow.”

It is tempting to agree, but Barry knows that he would want to talk about this tomorrow as little as he
does today. He would have some time to prepare and collect himself but, to be honest, he would
rather like to simply get it over with if he had to have this conversation.

“N-no, it’s f-fine… j-just l-let m-me f-finish here,” he says quietly, tiredly, and glances back to the
window. It seems so much more appealing to just keep standing at the closed door like this and look
outside into the dark streets. Maybe, if he ignores Max, he would leave. Then again, he would need
to use the door he is currently blocking to do so.

Barry smiles wryly at himself. He’s being ridiculous.

Finally, he turns reluctantly around to meet the other man’s gaze once more. He isn’t surprised by the
thoughtful and concerned way with which he is currently studied.

“You c-can g-go o-ver t-to m-my p-place, a-and I’l-l f-follow in a b-bit,” he tells him again.

“Or I could wait, and we take a taxi,” Max suggests and quickly adds, before Barry has the
possibility to protest. “This way we both would be able to finish this earlier, and I know that you
don’t want this to take any more time that it has to.”

There is no accusation in his voice as he says this. He doesn’t make it sound as if Barry should be
grateful that he actually took the time to come and listen. He just states the obvious.

Barry swallows nervously. His throat feels uncomfortably dry. “I’ll t-take th-the b-bus. I ddon’t h-
have t-the m-money f-for a t-taxi.”

Why lie about something that is so plainly obvious? He knows that Max is aware of his financial
situation. Why lie to try and save face? He is long past that point.

Max frowns, and Barry knows what he is about to say. He wishes he wouldn’t. He doesn’t need nor
want charity.

“I’ll pay for the taxi, I’m the one who has suggested it, after all.”

“Y-you d-don’t n-need t-to.” Barry rubs his forehead. He feels exhausted again. It occurs to him how
strange it is that some people seem to be like leeches, sucking his energy right out of him, just by
being there. A feeling of guilt overrides him just a second later when he realizes what an awful
thought that really is, especially due to Max having done nothing to earn it in the first place so far.
“I don’t mind,” the other man assures him and probably really doesn’t. To Max, the thirtysomething
bucks to Barry’s rundown neighborhood are most likely next to nothing. He remembers a time when
he wouldn’t have hesitated to spend such an amount either. He also remembers a time, when he was
still not of age, when it was for him just as it is now. When five dollars made the difference between
going to bed hungry or not.

Odd, how some things work.

“You can pay me back your share of the money later,” Max offers when Barry fails to response.

He chuckles humorlessly. “L-like f-for th-the m-medicine?”

Max doesn’t reply. They both know that it probably would take a long time before he would be able
to do so. He is trying to safe, he really does, but at the end of each month there is still hardly anything
left to put aside.

“Y-you’re r-right. L-Let’s t-take a t-t-taxi.” There is really no point of arguing about this. If he wants
them to take a taxi, why not?

This seems to surprise Max. He has clearly not expected him to suddenly give in like this. Barry
frowns and looks away. His eyes fall upon the security mirror that is fixed at the upper corner close
to the counter, and he feels a heaviness set into the pit of his stomach.

“C-come,” Barry says after he has turned his attention back to the other man. “I’ll s-show you w-where
you c-can w-wait w-while I f-finish up h-here.”

The notion of Max standing around and watching him while he works is uncomfortable, and while
he would much rather tell him to wait outside, he knows that it would be rude. The weather has been
cool und rainy for days, and while he may not particularly want the man around him, there is no
reason for him to be mean about it.

Still, Barry really doesn’t want him in the rather small back room either, in which he counts the
cashier money every day after work, and which he sometimes uses during his breaks.

Having Max around in general fills him with unease, but he tries not to think about it.

To his surprise and relief, Max follows him without trying to insist that they could speed all of this up
if he would just let him help.

It is about half an hour later that they leave the store through the backdoor. The taxi is already
waiting close to the bus-stop, and Barry pulls his coat closer around himself as they make their way
over to it. The rain has started to pick up again.

The drive home is quiet, neither of them speaks other than for giving the taxi-driver the address.
Barry watches the streets pass by, the people in them, who are going about their business on a
Saturday night. He feels sick.

It is a twenty-five-minute drive to his apartment building as the traffic runs surprisingly smooth
tonight, and they have luck with the traffic lights. Barry watches the city through the window as they
drive, trying to ignore that Max is next to him, all the while the dread he feels is steadily growing the
closer they get to his home.

When they finally arrive, he watches Max pay the man before he leads him inside.

“You w-want s-some c-coffee or tea?” Barry asks as he flips the lights of his living area on.
He takes his coat off and makes his way over to the kitchenette.

“Coffee would be nice.”

Barry nods and starts to prepare the hot beverage. He doesn’t look back to Max but tells him to take a seat at the table. His stomach feels uncomfortably queasy again.

The familiar and soothing aroma of coffee soon starts to fill the room. Usually, this late, Barry doesn’t drink any caffeinated drinks anymore, seeing that he has enough troubles falling asleep as it is. He is quite certain that he would get no sleep tonight anyway, regardless one or two cups of coffee, though, and he is just glad that he doesn’t have to go to work tomorrow.

“Thank you.” Max accepts his cup with a nod, and Barry takes a seat opposite to him.

“S-so, wh-what d-do y-you w-want t-to kn-know?” There isn’t really a point to beating around the bush, and while he knows that the other man wants to talk to him, he isn’t sure about what exactly. Part of him fears that it would be about Bart. About the day the boy spent with him at work. He knows that Max has to be at least a bit worried, so far he has been surprisingly friendly towards him, but he is still waiting for the second shoe to drop.

“How are you doing?”

This is such an odd and unexpected question, and Barry can’t help but frown. For a second he feels the urge to ask Mas how he thinks he is doing. It is a stupid question, it really is.

“I don’t mean to offend you, Barry.” Max sounds honest and worried, and it makes Barry’s skin itch. Maybe agreeing to talk to him tonight has been a bad idea. He doesn’t feel like he is in the best mood for it.

With a soft and exasperated huff, Barry rubs his right hand over his face. “N-no, I kn-know, I’m s-sorry.”

He frowns down at the cup in front of him and picks it up to take a sip.

“Wh-what d-do you w-want t-to t-talk about, th-though?” He meets Max eyes, and while he knows that the other man could lead this conversation whatever way he deems fit, he hopes that he would humor him and let his last question drop. There is really not much to say, after all.

He feels lonely and stupid. He is missing the Rogues, he is missing Len. Ridiculously much so, and there is no way in hell that he would tell him about this.

Max studies him for a long moment. It makes him feel uneasy, but he doesn’t avert his gaze.

“Can you tell me about that night?”

It has to show on Barry’s face that he has no idea what he is talking about as the older man goes on.

“About-,” Max hesitates and briefly looks like he is considering whether he really wants to say it or not. “About what happened the night Iris was killed.”

For a second Barry is pretty sure that this can’t be happening. He stares at the other man in disbelief and confusion before such an intense sensation of nausea overcomes him that he nearly groans. He promptly stands up.
“Barry-“

“I n-need t-to use h-the b-bathr-r-“ Barry breaks off. It doesn’t really matter; Max will get it. With that, he turns around and hurries into the only room in his flat that has an actual lock and makes sure to use it.

Against his fear, he doesn’t need to throw up, but he still lands heavy on his knees in front of the ceramic basin. His stomach feels like it is cramping up into a painful ball for a couple of seconds, but he tries to breathe through the worst of it. He just feels so damn light-headed and the ringing in his ears momentarily blocks out anything else.

He bows his head, lets his forehead rest on his arm he has on the toilet and tries to get these awful emotions let go of him. This is the beginning of a panic attack, he isn’t there yet, but he is familiar to how it feels and breathing threatens to become difficult despite his effort to keep calm.

God, he really doesn’t want to have one of these with Max next door. It is embarrassing and frustrating. He forces himself to push that thought away. His mind feels too agitated, and he turns his attention to the cool ceramic under his hands, to the hard ground under his knees and to how his chest is moving with every single breath. Keep everything away, just concentrate on what is there, nothing else. He knows how this works. He can do this. He is good at it, if he was good at anything, it is this. Just breathing, slow and deep.

The panic starts to retreat.

It is when the ringing in his ears starts to subside and he is able to get a real grasp of where he is, that he picks up that he is crying and shaking. He opens his eyes slowly. He feels mostly exhausted- Max is right there next to him. Barry freezes. It is then that he realizes that the other man is talking to him. How did he get in here? He locked…

“G-get th-the f-fuck aw-way f-from m-me.” He hisses and pushes himself away from the toilet to get some additional distance between them. This catches Max clearly off-guard.

“Barry, it’s alright, I-”

“G-get out! G-get out and w-wait th-there! I l-locked th-that d-damn d-d-door f-for a r-reason!” The anger is nearly smothering him. Why couldn’t he have control over anything in his life?

Max seems about to argue but thinks the better of it then and instead nods.

“Alright,” he gets up but doesn’t move his concerned gaze from him. “If you need any help, just call.”

Barry just glares back at the other man till he starts to move. His stomach makes a sickening lurch when he watches him walk through the door, as if there was nothing in his way. Wally comes to his mind, and he squeezes his eyes shut again.

The kitchen is quiet when he leaves the bathroom about fifteen minutes later. Max is sitting at the table and looks nearly painfully concerned. Barry doesn’t understand the man. Why does he care? Why now?

“S-sorry ab-bout th-that,” he says quietly as he sits down. “I d-didn’t expect you t-to b-bring th-this
up and… I’m s-sorry f-for h-how I r-reacted.” Max shakes his head.

“It is alright, I’m the one who needs to apologize. I shouldn’t have intruded like that,” he gives him a faint smile before his expression turns somber again. “You are feeling alright?”

No, he isn’t. There’s nothing he can do about it, though.

Barry nods and picks his cup up again. The coffee has turned cold by now. He studies the dark beverage quietly for a couple of minutes. Max doesn’t interrupt the silence.

“You w-want t-to t-talk about…” he frowns and looks up. “Wh-why?”

Max doesn’t answer immediately. He seems to think about what to say, and Barry can’t help but wonder what all of this is about. Iris died nearly a decade ago…

The other man sighs and closes his eyes for a moment. He lifts his hand rubs the bridge of his nose before he focuses on him again. His gaze is hard but not hostile.

“I want you to tell me what happened back then.”


“I haven’t been there, Barry,” Max points out.

“I’m s-sure B-Bruce m-made s-sure t-to r-record th-the es-sential outline o-of it all.”

Max frowns but doesn’t say anything to that. The way he looks at him makes it obvious that he thinks he is behaving a bit like a brat. Barry thinks so too, but he doesn’t care. He is angry and tired and not in the mood to be played with.

“Please, Barry, just humor me, then.”

“You th-think I enjoy th-thinking b-back t-to… t-to th-that n-night?” It hurts, how everybody assumes that this doesn’t affect him. Barry bits his lower lip and turns his gaze to his hands around the cup.

Then, he scoffs.

“Of c-couse you d-do, d-don’t you? B-bec-cause I k-killed h-her… I h-had t-to e-enjoy…” His voice gives out and rubs a hand over his eyes.

“That’s not true.” Max doesn’t sound frustrated or annoyed but sad. Barry is a bit disappointed, and he doesn’t understand what is wrong with him, why he is behaving so damn childish tonight.

“Barry, I know that this isn’t easy for you, but I really would appreciate it.” The other man sounds so honest, and he wants to ask about the reason again but decides against it. The faster he would get this over with, the faster Max would leave again, and, right now, Barry just wants to be left alone.

His mouth feels dry, and he takes a sip of his coffee.

“Okay.” Barry gives Max a humorless smile. “L-let’s t-talk about th-that night.”

He looks back down and considers how to start. It takes him a bit, and he is glad that Max doesn’t urge him.

“I… I c-came h-home f-from w-work…”
It was a Friday. Iris and he had another fight two days prior, and they hadn’t talked to each other since then. The day at work had been tiring. All of them were towards the end back then. He had hoped that he could cook something, maybe together with Iris or for her if she still was too mad. He had hoped that they could talk.

“Th-the d-door w-was open… th-there w-were n-no s-signs o-of s-someone f-forcibly g-got in… it w-was j-just o-open…”

It hadn’t been all the way open, just ajar. The lights were on, and he had wondered whether Iris had left it open for some reason. Part of him knew that this wasn’t it, though. He just didn’t want to acknowledge it.

“I-I c-called f-for h-her…” Barry’s v-voice gives out and he coughs slightly. “S-someththing w-was w-wrong… I-I kn-knew… I-I…”

Iris and he had drifted apart for a while then. Still, he somehow had always a sense of her being there, somewhere in the back of his mind. It had grown weaker over the months, and he hardly noticed it anymore at that time, but it still was there. Or, it had been there. He grew nearly sick when he later realized that he hadn’t even noticed when it had vanished.

The moment he pushed the door open, he already knew what he would find. It was horrifying, and he just couldn’t bring himself to run, to make a quick sweep of the house.

“I-I d-didn’t w-want t-to g-go ins-side.” Barry swallows and chuckles even though there is nothing funny about any of this. He takes another sip of his coffee and tries to concentrate on how bitter it tastes. He licks his lips before he goes on. “I-I p-probably s-stood th-there f-for a m-m-minute or t-two b-b-but… it f-f-felt l-l-like f-f-forever… I-I kn-knew I d-didn’t w-want t-to… t-t-o g-go i-inside and f-find… I w-was s-s-scared…”

The air inside the house has felt odd. Humid, charged, and thick. He doesn’t remember the part where he crossed the living room to get to the kitchen anymore. It doesn’t really matter anyway.

The next thing he remembers is clear and sharp in his mind, and he wishes he it wasn’t. Thinking back to it, he still can taste the sickening metallic taste of blood in the back of his throat. It has been nearly overwhelming.

“I-I f-found h-her i-in th-the k-kitchen…” His voice grows thin, and he has to clear his throat again before he looks up to meet Max’s eyes. “Sh-sh-she w-was d-dead.”

This is much too inaccurate to describe what he has really found there, though, or to explain the horror and the unbelievable sadness he felt the moment he saw her on the once white tiled floor, on her back and in a sea of blood. Iris abdomen had been wide open, her guts spilled out around here, and he hadn’t been able to do anything but stare at this grotesque picture in front of him.

Barry clenches his eyes shut and takes a couple of deep breaths. He feels sick again, much worse than before, and he realizes that he has actually forgotten how awful it is to actually allow himself to think back to it.

“You found her?”

It is a redundant question, one he has expected, and he can’t even find it in himself to really grow angry over it. He just nods quietly.

“Hal said that he found you with her blood all over you.” Max doesn’t sound accusing, but calm and oddly neutral. Like he is stating something about the weather. Barry isn’t sure how to feel about it
but can’t really bring himself to worry. He just shrugs.

“I-d-don’t r-really kn-know wh-what… I s-stood at th-the e-entrance t-to th-the k-kitchen one s-second a-and th-then I h-had h-her i-in m-my arms…”

His eyes have started to itch, and he brushes over them with his fingers. “I-I r-remember H-Hal b-being th-there…”

His former friend was the first to arrive. Barry can’t really remember what he had said, most of what followed is oddly distorted in his mind, but he knows that Hal had tried to talk to him and give him some comfort. He had hardly been able to make sense of what he said, though.

Later, most likely not more than ten minutes, the police and an ambulance arrived, and he didn’t want to let go of her. He remembers the panic he felt when they wanted him to let them take Iris. Somehow he knew that he wouldn’t see her again after this.

“Hal stated that you were very upset,” Max says, and Barry can’t help but glare at him for it.

“M-my w-wife h-had b-been m-murd-dered, o-of c-course I-I w-was u-upset!”

The older man doesn’t say anything to that. He doesn’t have to. Barry knows what he is thinking.

“I-I d-didn’t k-kill h-her.”

“You were having difficulties in your marriage back then.”

“Y-yes b-but th-that d-doesn’t m-mean th-that I-I w-would… I-I n-never h-hurt h-her, I-I w-would h-have n-never d-done th-this…” He huffs in frustration and presses a fist against his forehead. His skin feels too tight again.

“You stated something else when you were under the influence of Diana’s lasso.”

Barry feels like the air is taken out of his sails. The anger leaves him, and he is left feeling groggy and sick.

The problem is that he should have seen this coming and that he somehow still hasn’t. He averts his eyes from Max and looks back down to the table.

“Barry, I’m just stating the facts.” Max seems about as unhappy about this as Barry, and he wonders why the other man has even bothered to come here.

“Y-yes,” he agrees bitterly.

“J’onn also confirmed what Wally said.”

This actually is new to Barry, and he looks up to him in surprise. “Wh-what?”

Max gives him an odd look. “The Justice League confirmed what Wally said, Barry. Do you think they would charge you with this crime if they hadn’t any proof?”

Briefly, Barry feels another surge of anger flash through him. Nobody told him anything about what was done or not done after they picked him up from the hospital and took him straight to the Watchtower. He has no idea how they tried to evaluate any of this, other than for the accusations the made to his face, and stating his guilt via Wonder Woman’s lasso.
They didn’t listen to anything he said otherwise, and while Hal came to him a couple of times to talk while he has been kept in one of the holding cells, there was very little his friend could tell him.

“I-d-didn’t kn-know th-that.” He can’t help himself if he sounds bitter and watches the other man start to frown.

“Nobody told you about it?” Max sounds honestly surprised.

No, nobody told him about anything. He thinks about pointing this out and how everything about this is messed up. Unfortunately, this doesn’t change anything about the fact that he confessed to a crime he didn’t commit under the influence of Diana’s lasso of truth. There is no way that anybody would believe him, no matter how much he insists on his innocence.

“Wh-why a-are y-you d-doing h-here?” Barry asks quietly. “Y-you b-believe I’m g-guilty, sso wh-why w-waste t-time g-going th-through th-that w-with m-me a-again.”

“I’m here to hear your side of the story.” Max meets his incredulous look firmly. “I know what the facts say, and you can’t hold this against me or any of the others.”

“Wh-why b-bother, th-then?” Barry is aware that he should be relieved and grateful that there is finally someone willing to listen, but he is just tired. It has been years and what would this change? Talking about this is only painful, and Iris would still be dead afterward, Wally would still hate him, and his life…

Barry stomps down on that notion when he realizes what he is doing. With a sigh he rubs his eyes and tries to remind himself that self-pity is never helping anybody.

“What could it hurt?” Max doesn’t seem annoyed, his grim expression from before has eased away to one of empathy, and he gives him a tight smile as he goes on. “I understand that it isn’t something that is easy for you, but maybe it will help you to speak about it.”

“I already t-told y-you wh-what h-happened,” Barry points out tiredly and takes another sip from his coffee. He shudders slightly as it has started to taste really bad by now.

“We could go over it once more.”

There is hardly anything Barry would want to do less right now, and he knows that it is most likely futile to expect anything from it. Still, there is someone who actually knew him back then and offers him to listen. It is likely that he wouldn’t get such a chance another time.

Barry swallows, his mouth feels uncomfortably dry, and he takes another sip of the nasty tasting coffee. He nods somewhat reluctantly and meets Max’s eyes with a tired expression.

“O-okay.”

He has no idea what the other man promises himself from this but why not humor him? In the best case it helps him to share what has happened back then, if not…

Well, life always goes on.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter gave a small glimpse into what happened that night when Iris was killed. It also touched upon why the JLA was so willing to believe Barry to be guilty as the evidence is really not in his favor.

I hope I was able to make it understandable why Max is still uncertain about whether he should believe Barry or not. Seeing that we experience the main part of this story through Barry’s POV it makes it easy for us to not sympathize with him, but Max (and many others) have experienced everything from another point so far, and act out on their belief of doing the right thing.

I’ve really started to feel bad for the JLA and how most readers really dislike them for how they’ve handled the whole situation with Barry. It’s understandable due to how we all see how much this has messed Barry’s life up, but it is not my intent to portray them as the bad guys, similar to how Wally has never been intended to be perceived as anything but another victim (like Barry).

While I was sick and bedridden for the most part of this week, I read over a lot of what is going to happen later on, and I’m really looking forward to how Barry’s relationship with many of the characters is going to develop over time. I wish I was already done with all of it and could post you the whole thing outright, I’m so excited about where things are heading, the only thing that is still giving me a headache is the pacing. I’ll probably cut a lot away because I wrote so much that is just about establishing the relationship between Barry and other characters, and while it is so much fun to write, I think it does weigh down on the reading experience for you.

Next chapter will have Axel turn up again, as well as James and Mrs. Ming! And there will be dumplings filled with (not so) actual heads! :3
Dinner with A Side Dish of Friction

Chapter Summary

Barry and Axel are invited to stay for dinner at Mrs. Ming’s after closing. Things get a bit tense.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by the lovely Katzerover who is just crazy fast and just one of the sweetest people! (Danke, meine Liebe! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Finally” Axel huffs as he enters the small backroom, where Barry is currently finishing with the money counting of today’s business. He shoots a disgruntled look back to where he has just come from. “Who knew that a bit of snow could cause such a mess?”

“You’re f-finished already?” It is a bit surprising that Axel is already done with the task as it hasn’t even been ten minutes since Barry has left him to it. The teen smirks and nods, though, which causes him to eye him slightly suspiciously. “You d-did m-mop it, r-right?”

“Yes” Axel says as he rolls his eyes and makes his way over to the table where Barry is sitting at, eying the money with fleeting interest. “The ground’s so clean, you could eat off it.”

Barry puts the last of today’s intakes in a small portable safe and chuckles. “G-good t-to kn-know.”

He quickly scribbles down a couple of notes regarding the money before he adds the small booklet to the cash and locks the box. As he gets up with it, he gives Axel a pleased smile. “Th-thank you, A-Axel, y-you h-helped m-me a l-lot w-with th-that.”

The teen shrugs, and Barry doesn’t miss that he is still smirking. He gets the feeling that he is missing something. It is then that, he notices that the kid hasn’t brought the mop nor the bucket back with him. Before Barry has the opportunity to ask about it, he is cut off by another voice.

“Hey, you two are all done here?” James enters the room; the missed cleaning tools in his hands.

“Axel” Barry gives the boy a disapproving look.

“What? The floor has been mopped, and I actually did do the main part of it. He just offered to finish.” Axel defends himself which causes James to snort in amusement.

“If you mean the small area in front of the entrance by that, then you did do an impressive job indeed. I just had to go over it one more time to get rid of any remaining stains.” The other man remarks and ignores the glare he receives from Axel for it.

“You offered to do the mopping,” the teen points out with a shrug before he frowns. “You’re already done with it, though? You sure you did it any better than I did?”
“Please, don’t insult me, young padawan. I’ve been doing this since I was old enough to hold a mop.” James grins as he carries the cleaning tools to the cupboard to stash them away for the time being. “I would be worried should I need more than five minutes for it.”

“Wow, careful,” Axel says in a fake worried voice. “Your head got alarmingly huge for a moment there.”

“Smartass.”

Barry watches both of them with a fond smile. It is good to see that they are getting along, even though he isn’t really surprised. James is a very easy-going and funny man. There are probably not many who don’t like having him around.

“Y-you sh-should h-have l-let h-him d-do h-his w-work,” he still points out a bit sternly.

James grindims somewhat at that, and turns back to him. When he notices the absence of any actual annoyance on Barry’s face, his expression becomes playful again.

“You should have heard him moan and groan,” James says. “I just had to take pity on this poor soul.”

“I didn’t moan and groan,” Axel protests with an indignant frown before he looks to Barry. “Don’t listen to him, he tries to badmouth me because he knows you like me better.”

This causes James to laugh outright. Barry ignores them and brings the portable safe over to the small safe that is let into the wall opposite to the entrance of the room.

“So, did Axel tell you about the dinner?”

Barry’s surprised look makes it clear to James that the boy hasn’t so far.

“Lao lao would like you both to join us for dinner if you’ve time,” he explains and adds when Barry hesitates. “Axel would like to.”

This doesn’t surprise Barry at all, as the growing teen likes anything connected with food.

“Hey, you offer (offered?) a free meal,” Axel reminds him as if this in itself made his decision self-explanatory, and even gives James a look like he is crazy for even considering the possibility that he could have declined.

“Of course,” the other man agrees earnestly and chuckles when he receives an eye-roll in return. He then turns looks back to Barry and asks with a rather winning smile. “So, are you in for some amazing Mantou?”

“It’s already h-half p-past t-ten.”

“Who cares,” Axel stretches himself like a cat before he goes on. “You haven’t eaten yet. I know, I’ve been around for the last couple of hours, and I’m famished.”

“I can drive you home afterwards,” James adds, and it is then, when it occurs to Barry that both of them seem to want him around.

It is a nice thought.

“You r-really d-don’t h-have t-to. I c-can t-take the b-bus.”
“Does this mean that you’ll eat with us?” James asks, and it is hard to miss how pleased he looks by this. It worries Barry for a moment, a feeling of unexpected discomfort settles into his stomach, and he can’t help but wonder why the other man would actually want to have him around.

He is being stupid again, and he wishes he wouldn’t be so absurdly paranoid, because James is Mrs. Ming’s grandson, who has been nothing but nice and decent to him so far.

Barry pushes the concerned voice that has piped up in his mind away and nods.

It would be a nice change to not spend the next couple of hours, lying awake in his bed and trying to keep himself from thinking of Len and the others.

A familiar heaviness replaces the discomfort when Barry’s thoughts touch upon Len, and for a second he feels the exhaustion overcome him, based on the too little sleep he has gotten over the last couple of weeks.

He knows that Len is keeping an eye on him which means that he still cares but…

“Great.” James’ smile causes the corners of his eyes to crinkle, and while the sombre mood hasn’t completely let go of Barry yet, he returns it faintly as it is still a new and welcome change to be so openly liked.

They follow up James to the little apartment above the store. It is as warm and welcoming as usual, and the food turns out to be everyone’s liking. Not that Barry has expected anything else as he has learned so far that both, the old woman and her nephew, are really adept (skilled?) in the kitchen.

“So these are Manitus,” Axel remarks after he ate the first Chinese bun in two bites and is now studying the second one in his hand. “They look funny.”

“M-Mantous,” Barry corrects as he is nibbling on his own in a much slower pace.

“They are a traditional Chinese dish,” Mrs. Ming explains amused.

The boy hums and is obviously not too interested in any history regarding their food.

“Did you know that Mantou actually means barbarian head?” Axel, who has shoved the last of his second bun into his mouth, lifts his eyebrows in surprise and gives James a curious look. “Weawy?”

“Axel,” Barry chides but can’t help, to be a bit amused by the kid’s antics. Their hosts don’t seem to be put out by his lack of table manners either, and James nods in agreement instead.

“Yes, a long time ago a clever man named Zhuge, led an army to a war against the barbarian king Meng Huo and was able to defeat him. Afterwards, when his men and him wanted to return home, they came across a swift-flowing river but, they weren’t able to cross it, due to the strength of its current. One of the barbarian lords the soldiers captured, informed Zhuge that he would need to sacrifice 49 men and throw their heads into the river in order to appease the river spirit enough to allow them to cross.”

“Dude! Those Chinese and their spirits were really badass, weren’t they?” remarks Axel, clearly impressed by this little history lesson.

Barry thinks about pointing out that cutting someone’s head off really shouldn’t categorize as something to be impressed by, but decides against it. The boy is just a teen after all, and he still knows from experience what can seem cool to you at such an age.
“We certainly were and still are,” James agrees with a nod and winks at Barry when he notices his slight frown. “Zhuge was certainly a good example of it as he didn’t want to spill more blood and instead of beheading 49 of his men or prisoners, he sacrificed the cows and horses they brought along with them and filled their meat into buns that were then shaped roughly like human heads.”

“Seriously?” Axel asks incredulously. “And that river spirit bought that?”

“He certainly did,” Mrs. Ming confirms with a chuckle. “And after Zhuge Liang was able to cross the river, he named the buns mántóu which translates into barbarian’s head.”

“Well that’s gross,” the teen muttered and after eyeing the dwindling heap of buns on the plate in the middle of the table, he seems to decide that he has had enough of them for now.

“Th-that’s n-not a p-polite th-thing t-to s-say,” Barry scolds and shoots the old woman an apologetic look. Mrs. Ming only waves it off with a kind smile and tells him not to worry.

“James refused to eat Mantous for exactly the same reason when he was little. I made the mistake to tell him the story when he was eight, and he wouldn’t touch such a bun again till he was nearly twenty.”

“Lao lao,” her nephew groans a bit embarrassed. “I just didn’t like them. It wasn’t because I thought you put actual heads in them.”

“You were convinced for a while that the mincemeat came from barbarians,” Mrs. Ming reminds him with an amused twinkle in her eyes. “I had to ask dear Mr. Sheppard to vouch for it being just simply pork meat.”

Axel guffaws at that and asks who this M. Sheppard is. The old woman explains that it was the butcher who had his shop just down the street from them.

“He died about ten years ago,” she explains with a sad little smile. “He was such a good man.”

Not sure what to say, Axel turns his attention back to the buns that are still left, to eye them with a mixture of distaste and interest.

“He was,” James agrees with a fond smile. “He had fun assuring me every single time I passed by at his shop, that all of his products were solely animal based, even long after I passed my teens.”

Again, Barry wonders whether James had been brought up solely by his grandmother. He hardly mentions his parents and neither does Mrs. Ming.

“I know a guy who knows a guy whose brother has a friend who pulled a couple of jobs for the mob in Gotham, and he told me that they actually have a butcher shop there which sells the meat of people they’ve gotten rid of.”

James, who has just taken a sip of his water, nearly chokes on it in response to Axel’s words.

“Axel.” Barry groans and glances to Mrs. Ming in concern who seemed quite alarmed by this piece of information. Thanks to his former friendship to Bruce, he is well aware that Axel’s friend could very well have said the truth, but that doesn’t make it anymore to a passable dinner conversation topic. It also makes him worry once again with what kind of people the boy is spending his time.

“What?” Axel huffs and gives him an annoyed look. “We just talked about stuffing a guy’s head into a bun, how is this any worse.”
Next to Barry, James makes a noise that lays somewhere between coughing and laughing.

“The people of Gotham are crazy, it’s not my fault.” Axel shrugs.

It doesn’t do much to settle Barry’s worries that the teen sounds utterly unconcerned by what he has just brought up.

“You d-do kn-know h-how d-dangerous th-those p-people are, d-don’t you?”

“Yes, Barry.” Axel rolls his eyes and gives him a look as if he is being a bit slow. “Psychopaths and murderers are dangerous. I know that, okay?”

“For that you do have quite interesting friends,” James adds as he wipes his mouth with a napkin and most likely tries to hide his grin. He gives Barry an apologetic look when he notices his disapproving frown.

“He, just because they know guys who do such stuff doesn’t mean that they are like them as well,” Axel protests with a scowl.

“Are they friends from school?” Mrs. Ming, who looks far more concerned than her nephew, seems surprised when the boy snorts in response.

“W-watch it, Axel, th-there’s n-no reason t-to b-be imp-polite.” Axel glowers briefly at Barry for the reprimand before he glances to the older woman and actually looks a bit guilty.

“Nah, they’re just people I hang out with.” He shrugs again and doesn’t elaborate on the fact that he isn’t enrolled in any school at the moment.

“Do your guardians know that you are spending your time with them?” It is interesting how Mrs. Ming words this question. Not parents but guardians, and Barry can’t say he is surprised that she would have picked up on the fact that, Axel is most likely not having an ordinary living conditions like other teenagers of his age do.

“Sure,” the kid agrees readily and glances at him as he does so. This catches Barry off-guard, and he is not sure how to response to it or whether he should at all.

Mrs. Ming looks surprised as well, and she wonders whether she has expected to learn that Axel doesn’t have any legal guardians, which he most likely doesn’t as far as Barry knows, or that she simply can’t understand how anybody would allow their charge to spend time with such people.

“Did you tell them where you are this late at night? You did ask them for their permission, didn’t you?” She asks a bit concerned.

“Yeah, they know, and they are fine with it. Don’t worry, Mrs. Ming,” Axel assures her, and Barry find him glancing towards him again.

“Well, that is good.” The older woman seems a bit reassured by this and gives the young teen a kind smile. “I wouldn’t want them to worry about you. I can still remember how it was for me when James was still your age and started to stay over at his friends’ places. He was such a good boy, but this isn’t exactly the safest area for children to grow up in.”

“It wasn’t that bad, Lao lao, you just worried way too much.” James chuckles and turns to Barry and Axel. “There were a lot of gang stuff going on even back then, but my best friend’s dad was a cop, and he was probably the most paranoid man you can imagine. He always picked us up from school when I stayed over, and he always drove me home in the evenings. Neither Nick nor I ever dreamed
James laughs and rubs his chin as he seems to think back to his own youth. “God, Mr. Hanson… he was a huge man, like a bear, especially with his bushy beard and gruff voice, but he was one of the kindest and most patient men I’ve ever met. He never raised his voice when we caused some trouble, he didn’t need to. He just looked at us with those disapproving and disappointing eyes, and we felt like the worst kids on the whole planet.”

He turns to his grandmother with a smirk. “You remember when Nick, Amber, and I were caught spraying the walls behind McKinley’s shop, and the old man caught us? We were convinced that we would go to jail for it when Mr. Hanson picked us up in his police car.”

“Well, you certainly deserved that little scare after what you had done.” Mrs. Ming gives her grandson a stern look. “I still don’t understand why you would do such a thing.”

“It was a bet, and we were stupid kids, Lao lao.” James chuckles but has the decency to look guilty under the blaming eyes of his grandmother.

“You did that during the day?” Axel looks both incredulous and amused. “Why didn’t you wait till it got dark and the dude closed his shop? That way you probably would have gotten away with it.”

“It’s a g-good th-thing th-they d-didn’t,” Barry points out a bit sharply before either Mrs. Ming or James can who both seem unsure of how to take the boy’s advice. “Th-they c-caused d-damage t-to another p-person’s p-property. Th-they sh-shouldn’t h-have g-gotten away w-with it, n-nobody wh-who d-does s-such a th-thing s-should. C-causing other p-people t-trouble out of b-boredom or m-m-mindlessn-ness isn’t s-someth-thing f-funny and d-definitely n-not s-something t-to b-be p-proud of. It’s a p-petty th-thing t-to d-do, and sh-shows h-how l-little you underst-stand h-how w-wrong it’s t-to h-hurt s-someone e-e else f-for y-your own entertainm-ment.”

Nobody says anything for a long moment after that, and Barry immediately realizes that he has spoken too harshly. He feels sorry for it but, he doesn’t want Axel to become one of those people, who are part of the reason, why the Keys are such a miserable place when he grows older. The boy is a good kid, he is clever and doesn’t intentionally want to hurt others, he just doesn’t think his actions through at times, and sometimes he just doesn’t know any better.

“You don’t know shit, okay!?! You and your stupid rules! Do your really believe anybody gives a fuck about them?” Axel scoffs angrily and point a finger at him as he sneers. “You of all people should know better! People aren’t nice, and they aren’t good! They can turn on you any moment, and more often than not they will! Do you really think I’m not getting what happened to you?! And where did your stupid sentiment about being good get you?! People think you’re twisted and sick, and you have to take the shit they dish out, because you can’t do anything about it! That is how reality works!”

“I think that is enough.” James gets up as well and returns Axel’s dark glare with a stern expression.
“Yeah?! You can go screw yourself! I’m outa here anyways!” The teenager spits before he storms out of the room. James looks about to follow, but Barry stops him. “I’ll t-talk t-to h-him.”

He turns to Mrs. Ming and gives her an apologetic smile before he hurries after the boy, ignoring the other man’s protest on his way out. He is able to catch up with him on his way out the backdoor.

“Axel, w-wait-“

“Fuck off!”

Barry grimaces slightly. “J-just w-wait f-for a s-second, p-please-“

He stops abruptly when Axel whirls around and snarls at him. “Why!? So you can tell me what a jackass I am!?“

“I d-didn’t s-say th-that,” he states firmly and tries to relax which is quite hard in thus tensed up situation.

“No but you could just as well have! I’m not stupid, you don’t need to spell things out for me!” Despite all of Axel’s angry bravado, Barry doesn’t miss the hurt that lies beneath it, and he really starts to regret his words from earlier on.

“N-no, you aren’t, and I n-never m-meant t-to insinuate s-such a th-thing,” he says quietly can’t help but wonder why the boy would react this vehemently. He honestly hasn’t expected him to get this angry over a rebuke.

“Yeah? Great, what did you try to insinuate then?”

It has become cold towards the middle of December, and their breaths turn white in the cool air as they speak. Barry shivers a bit and is glad that at least Axel had the presence of mind to grab his jacket on his way out.

“You’re n-not s-stupid, Axel,” he tells him earnestly, “and y-you’re n-not a b-bad k-kid, b-but I’m w-worried th-that th-the p-people you s-spend your t-time w-with c-could eventually c-cause y-you t-to d-do s-someth-thing y-you’ll r-regret l-later on.”

“You don’t need to worry about me! I’m not your fucking responsibility!” Axel spits. He has his fist clenched tightly enough that they’re slightly shaking, and Barry doesn’t understand why he is so upset all of a sudden.

“You’re m-my f-friend,” he says softly after a tensed silence has lingered for a couple of seconds. The neighbourhood has quiet down somewhat this late at night, and Barry can pick up on the teen gritting his teeth in response to his words. “You m-may n-not b-be m-my r-respons-i-bility b-but th-that d-doesn’t m-mean th-that I d-don’t w-want you t-to b-be s-safe and s-sound, A-Axel.”

“You think I’m an idiotic troublemaker,” the boy responses stubbornly. “That I can’t look after myself and that is bull. I’ve been doing so for over two years.”

It is a daunting realization that Axel could have hardly been older than eleven when he started to live on the streets. The concept of someone so young doing this isn’t hard to grasp, though. Barry has known many kids who did the same during his childhood. He himself, ran away a couple of times, but he always went back to the abuse in the end.

“You’re n-not a-a t-troublemaker.”
Axel gives him a very incredulous look at that.

“You aren’t,” he insists.

“I’ve stolen from you,” the boy corrects as he crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“You t-ried,” Barry reminds him with a small smile, “and d-didn’t s-succeed.”

“That one time I didn’t.” At Barry surprised frown, Axel rolls his eyes and snorts. “You know, it becomes ridiculously easy to let something slip into my pockets when you aren’t paying attention to such a thing anymore.”

The taunting expression only last briefly on the teens face. He seems to pick up on Barry’s disappointment but stubbornly refuses to show regret or guilt.

“Maybe I fit just fine with my friends, Barry,” he states instead a bit bitter. “They aren’t good people and neither am I.” He averts his eyes to glower darkly at the ground in front of him.

Barry watches the morose looking kid in front of him. By now he really regrets having said anything at all before. It is obvious that Axel feels bad and shunned, and he still isn’t sure what has caused him to react so badly to his words.

Slowly, as not to alarm the boy, he walks closer to him till; there is about an arm’s length between them. Axel tenses up, when he notices it and frowns up at him with a mixture of surprise and wariness.

“I’m s-sorry f-for ups-s-setting you l-like th-this. I kn-know th-that you are b-bright and m-much m-more indep-pendent th-than m-most b-boys y-your age, b-but you’re s-still y-young. I d-don’t w-want you t-to g-get in t-trouble b-because you d-don’t under-stand wh-what c-consequ-ences y-your d-doing c-could h-have.”

“I’m not stupid,” Axel repeats audible annoyed, but Barry cuts him off before he can go on.

“And I’m n-not s-saying th-that y-you are, b-but you d-did n-not s-seem t-to b-be t-troubled b-by th-the p-prospect o-o-of d-damaging another p-person’s g-goods, and you s-seem f-fine w-with t-taking th-things th-that aren’t y-yours.”

The boy scowls at him stubbornly before averting his gaze. He still looks pissed, but Barry can sense that his anger has started to decrease and that he gets his point.

“You’re n-not a b-bad k-kid,” Barry goes on, and he hates how Axel scoffs and shoots him an incredulous look at this. It is unfair to expect the boy to see himself in a better light, though. He never really made it outright clear that he doesn’t see Axel as a scallywag or anything else of that kind, mostly because he hasn’t realized how important it would be. He regrets this now.

“You aren’t,” he insists firmly. “You’re j-just y-young and m-mostly on your own, wh-which is utterly unf-fair and w-wrong, b-but w-we c-can’t p-pick and ch-choose h-how our l-lives t-turn out. I unde-rstand th-that, and I d-don’t th-think any l-less of you b-bec-cause of h-how y-you’ve s-s-survive in th-this w-world s-so f-far.”

The intense way Axel looks at him now, makes him feel a bit uncomfortable. There is surprise and disbelief in his eyes but also understanding. Barry coughs a bit awkwardly before he goes on with a faint but kind smile.

“I’m j-just w-worried about you. I d-don’t w-want you t-to h-have t-to s-stick t-to th-this k-kind o-of
life, and it’s d-difficult t-to n-not m-make s-some w-wrong t-turn wh-when you’re y-young and on your own th-that c-can m-make it h-hard t-to l-leave th-this p-path again.”

A cool breeze picks up, and he shudders slightly.

“You were an arse,” Axel points out after a brief silence has passed between them again, and Barry has to chuckle despite the insult. “Th-that isn’t a n-nice th-thing t-to s-say.”

The boy snorts but doesn’t look like he is about break something any second now. His shoulders have relaxed and his scowl has been replaced by a small smirk.

“But it’s still true,” he says which causes Barry to ache an eyebrow. “Is it?”

“Totally.” Axel confirms with a nod and pushes his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “But it’s fine, I don’t hold it against you. You’re an adult, after all, and an old one at that.”

The tension in his chest loosens, and Barry has a hard time to stop himself from smiling in relief as he feigns annoyance. “I’m f-forty-one.”


Barry can’t help but chuckle this time and doesn’t miss how the cold air has started to smell like rain. He also is pretty sure that they’ve Mrs. Ming quite worried, which is why he nods back to the backdoor. “W-we sh-should g-go b-back inside.”

The humor leaves the boy’s expression and a frown replaces it instead. He suddenly seems rather uncomfortable.

“You think Mrs. Ming’s pissed at me?” Axel asks in an unusual quiet and worried voice; it is nice to know that he has really taken a liking to the kind old lady.

Barry smiles and steps a bit closer as he cups his shoulder gingerly. “I’m s-sure sh-she isn’t. Sh-she’s m-most l-likely j-just w-worried about you.” He meets Axel’s embarrassed and hopeful expression and slightly squeezes his shoulder in reassurance, before he adds as if on an afterthought. “B-but I w-would s-still apolog-gize f-for h-having b-been r-rather r-rude.”

“I’m a teen, people expect me to be rude,” Axel argues with a small smile.

“Of c-course w-we d-do,” Barry agrees solemnly before he smiles too and nods towards the closed door. “L-lets h-head b-back in, it’s g-getting r-rather ch-chilly out h-here.”

“I’ll i-ignore any f-further qu-quips t-toward m-my age f-from n-now on,” Barry remarks drily, which causes Axel to grin. “You know, everybody is getting old. There’s no shame in it.”

Barry smiles and follows the kid inside, not surprised at all to see James waiting for them at the foot of the stairs. His concerned expression relaxes, as soon as it looks like they have worked things out.

“You’re badmouthing old people now, grasshopper?” the other man asks with a fake frown.

“Despite what you may think, you’ll turn into one of us one day as well, and this day will probably come much earlier than you think.”

“So you’re saying you are old?” Axel quips as they make their way back upstairs.

“I’m nearly forty, of course I’m old.”
The teen laughs in triumph when this reply causes Barry to groan slightly in annoyance, and he turns to him with a pleased grin. “Told you so.”

“Th-thanks, J-James, you’re d-definitely th-the p-person I’ll t-turn t-to once I r-reach m-my m-mid-l-life-c-crisis.”

His friend feigns innocence. “Aren’t you long past your midlife crisis?”

Axel roars with laughter at that, and Barry decides it would be best for his self-esteem, to ignore both oafs for the rest of his stay, which wouldn’t be all that long anymore, anyway.

It is already close to midnight, and while Axel doesn’t have to worry about a curfew, as he is currently staying with some friends again, and he himself would take James up on his offer to drive him home; he still has to get up in about five hours again. Even so, he doesn’t regret having accepted the invitation.

It is about forty minutes later when Barry exits James’ car in front of his apartment building. The air is still chilly, and it has started to drizzle a bit by now. He leans down after getting out of the car, and thanks the other man again for bringing him home.

“No problem, I’m glad that you joined us for dinner,” James replies easily before frowns slightly. “Even though, it probably cost you a couple hours of sleep.”

“It’s f-fine.” Barry doesn’t mention that he usually isn’t able to fall asleep before half past two in the morning these days, anyway. One of the reasons why he is looking more and more like a raccoon every passing day, with how dark the circles under his eyes are getting.

“It w-was f-fun and th-thanks again f-for th-the g-good m-meal.” Barry straightens up before quickly ducking down again to add. “And p-please t-tell y-your g-grandmother m-my th-thanks a-again f-for l-letting Axel s-s-stay t-tonight. It’s v-very k-kind of h-her, and it’s g-good t-to kn-know th-that h-he’s s-somewh-where s-safe.”

Mrs. Ming hadn’t hold Axel’s outburst against the boy and rather offered him to stay on her couch for the night, as it had been already quite late. She didn’t tell him to ask his parents for permission and in fact took Barry aside to inquire whether the boy had a place to stay or not. Her sad expression is still clear in his mind when he explained her that Axel is more or less, a street kid.

“I will, but I’m pretty sure the boy is really no bother to her. She’s already very fond of him, and it will give her some peace of mind to know, he’s not somewhere on the streets tonight,” James explains before he wishes him a good night.

Barry watches his friend drive off in the cool drizzle. He feels exhausted but in a good kind of way and decides to head in for bed.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. It's been another one that dealt with Barry and the relationship he has with the people in his life. I know that Len and the others have been gone for a while now, but I still wanted to keep this piece in because I really enjoyed writing it, and I like the notion of Barry sharing a meal with these three people, and put a bit more focus on him and Axel.
This has been the last filler-ish chapter before the plot moves on and some familiar faces are about to return. Have I mentioned before that we're also about to reach a part I'm so looking forward to? X).

I'm saying this not enough, but I'm really thankful for all of you lovely and kind people who are reading and enjoying this story! You all brighten my day! <3
On The Way to The Lion’s Den

Chapter Summary

Some days just don’t end well.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by the wonderful Katzerover! Thanks so much, my dear! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That’s a lovely train painting.” Barry glances over his shoulder to where Mary is currently standing behind him, while studying the sketch he is working on. He smiles. “Th-thanks, it isn’t r-really a p-painting y-yet, th-though.”

“But it is going to be?” she asks curiously.

He nods and turns back to the thick sheet of paper, on which he is trying to outline a background that goes along nicely with said train in the front.

“Is it a gift?” Mary takes a seat next to him and studies his sketch attentively, seemingly liking what she is seeing there. Barry looks at her in surprise at this, and she meets his eyes with a fond smile.

“You like to pencil, yet only do sketches; nothing that would consume too much time and never anything for which you would spend money on such a good paper. So, I guess, this is going to be a present for someone.”

“Y-your d-deduction s-skills are qu-quite impressive.” He smiles. “You’re r-right, it’s f-for a f-friend.”

“Is it for your employer’s nephew?” His astonished expression causes an amused glint to settle in her eyes, and she shrugs lightly. “You’re working on a picture for his grandmother, so this possibility probably isn’t too farfetched.”

Barry isn’t sure why, but he gets a bit uncomfortable due to Mary having immediately guessed for whom the painting is supposed to be. It isn’t that he wouldn’t have told her, but he wonders why she thought of James so swiftly.

Then, he tells himself to not be silly. She hasn’t even met James so far.

“Hey, what’s with that frown again, Bar?” Her fingers are soft and warm when she touches his wrist lightly. She studies him with concern. “Did I say something wrong?”

“N-no… I’m j-just b-being s-stupid.”

“That’s something I’ve difficulties to believe,” she argues kindly. Barry gives a small smile for it, before he turns back to the sketch in front of him and studies it quietly for a moment. “I’m w-worried you th-think t-too highly of m-me. I- c-can b-be qu-quite d-dumb at t-times.”
Mary rolls her eyes and gives his wrist a light squeeze before she lets go again. “Of course you can, but you have to admit that it isn’t far-fetched for me put you on a bit of a pedestal, compared to the people I usually spend my time with.”

“Eddy w-wouldn’t f-find th-this v-very f-f-flattering,” Barry points out amused.

His friend stays unimpressed. “Eddy knows very well that he’s an annoying brat most of the time, and he is actually aiming for it. I’m pretty sure that he wouldn’t be surprised at all that I hold you in higher regard when it comes to character and manners.”

“He isn’t that bad.” Barry laughs as he tries to defend the other man but knows very well, that Mary does have a point.

“He is, and it is part of his charm actually,” She disagrees amused before she glances back to his sketch. “So, this is for…. she gives him a questioning look. “James, right?”

Barry nods. “Y-yes, h-he l-likes t-trains.”

“In that case he will love it.” Mary smiles and studies the sketching again. “It looks really nice. Is it for Christmas?”

“No, h-his b-birthd-day is next week, and th-this is j-just a s-small p-present.” He shrugs and turns back to sketching some more.

The following twenty minutes are shared in a comfortable silence, and Barry is quite pleased with how nicely he proceeds with the background sketch.

“Huh”

He looks over to his friend who is studying a page in today’s Keystone’s Quickest and already slides it slightly towards him before he even has the chance to ask what has caught her attention.

“Look.” Mary shows him an article above which he notices the photo of a very rather facility. “There was a break in the CC’s S.T.A.R. labs last night.”

Barry hums and tries to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. “D-do th-they kn-know wh-who b-broke in?”

Mary looks back at him and a guilty expression crosses her face. “No, Bear, they don’t know who did it and… I’m sorry, I didn’t want to bring them up, I wasn’t thinking.”

His throat feels uncomfortably dry all of a sudden, and so he swallows before he shrugs and pretends to study the article. “It’s f-fine, r-really.”

Her silence makes it clear that she doesn’t believe him, but he couldn’t care less. He is not going to talk nor think about Len and the others, not now. He would likely have more than enough of this later on when he goes to bed.

“What d-did you w-want t-to sh-show m-me?”

She hesitates for a moment, eying him with a familiar concern, before she finally explains. “It’s just that I know someone who works there, one of my clients, and he’s mentioned in the text. I just found it curious, I guess…”

Barry glances at her and isn’t surprised that she looks a bit dejected as she studies the picture of the
S.T.A.R. labs building above the actual article. He can’t help it but feel bad about it. Len and the Rogues keeping about from him isn’t her fault, he shouldn’t pull her down with him for it.

“Wh-what d-did h-he s-say?” he asks.

Mary meets his eyes and seems a bit surprised about his question before she gives him a small smile.

“He’s mostly just badmouthing some colleague of his and indicates that it is due to this man’s lack in following the standard security protocol that this coupe was successful,” she explains. “It just seemed a bit funny to me because he’s always going on and on about this Dr Elias when I’m over.”

“Is h-he h-his b-boss?”

“No, just a colleague, but he seems to be a really smart guy who is quite popular with the people who lead the facility and thus gets a lot of leeway.”

For some reason, even though he knows nothing about Dr. Elias, Barry feels a bit bad for him. He knows what it is to be disliked by your colleagues for being the golden boy.

Barry decides not to linger on this uneasy memory, and asks about what was stolen instead.

“They don’t really go into that, but I guess is some invention,” Mary suggests. She studies the article with a thoughtful expression, then she gives him a curious look. “Have you ever been there? At S.T.A.R. labs I mean.”

“Yes, a-a c-couple o-of t-times,” he confirms and picks his mug of tea up, which he has hardly touched so far.

“For work?”

He hums in agreement. He doesn’t mention that he had been there quite often as the Flash as well.

“You know a doctor named Carlson? He is about fifty now, and specializes in biomechanics.”

“Y-your c-client?”

She nods. “He’s quite the shy fellow but very nice, despite the fact that I hardly understand every third word he says when he tells me something about his work.”

Barry tries to think whether the name Carlson rings any bells for him. It doesn’t. “N-no, I d-don’t th-think I’ve m-met him b-before, b-but th-the C-C S-S.T.A.R. l-labs are qu-quite b-big, and th-they already h-held over t-two h-hundred s-scientists even b-back th-then.”

Mary whistles at that.

“Colour me impressed,” she chuckles. “Then you probably don’t know Dr. Elias either, do you?”

“N-no, s-sorry.”

“There goes my chance on gettingsome inside information.” Mary heaves an exaggerated sigh, and both of them share an amused smile. “You hungry?”

“I g-guess, are you?”

“A bit,” she agrees and glances over to his fridge. “You’ve any eggs around?”
It is the middle of December, and his fridge is still quite nicely stocked so Mary is lucky.

“Y-yes, a c-couple. Y-you w-want t-to m-make s-some s-s-scrambled?”

“What do you think of pancakes?” she suggests. “I’ve all of the ingredient other than for the eggs, and I feel too lazy to walk to the store around the corner.”

Barry likes the idea, especially because Mary makes the best pancakes. He knows that Sam and the other Rogues praise his cooking skills but, in his own opinion he has nothing on her.

About forty minutes later, they are sitting on the couch, each of them with plate in hand, and enjoying the still warm and sweet goodness.

It doesn’t come as a surprise at all when Eddy finds his way over to them, within the next five minutes. The man has unbelievable good timing when it comes to meals.

“Don’t be so greedy,” Mary chides when Eddy ends up with more than half of the still remaining pancakes on his plate.

“I’m not, I’m just a grown man,” he explains matter of fact. “We need calories.”

“For what? Lazing around the whole day?”

“Always you and your criticising, Mary.” Eddy huffs. “I’m really starting to get self-esteem issues thanks to you.”

Barry leans back and enjoys listening to his friends’ bicker. Having them both around is comforting, and he is glad that Eddy has passed by as well, albeit his friend told him he would not be around at all today. Barry concludes that whatever business the other man had to take care of, he must have been able to finish quicker than expected.

He jumps slightly when Eddy puts two of his pancakes onto his plate all of a sudden.

“So, here, now he and I have exactly the same amount, no reason to nag my ear off any further,” Eddy points out to Mary who rolls her eyes and shoots Barry an apologizing smile.

“I’m n-not th-that h-hungry,” Barry tries to protest, but Eddy cuts him off. “You never are, but you’re still always complaining about being too skinny.”

“Don’t be mean.” Mary slaps their friend’s shoulder lightly in warning.

“I’m not,” Eddy chuckles. “And don’t hit me. You’re too violent for such a tiny person.”

This earns him another slap, an audibly harder one.

Barry watches them for a moment longer, before he frowns down on his plate and starts eating again. It isn’t as if his friend hasn’t a point. He has just hoped that he could save some of them for the next morning.

“I want whipped cream,” Eddy announces all of a sudden. “Why do you eat pancakes without whipped cream, anyway?”

Mary gives him an exasperated look, and Barry pretends to not have heard him.

“You two have no idea what’s actually good food,” Eddy snarks.
“You want whipped cream? Then get up and buy some,” Mary tells him slightly annoyed.

“Why don’t you do it?”

“… seriously?”

Listening to them bicker, Barry decides it would be a good idea to ignore them for now and instead concentrate on his food. Having them around is nice even when he isn’t really listening to what they are talking about, after all.

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“It’s like the damn monsoon out there.” James joins Barry behind the counter after having taken the trash out and judging by his drenched state, he doesn’t seem to exaggerate that much.

“I hate this kind of weather,” he grumbles as he uses a paper towel to wipe his face off. Barry looks outside the storefront windows and notices that it is bucketing down. He had gone through the order list he would have to send out tomorrow for the goods required to be restock so he completely missed how the weather has taken a turn for worse over the last ten minutes. At least he brought his umbrella to work.

“It isn’t s-snowing, th-though,” Barry points out and chuckles when his friend deadpans. “Yes, because snow would be so much worse than this downpour.”

“W-well, s-some p-people w-would t-think s-so.” His smile dies down the moment he realizes what he’s just said, and he could kick himself for unintentionally bringing Len up in his mind again. He swallows and turns back to the list he is rechecking.

“Yes, crazy people,” James agrees sourly, and Barry is relieved that he hasn’t picked up on his mood change.

“Oh, would you look at that ghastly weather.” Mrs. Ming enters the shop with a concerned frown. She most likely came downstairs to check up on them.

“Well, at least it isn’t snow,” James says in cheerful mocking impression of Barry before he winks at him.

“Not yet,” the older woman points out. “But according to the forecast this will change into the weekend.”

“Great…” Her grandson sighs and rubs his face in irritated frustration. “Cause’ driving in a city could get any worse than that.”

Barry considers mentioning that using the public transport system when it’s snowing, isn’t exactly fun either, but holds his tongue.

“You definitely must drive more carefully then, James,” Mrs. Ming tells him in concern and causes James to chuckle fondly. “Of course, lao lao.”

“And would you be so sweet and drive Barry home tonight once you are finished with the closing up. I don’t want the poor dear to catch himself something in this weather, while he is waiting for the bus.”

Somehow, Barry should have seen this coming, he is certain of it.
“N-no, it’s f-f-fine. I’ll t-take th-the b-bus,” he assures her. “J-James r-really d-doesn’t n-need t-to b-bother.”

“It wouldn’t be a bother,” James disagrees and nods toward the window behind him where hardly anything is visible, as a result of the rain. “I honestly wouldn’t want to have stay around out there and wait for the bus either, in this weather.”

“I’m s-sure it w-will l-lighten u-up a b-b-bit t-till w-we’re f-finished.”

He hopes so at least.

“Nonsense. Nobody should have to use the public transport when we have around such a rainstorm,” Mrs. Ming argues and gives him a reassuring smile when she notices that he is about to protest again. “And don’t worry about being a burden, I’m sure it is really no trouble to James. Isn’t it, dear?”

James shakes his head in agreement, and Barry has to bite down on the urge to sigh. A loud crack cuts through the air, and he can see out of the corners of his eyes how the night briefly lights up through the store window. It seems, that the storm isn’t even considering easing off a bit.

While he still feels bad about James having to drive him all the way over to his place, the notion to wait out there for his bus becomes less appealing with every passing second.

“Take it as a small thank you for the amazing painting you made for me,” the other man suggests when Barry keeps evaluating the rain with an unhappy frown.

“It’s a-a p-present,” he points out. “You d-don’t n-need t-to g-give m-me anything b-back f-for it.”

His friend rolls his eyes and sighs in mock exasperation. “I know, I still want to drive you home, though.”

Seeing that arguing about this would get him nowhere and that the notion of standing out there and waiting for his bus is not a very comfortable one, he finally relents and nods in agreement.

“Alright b-but only if it’s r-really n-not t-trouble t-to you.”

James smiles clearly pleased by his decision and assures him that this isn’t the case.

Mrs. Ming is also obviously relieved that he agrees to her grandson’s help and with that wishes them a good night and a safe journey home before she goes back upstairs to go to bed.

The rain is icy and pours down like out of buckets when they leave the store about fifteen minutes later. They hurry over to the car James as parked about thirty feet away from the entrance and while both of them have umbrellas, they are mostly soaked by the time they reach it, just a few seconds later.

Barry, who goes straight to the passenger side, looks up with a frown when he hears the other man exclaim something in another language, most likely Chinese, and it sounds a lot like a swear.

“Everyth-thing alright?” he asks worriedly and ducks down to see through his window side. It is difficult to make anything out due to the poor light and hard rain, but he can see that the opposite window has been smashed.

A sense of dread overcomes him all of a sudden, and just as he wants to suggest to James to go back inside, he hears a wet sounding smack and watches how the other man’s body grows stiff for a second before he slumps to ground. He freezes in fear when he notices that another person is
standing behind where his friend has just been, but he can’t make out much other than that he or she is wearing dark clothes.

Barry feels how the adrenaline starts rushing through his body, and to his horror, he can hear someone moving behind him.

He has no time to turn around before something hard and heavy hits the back of his head and everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is shorter than it’s usually the case, mostly because this part neither did fit well with the last one nor with the following one, thus you’re stuck with what I’ve dubbed the ‘cliffhanger’ chapter. It really mostly exists to advance the plot (and because of Mary ;), and I hope you don’t mind too much. The next ones will be longer again, and we’ll finally start with the part of the story I’ve been going on and on about. :)

I’ve gotten such lovely and kind feedback from you guys for my last chapter, and I don’t even know how to tell you how much this means to me, or how happy and blessed I am to have such wonderful readers like you! You’re just plain amazing! Thank you so much, my dears! <3
Chapter Summary

Barry and James find themselves in the hands of a very dangerous man.

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains explicit violence and mild sexual assault.

This chapter has been edited by my lovely beta Katzerover, and as always she has done an amazing job with it. <3

The first thing Barry becomes aware of when he wakes up is the horrible pain that threatens to crack
his head open. It is so bad that he actually feels nauseated for a moment which doesn’t help in the
least with the confusion and disorientation he experiences.

The queasiness passes, fortunately, and he groans in a mixture of relief and hurt.

“Ah, good. You’re awake.” The voice sounds muffled over the ringing in Barry’s ears, and it is
utterly unfamiliar to him. A rush of fear overcomes him and he instinctively tries to curl up just to
discover that neither his arms nor his legs are free. He whimpers miserably and tenses up when he
hears the stranger once more, this time chuckling and obviously amused by his reaction.

Opening his eyes turns out to be more difficult than it should be, at least till a sharp slap lets the right
side of his face erupt in pain for a couple of seconds.

“Don’t! You bastards, don’t touch him!”

This voice he recognizes. It is James’, and he sounds furious.

“Shut him up,” the stranger orders sharply towards someone behind Barry before he meets his wide
confused eyes with an amused smirk. “Hello, Barry. May I call you Barry?”

The man is Caucasian, lean and very tall, at least 6’ 2″, with short dark brown hair and a handsome
enough face that borders a bit on the plain site, as well as very intense green eyes. He is wearing a
dark blue suit with a white dress shirt but no suit coat, and at first glance he doesn’t look really all
that threatening, more like someone who is just on the way to grab a drink after a day in the office.
Definitely not what one would imagine an everyday kidnapper or criminal to look like, which means
that he is probably higher up in the food chain of whatever gang or organization he belongs to.

“Your head is probably still a bit sore,” the stranger remarks without giving him any time to reply.
“Your took quite the bump. I’m impressed you’ve come around already.” The stranger chuckles at
this, and while he doesn’t say so outright, Barry knows that his kidnapper doesn’t think that he looks
particularly tough.
An unsettling and intimidating smile spreads over his lips, then, as he steps a bit closer.

Barry tries to move again, without success. He glances down on himself and realizes with a jolt of panic, that his arms and legs are bound to a chair. A small frightened whimper escapes him in response, earning another chuckle from the man.

“It’s alright, really.” His voice is deep and soft, and Barry tenses up when he gets so close, he nearly touches the edge of the chair between his knees. “No reason to be afraid, Barry. Nothing will happen to you if you play along.”

His kidnapper crouches down in front of him and rests his fingers on the wooden edge, close to his crotch. Barry feels how his heart nearly lurches up to his throat, and he starts shaking in response to this unwanted closeness.

“Hey there,” the stranger coos in a bizarrely soothing voice. “I just told you that you don’t need to be scared. Don’t you trust me?”

Another small noise escapes Barry, he sounds alarmed and afraid, and judging by how the man’s smile grows it is quite pleasing to him.

The stranger’s hands, which look big and strong despite having obviously been manicured not too long ago, move from their spot on the chair to his thighs, where they rest a bit above his knees. It is such an intrusive thing that Barry actually chokes out a small sob and once more tries to get away from him.

“Shhh,” the man hushes and starts to rub his thighs lightly as if to calm him down, while the unsettling smile still rests on his lips. “There, there, Barry. Just calm down. Nothing’s going to happen to you”

James starts yelling again, or tries to, at least. Barry doesn’t have to look around to know that they have gagged him. Still, his friend manages to sound furious and threatening nonetheless. Barry envies him for it. Any reaction other than being paralyzed by fear would be welcome to him.

“Your friend seems quite worried about you,” the stranger remarks as he glances past Barry to where James is. He seems amused by this fact.

“It is a bit surprising, to be honest,” he goes on and fixes Barry with his eyes again. “Doesn’t he know that you like to fuck little boys? Haven’t you told him?”

The look he’s giving Barry turns into one of feign reproach as he digs his thumbs painfully into the muscles of his thighs for a second.

“It isn’t good to keep such a secret from your friends, Barry,” he goes on and visibly enjoys how distressed Barry grows with each passing second. “How is he supposed to trust you if you aren’t honest to him?”

Bile is rising up Barry’s oesophagus, and he feels so terrified by what is happening to him that he can’t utter a single word. The stranger replies by smiling like a cat who caught the canary.

“Does Lenny know about it, then?” It takes Barry a moment to realize whom the other man is talking about. His eyes grow wide which in turn causes his capturer to chuckle.

“You look surprised, Barry. Have you really thought that people in the right circles don’t know about your little tête-à-tête?”
The hands start to rub his thighs again in a mock-soothing way, and it feels like he is being burned.

“I’m disappointed, Barry. After Kenneth, I’ve assumed that it became clear to you that you’re quite popular with us,” he explains. “Or you thought we would forget about you just like that? Especially after the odd stunt you pulled on him.”

Blacksmith, Barry thinks, this man has to work for Blacksmith. This notion confuses him; he doesn’t understand why they waited for so long if they were able to fetch him any given moment. And why now? It would only cause trouble with Len and the others, should they find out about this.

His thoughts come to a sudden stop when he notices the stranger moving his hands slowly up his tights closer to his crotch. An involuntary shudder overcomes him.

“D-d-don’t,” he pleads and feels a mixture of mortification and fear causing his skin to itch and tingle in a very familiar and uncomfortable way. Unwantedly, Michael and Puckett come to his mind.

“Shhh,” the man murmurs, and Barry feels like throwing up when he notices the nasty gleam in his eyes. “Maybe this will help you to relax a bit and show you that you don’t have anything to fear from us.”

A frightened groan escapes him, and he hardly picks up on James yelling furiously behind him, most likely cursing those guys to hell.

“We want you to cooperate with us after all, Barry. You see, you have to be our middle-man here,” his tormentor goes on, and he shudders when he can feel his fingertips reach the end of the inside of his upper thighs.

“Lenny and his little band of misfits seem to have become confused over who their real friends are, and I need you to make them understand that the Blue Velvet can offer them much, much more than this bitch ever will.”

What Barry hears causes his stomach to drop in an agonizing way; he could kick himself for being stupid enough to believe that the Rogues’ business with those people would not come back to haunt him. It seems that the BV and Blacksmith had some kind of disagreement and are no longer on the same page, and as a result his friends and by extension Barry himself have been caught in the middle of it. He briefly wonders why the Blue Velvet would be interested in the Rogues, but the man in front of him answers this next.

“They’re not the brightest, are they?” he asks in a condescending manner; his shark grin growing wider. “They’re tough, I give them that, but there are many tough people out there, and your fuckbuddy is under the wrong assumption that they differ somehow from them. It’s funny how thugs like them always think they are somehow special and more useful than the rest of their bread.”

Barry winces when the other man’s thumbs painfully dig into his thighs again.

“Do you think they are special, Barry? I’m pretty sure they can give you quite the ride worth your money, hm?” The way he leers at him causes him to whimper softly. “Oh, don’t be like that. I’m just asking, I don’t want to insinuate anything. I couldn’t give a rat’s ass who is pounding you into the mattress, to be honest.”

The criminal gives him a slow once over.

“Don’t understand why anybody would wanna fuck you anyway,” he says thoughtfully before he turns his gaze back to him with an easy smile. “Doesn’t matter, though, does it? What matters is that I need to talk to your little friends, and you are going to make this happen, aren’t you, Barry?”
When he just looks at his kidnapper, who’s crouching in front of him in confusion and fear, the still smiling man replies by intensifying his grip. Barry winces in pain and unsuccessfully tries to move away once again.

“Listen, Barry, I may look like I’m a nice guy and, don’t misunderstand me, I can be, if I choose to, but right now I’m really pissed and under a lot of pressure. I don’t give a fuck about you or the Rogues, but I need both of you, so please, for both our sakes, don’t make me hurt you.”

An oddly earnest expression crosses the man’s face, and Barry realizes that he is getting utterly overwhelmed by all of this.

“Come now, there’s no reason to cry. Do you really want to look like a baby in front of you friend?” the criminal murmurs and relaxes the vice like grip of his hands. He goes back to rub them in a calming manner over Barry’s trembling thighs.

“This will be over as soon as you agree to contact the Rogues for me, Barry. You just need to tell them that I want to meet them, nothing more.”

The man leans closer, so much so that there are just a couple of inches between their faces. His breath is warm and dry against Barry’s face, and he picks up on its faint minty smell as well as on the after shave the criminal is wearing. It causes something in him to stir in his lower belly, and the horrible realization that is body is acting against his will once again is nearly smothering.

“You will do that for me, won’t you?” his kidnapper asks in a calm and sweet voice. “It’s just to help me to clear up a misunderstanding. I even promise you, I won’t hurt your friends. I just need to talk to them.”

Barry, who is still crying quietly and shaking like a leaf in the wind, knows that the guy is lying. Of course he is lying. He has no intent to set him free and the notion that he has gotten James involved in this, makes him furious at himself and how stupid he has been.

“I-I d-d-don’t kn-kn-know wh-wher-re th-th-they a-a-are.”

It is the truth. He hasn’t spoken a word to Len or any of the others in weeks.

The criminal watches him quietly for a long moment, his face suddenly void of any expression. It scares him.

Then, he gets up, look back to the area behind Barry and purses his lips annoyed.

The backhand is expected. Barry has been in similar situations like this too many times before for it not to be. He instinctively tries to relax his neck and don’t offer too much resistance. It still is strong enough to cause the left side of his face to sear in pain for a couple of seconds, as a ringing fills his ears and a warm wetness run down his chin, most likely blood from a split lip.

The man lowers himself down, to be face to face with Barry anew and sneer. “You don’t seem to understand the position you are in, Barry. This is not a game, you will contact the Rogues for me, and don’t try to tell me you can’t, we both know this is bullshit. For whatever reason, Len is fond of your scrawny ass, and I know he’ll have left you with some means to get in contact with him. You know, just in case, because while that man is a fucking nuisance, he’s also smart.”

He grabs Barry on both sides on his head, as if to hold him in place, and digs his right thumb painfully in the wound of his split lip. Barry is too scared to let out a noise, though.

“Listen, I’ll do horrible, horrible things to you if you don’t get those fuckers to meet up with me. I
know you are no stranger to torture but, believe me, nothing what has been done to you will even come close to what I’ve in store for you, you dumb little bitch.”

Barry cries out in pain when the criminal digs his nails into his skin and gives his head a painful shake. Then, the hands are gone from his face and instead his shoulders are grabbed. With a jolt, the chair he is sitting on is turned around and his stomach makes a painful lurch up towards his throat when he spots James, also bound to a chair with two big buff and mean looking guys on either of his side.

“But you know, it will be nothing to what it will do to your little friend there. I will make sure that he becomes familiar with what it is like to have another man’s fist up his ass while others fuck his pretty little mouth. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

A hand grasps his hair and gives it a painful tug as if to emphasize his words.

“He doesn’t seem averse to the idea of cocks in his mouth anyway,” the criminal adds nastily. Barry whimpers when the grip in his hairs tightens so much, he is sure he is going to rip part of his scalp off any moment now. “Maybe he’ll like what I’ve in store for him? He seems to be very fond of you. Do you think he would enjoy fucking you while he has another cock up his own ass?”

To James’ credit, he doesn’t look frightened at all, but really pissed off. He makes the impression as if he would lunge at any of the guys around him weren’t he bound to the chair, and it goes totally over Barry’s head because he himself is terrified and just wants to leave so very badly.

“Do you want us to try and see whether he could get it up for you?”

Barry shudders and can’t bring himself to speak.

“Well, maybe that isn’t the right kind motivation for you,” concedes the other man with a frown. “You would probably snap, and I really don’t have the patience for this.”

The fingers in his hair are gone a moment later, and he watches confused and partly numb due to the pain how the criminal makes a step towards James and pulls a gun Barry hasn’t noticed on him so far.

“What if I tell you that I’ll blow his handsome face off instead? Does that make you feel more cooperative?”

“N-no! D-d-don’t! P-please!”

“No? You don’t want to see what the insides of his head look like?” the man asks innocently as he points the gun straight at James’ head. “You sure? Most people really can’t imagine how messy such a shot to the head is. You really don’t wanna see?”

“N-no! P-Please, d-d-don’t h-h-hu-”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, do you even know how fucking annoying you sound?” The criminal gives him a glare. “I really get the feeling I’m wasting my time here, and I hate wasting my time, Barry. I get really upset, when I do that.”

The man turns away from him and makes another step towards James. The grip on the gun tightens as he takes aim on the other man’s head, who is still scowling at their kidnapper but does actually looks a bit scared now.

“You want to tell me you agree to contact the Rogues, or you want me to give him a new look,
Barry? I’m not waiting any longer, tell me now!”

“Y-yes! O-ok-kay!” Barry gives the man a pleading look and prays he will put the damn gun away. This has nothing to do with James, it is his fault his friend got involved in this mess, he would never be able to forgive himself, should anything happen to him.

“Yes?” The criminal suddenly flashes him a dazzling smile. “Good, very good, Barry. For a moment there, I was worried you would be stubborn enough to make this really painful for both of you.”

The gun is lowered, and Barry lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, exhaling in relief. His body’s still shaking so bad that he is certain he would have fallen to the ground by now if it weren’t for the bonds that are immobilizing him. He feels sick again and notices that he has started to sweat like crazy.

“I’m relieved, really. I don’t want this to turn into something we all would regret in the end.” His kidnapper chuckles, and Barry thinks that, of all the things he sometimes misses from back then when he still had his powers, it certainly isn’t to have to deal with people who are so obviously crazy and full of themselves like this one in front of him. He glances over to James, who looks a bit shaken but clearly alleviated by not having been shot.

“So, how are we doing this?” The criminal sounds much calmer right now and steps back closer to Barry. “I don’t presume you simply have a number to call them on?”

Shivering, he shakes his head and closes his eyes for a moment.

“Hey there, now, everything is alright again,” the man says in a cheerful voice. “I’m sorry that I went a bit rough on you, but the clock is ticking and I’m really under a lot of time pressure right now, so please, if you could try to get it together and tell me how you’ll contact your friends.”

A note of steely impatience creeps back into his voice, and Barry shudders in response. He opens his eyes and slowly looks up to him.

“Th-th-there’s a-a m-mir-r-ror.”

“A mirror?” his kidnapper repeats with an arched eyebrow, before he snorts. “Of course, with Scudder that is probably the most convenient and safest way for them to communicate, isn’t it?”

Barry keeps his mouth shut and doesn’t respond, and the criminal doesn’t seem to expect him to, anyway.

“So, any mirror can do the job or just one in particular?”

“I-I… a-a c-c-e-r-t-t-a in o-one…” He feels like such a backstabbing asshole. Len gave him this in case he needed help. His friend was worried about him, and now he pays him back like this. His eyes start to itch even worse, and takes a shuddering breath.

“Come on now, there is really no reason for tears. You’re doing great, and it won’t take long before you and your friend are safe at home again, okay? You have my word for it.”

Barry doesn’t say that the word of a person like him, worths less than dust, and averts his eyes to the ground.

“You wouldn’t have this mirror on you by any chance, would you?”

He shakes his head in no, swallows, and explains to his tormentor that the artifact is in his flat.
“I-in th-the b-b-bot-tom d-d-drawer o-of th-the c-c-c… c-cupb-board i-in m-my b-b-bedroom.”

“Let me guess, the sock drawer,” the criminal chuckles, and doesn’t care that Barry doesn’t response. “Good, that’s something we can work with.”

The man turns to his two thugs. “Cut them loose and keep an eye on them. They’re not to leave the room, but they are our guests, so threaten them accordingly.”

Barry notices how both men, who are at least a head taller than their boss, tense up, as soon as he focuses on them. If not scared, they seem at least intimidated by the other criminal; not a very reassuring situation at all, and he feels his stomach drop when their kidnapper zeroes in on him once again to address him with another one of that absurdly nice smiles.

“Well, I’ll make sure that you get the mirror asap, so we can get over with all of this, and you don’t have to stay here any longer than necessary. Just try to relax while you are here, nothing will happen to you, as long as you don’t try to mess with me, at least.” Something shifts in his expression, it turns from friendly to cold and threatening in a second, causing Barry to get goose bumps.

“Should it turn out that, you try to play me for a sucker, I’ll skin your little friend over their alive in front of you pretty blue eyes.” He states that in such a calm and sober way that is just disturbing. Barry wishes he would finally leave, his presence becomes more and more unsettling with every passing minute.

“Tell these two gentlemen if you need anything, they’ll take care of it. I’ll have to leave for now seeing that I’m quite a-” As if on cue, his cell phone starts ringing, and he throws an amused look with Barry, not bothered at all that he just keeps watching him like a mouse would eye a cat. Without another word to them, the man behind their kidnapping answers his phone, vanishing out of his field of vision. A door is opened and shut again, and he is gone.

Their newly assigned guards, cut them loose from the chairs and warn them not to try anything in a gruff tone before they leave the room, locking it behind them.

Barry had slid off the chair and dropped to his knees as soon as the bonds were gone. He feels shaken and sick and decides that, it is probably a good idea to not try and get up again for at least a while. His body is trembling so roughly by now that his teeth are actually clattering.

“Hey, are you alright?” James is kneeling next to him, thoughtful enough not to touch him; he sounds very worried. Barry doesn’t understand why he still cares or why he isn’t totally livid with him right now, instead. His friend is in this horrible kind of a mess because of him, and he has to know this, after what has just happened.

“S-s-sorry… I-I… th-th-this… I-I a-am s-s-s… s-so s-s-sorry…”

A shudders goes through his body and he presses a hand against his eyes. He becomes aware of just now that he is still crying.

“Barry, are you hurt?” James urges him, and Barry feels even worse for it.

“N-no,” he shakes his head and takes a deep breath to calm himself a bit. There is his split lip but, this is hardly worth mentioning, and he knows James is not talking about it, as he saw Barry getting it. He is most likely talking about more severe injuries.

“Good.” James nods, but sounds wary, like he isn’t really believing him. “That’s good.”

They fall silent after the exchange and remain like that for the next couple of minutes, what gives
Barry some time to collect himself again.

“I-I’m s-sorry, J-James,” he utters quietly and hates how badly his voice is trembling, so much, it must be difficult to his friend to understand him. “F-f-for g-get-t-ing y-you i-int-to th-this m-mess.”

James meets his pleading eyes with an earnest, worried look. He seems to ponder for a moment, before inquiring in a very grave and concerned voice. “Barry, what is going on?”

The fact that he still doesn’t sound aggravated or even just a bit angry, is hard to fathom for Barry, but he knows he should be grateful for it, even though he doesn’t deserve it. He swallows nervously as he glances to the concrete floor beneath him.

Briefly, he wonders if it would endanger James even more, should he tell him about his connection to the Rogues, but decides that it is most likely not the case and probably could even aid him in getting out of this alive. If they, by some miracle, were able to do just that, it would also make it clear to James that it is much safer for him to stay away.

The notion of losing James is painful to Barry, even though they have become friends just recently. Still, he owes James the truth, no matter how little Barry wants him to know about it.

Taking another shuddering breath, Barry turns back to him and starts to explain what landed both of them into this mess.

Chapter End Notes

After last week’s cliffhanger we finally know what is going on (somewhat, at least ;), and I’m quite excited that we’ve finally reached this little mini-arc. Barry is really in a touch spot right now, and Cameron… what can I say, he is awful, just a plain awful fellow you don’t want to be around, but still so much fin to write! XD

I really hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! There will be two more part of In The Lion’s Den before we deal with the aftermath of it.

Unfortunately, I've only about 8 chapters left I just need to make smaller changes before a I'm going to write a rather large part of the story from scrap again because I'm not really satisfied with how it turned out before. This will probably mean that my updates will slow down considerably (the new semester is starting as well soon and work is keeping me busy), but I'll try to stay regularly with them at least. This is just meant as a little heads-up, so that you’re not caught off-guard when my uploading schedule changes.

Next week will have Len return (in a way ;), and we will learn more about what kind of a guy Cameron really is. We will also be introduced to someone people who read the comics may recognize.
In the Lion’s Den Part II

Chapter Summary

The Rogues get involved, Len is not pleased, and Cameron turns out to be an even bigger dick than expected.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: explicit physical abuse

This chapter has been betaed by Katzerover who is turning this story a much more pleasant reading experience by using her kickass editing skills! Danke, meine Liebe! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is difficult, but Barry is able to his hand steady when he reaches for the mirror from the man who interrogated him before, and whose name he still doesn’t know.

Getting the shiny gadget from his apartment took hardly no time, maybe one hour tops if at all, and Barry notices that they still must be somewhere within the twins, most likely even within Keystone, given that James watch shows it is just around half past six in the morning by now, and the traffic is usually quite horrible this early in the day.

“So, here you have it,” their kidnapper says in a light and clearly pleased voice, and Barry has to fight a shudder when their fingers touch briefly which causes the other man’s smile to grow a bit as he hasn’t missed his reaction.

“You really have no reason to fear me, Barry. I told you already, nothing’s gonna happen to you as long as you play along.” It sounds a bit like he is being scolded, as if he is behaving unreasonable here, and he wouldn’t have thought it possible, but his dislike for the stranger actually grows.

“Come on, now, call your friends. We’ve wasted enough time already,” the man urges and his taunting smile is replaced by a much more somber expression. “I’ve other things to do, mind you.”

Barry nods, but glances briefly over his shoulder to where James is standing a few feet away. Their gazes meet, and his friend gives him a faint, but reassuring smile. His friend still looks tensed up and worried, though, and Barry wishes he knew what he is thinking. James hasn’t said all that much on what Barry told him about his relationship with the infamous group of criminals before. Not that Barry holds it against him, it is much to take in after all.

Frowning dejected, he eyes the small mirror in his hand and takes a deep breath, glancing briefly up to the criminal in front of him, who is staring at him fixedly, before he looks into the round reflective surface, and hesitatingly calls out for Sam.

A few seconds go by, after which nothing happens; Barry is quickly and without warning, overcome with the horrifying realization that, of course, nobody is going to answer. They pretty much decided
on mutual terms, it would be unfavorable for both parties if Barry kept in contact with them, and even though he is sure that Len, had Sam check up on him over the last couple of weeks, and assured him this is just a temporary thing when all of this started. His friend must have realized by now that it may a much more sensible and clever thing for them to cut him off permanently.

In this case, the little mirror in his hand, has become pretty much useless and into a certain death sentences for both him and James.

This notion drained the color from Barry’s face, and the criminal in front of him has to have picked up on it as Barry can feel his gaze turn angry and unsettled without having to look up. The other man steps closer and grabs his wrist painfully rough to pull it a bit over so that he could also gaze in the mirror.

“What is the problem? Why is nobody-” He stops when Sam appears on the small round surface, and Barry immediately notices on how spent his friend looks. He is wearing his costume, mask pulled back, making way to a mop of unkempt hair, that is in dire need of a cut.

Sam holds a hostile expression and looks tense. Both of which catches Barry off-guard, and is glad his friend’s eyes only glance over to him briefly, before he spots the man next to him, which causes a rather impressive looking scowl to show up appear on his face.

“You have some fucking nerves,” Sam grunts, and it takes Barry a moment to understand that his friend is not surprised to see the other criminal, at least not that much.

“Good to see you too, Sammy, really. I was worried that your current mistress had gotten you killed already. We both know that our lovely Amunet isn’t really the safest person to be around, these days.”

“Screw you, Cameron.” Sam hisses angrily. “Your fucking feud is none of our business-”

“Well it is now, isn’t it?” the other criminal - Cameron apparently - cuts him off with a smirk, increasing his grip on Barry’s wrist, enough to make him flinch. Sam’s eyes immediately move over to him and, for a second, a concerned frown appears on his face before he schools his features again. He turns back to the other man and sneers.

“Is it? Do you really think you can blackmail us into working with you that way?”

“Why not?” Cameron shrugs and chuckles. “The cunt did the same, didn’t she? And it worked as we both know? Don’t waste my time, Scudder, get Snart on the line.”

Sam scowls at the other criminal darkly.

“He isn’t here.”

“You should better get him quick, in that case,” Cameron replies calmly. “Because for every minute that passes by, without me being able to talk to him, I’m going to break one of our dear Barry’s fingers here.”

Sam bares his teeth like a dog, snarling at him not to dare to while, behind them, James cries out in protest as well. Barry just stays quiet and closes his eyes for a moment. He knows he should have seen this coming.

“If you don’t want this to happen to him, you should better get your ass moving and get Snart for me,” Cameron says calmly. “Clock’s ticking, Scudder, so move it.”
Sam hesitates for a couple of seconds and glares at the other man. Then, he glances over to Barry and a more worried expression takes place on his features once more. He mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like *fuck*, and the surface of the mirror shows suddenly their own reflection again.

“They really don’t want anything to happen to you,” Cameron remarks, and he sounds amused by this in a nearly incredulous kind of way. He turns his attention back to Barry and gives him another once over before he chuckles. Barry stays quiet.

It feels like they are waiting forever for Len, and Cameron doesn’t lessen the painfully strong hold on his wrist at all as the seconds pass by. His hand is like a claw to Barry, he is pretty sure that the other man knows how disturbing it is having him standing this close. He likely is doing it for just that reason.

While he keeps his eyes on the small mirror on his now slightly shaking hand, he is aware that James is watching him intently. Barry can’t bring himself to glance back to him, though. Finally, the mirror surface changes again, and Len’s face appears on it, his face sullen and exhausted, yet it’s still such a relief to see him again.

Len’s gaze struck and locked on to Barry’s, waking up a ridiculous sudden feeling in him to crawl through the small glass in his hand and hide away there till everything is over. It is so stupid, he knows, but on a subconscious level he is certain that his friend could protect him from getting harmed again. This notion nearly has him scoffing in anger and sadness. He knows things don’t work like this in reality.

“You’re looking good, Lenny,” Cameron greets in a calm, pleased tone. “Very much alive.”

Len doesn’t answer. He holds Barry’s gaze for a moment longer with his expression, not giving away much, only his clear unhappiness about finding him here. Then, he turns his attention to the other criminal.

“You hurt him, and I’ll break your neck.” It is unsettling how Len states this threat. He sounds utterly calm and serious.

Cameron smiles in response. “I don’t think so, Lenny. I think, instead, you’ll get me the info that bitch of yours took from us. And do so quickly, or I’m gonna hurt your little boy-toy here. Very much so, let me assure you.”

Both of them keep staring at each other for a long moment after that exchange. Barry is pretty sure Len knows as much as he does that this man is not joking. He’d probably known so already, before facing him here.

“You’re an arrogant asshole, Cameron, but you ain’t stupid. If we get this data to you, we are as good as dead,” Len states matter-of-factly and does not look over to Barry who winces, when Cameron’s grip tightens up, like a vice.

“It would be suicide for us but puttin’ that aside, you really know none of the data is worth shit. You saw it, you bitched about it to no end,” Len reminds him, and Barry can sense the criminal next to him, shifting almost imperceptible as if he was growing impatient again. “I’m not even sure whether Blacksmith still has it or not. We took it weeks ago and that woman doesn’t like to hold onto things for too long.”

“That isn’t entirely true, is it?” Cameron interjects with a smile that is sheer malevolence. “She likes to keep on to you, Lenny, doesn’t she? That stupid little bitch is fond of you, and I’m certain you can
get her to give you the data or learn from her where it is.”

Barry whines softly when the other man digs his fingers painfully into Barry’s wrist, he is certain it is going to break should he not relax his hold a bit. He glances at Cameron, noticing that his mood has turned bad once again.

“I don’t care how you get it from her. Fuck her, torture her, whatever. I’ll leave this in your capable hands,” the criminal goes on. “You’ve till tomorrow 9 pm. Bring it to me, to the east side of the southern hall, at the docks, where the cunt likes to stash her goods. Oh, and don’t think for a second that you can take me for an idiot. I’ll check the data before you get your little honey-bun back and, should it turn out to be fake, I can guarantee you that I’m not the only one who will not walk away happy from there.” Cameron’s tightens his grip on Barry’s hand at this, causing him to whimper in response.

Len scowls and is about to protest when Cameron cuts him off.

“I’ve wasted enough time already,” he glances at his watch in exasperation as if to make a point before he stares back at Len. “You will bring it to me, or I’ll kill our sweet little Barry here.” Cameron chuckles softly and adds. “After having him fucked raw by my men, that is.”

“Lay a fucking finger on him, and I will gut you, Cameron,” Len threatens in a low, belligerent voice, but the other criminal laughs at his face in response. “I thought you were going to break my neck, Lenny? Haven’t really decided on that one yet, have you?”

Without a warning, he snatches the mirror out of Barry’s hand and throws it over to one of the thugs who is standing close to James. The guy seems taken aback but catches it nonetheless. “Hold it, so that our friend can see that my warnings mustn’t be taken lightly,” Cameron orders before he changes his grip on Barry’s hand and forces him violently on his knees, his arm pulled back away from his body twisted in such a way that makes it impossible for him to move at all without it hurting.

“What the hell are you doing?” Len snarls; Barry glances up to the mirror in the thug’s grasp to look at him. He feels absolutely terrified because he knows what follows now. Len doesn’t have his eyes on him, though, and it gets hard to breathe all at once.

James is yelling, when Barry looks at him over his shoulder. Two of Cameron’s men have him on the ground now, holding him down, his arms painfully twisted behind his back, while he is furiously trying to get up again. Barry wishes his friend wouldn’t have to see this. He wants to call out to him. He wants to call out to him, tell him to -please- look away, but his throat closed up on him again, and it is already difficult to get enough air in his lungs.

“I told Scudder before, I’m gonna break one of his fingers for each minute that ticks by” Cameron explains and sounds so damn pleased by the prospect of making his threat come true. It is disgusting, unsettling, and Barry has to bite down a sob at the notion of what is about to happen. The other man takes hold of the ring finger of his right hand.

“He doesn’t seem to have taken me very seriously, and I don’t want you to make the same mistake,” the criminal goes on, and Barry can’t bring himself to look up at him.

Len doesn’t reply. Barry isn’t sure how he feels about it. He glances up to the mirror, where he can hardly make out the other man’s face on the small surface, tries to tell himself that he should not feel so damn betrayed by it.

The pain is mind-numbing; Cameron breaks his finger at the base, with one quick jerk and the crack
it makes is just plain horrible and sickening. Barry doesn’t cry out, he throws up. He is glad he has enough self-control left to prevent his bladder to give out but, this relief is a fleeting flame of comfort, before the hot, throbbing pain smothers everything and he starts to sob.

“You fucking bastard!”

It is James, he sounds still infuriated but, there is something else in his voice as well, a note of pain, however Barry can hardly concentrate on anything right now.

“He has pretty weak bones,” Cameron comments in a disgustingly amused way, and Barry wails up when he tugs at his broken finger playfully.

“I will kill you for this.” Len sounds cold and emotionless.

“Yes, you’ve stated so a couple of times so far.”

Cameron is clearly not impressed and chuckles softly.

Barry feels dizzy, he is sure he would fall face forward into his own vomit if it wasn’t for the other man holding him up. He winces when he lets go of his finger and briefly is flooded by relief before he grabs his little one. The sheer panicked horror that that overcoming him at that, is nearly overwhelming.

“N-no…” he rasps and tries to tug his hand away. “P-p-ple-ease…”

“God, he sounds awful, doesn’t he?” Cameron asks, and it is obviously directed towards Len. “How the hell can you stand him talking? He sounds like a broken record.”

“What are you doing?” This time, Len does sound upset, but Barry doesn’t really pay too much attention. He just wants to get away from this awful man.

“I told you, for each minute one finger, and it took your friend two minutes,” Cameron explains with a shrug. “Nearly three, to be honest.”

“Take your fucking fingers off him, you damn bastard!” James bellows yet again to no avail. Still, having him here, is actually the only source of comfort Barry has, so he tries to remember that he isn’t alone.

Again, the criminal gives him no warning before he breaks his next finger, which is actually a small mercy in itself. The pain is even worse the second time around, and, this time, Barry does scream.

He hardly picks up on anything afterwards. Moreover, there is just this horrible hideous, sickening pain and the feeling of being totally helpless again, which is even worse. He gets pulled back, so he falls backwards when Cameron lets go of his hand; he doesn’t pick up on it, till later but it must have been an unexpected act of kindness from his tormentor, to not let him fall into his own vomit.

Everything turns dark promptly after that.

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Barry comes to himself, lying on a hard, cool surface in a brightly lit room. In the first instance, he is confused, his vision is blurry and clouded, and he doesn’t recognize his surroundings. Then, he notices the throbbing pain in his left hand, and the fog that has settled over his mind starts to lift. The memories of what transpired comes rushing back, and they are like glass shards under bare feet.
A small, distressed noise escapes him; he instinctively tries to curl up on his side, and make himself as small as possible. Unfortunately, his body feels heavy and sluggish, though, and he can hardly move. Briefly, he thinks that this must be due to him having been bound again, but he quickly realizes that this isn’t the case, when he can’t pick up on the feeling of restraints against his limbs.

Someone turns up at his side, he or she is hardly more than a dark blurry silhouette to Barry, and he immediately tenses up. This causes the ache in his hand to grow worse, and he cringes as a consequence.

“There is no reason to be afraid of me, Mr. Allen,” an unfamiliar male says. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

Barry doesn’t try to reply. He just nervously squints at the stranger and tries to get his eyes to finally focus again. He really wishes he had more control over his body; he wouldn’t feel so damn helpless then.

“You’re safe, at least for now,” the stranger goes on. “I’ve set your fingers back and given you something for the pain. You don’t look like the drugs are really doing their job, though.”

The stranger, almost certainly a doctor, doesn’t get angry or impatient when he fails to answer and in lieu he sighs softly before turning around and trails off from his visual field.

“I’ve given you some diluted buprenorphine, you should feel better by now,” the other man says from somewhere next to him. “I’ll give you another shot and let’s hope that this one does its job better. There isn’t much else I can work with in here.”

He actually sounds apologetic, and Barry wonders who he is and, whether he is one of Cameron’s men or another prisoner.

“I-it’s f-fine,” he says and has a coughing fit as his throat feels dry like a wasteland. This causes the pain in his hand to flare up again; a small whine passes his lips before he can bite down on it.

“Don’t be alarmed, I’m just going to help you to drink some water, okay?”

Barry tries to brace himself, out of instinct, waiting for the invading touch after those words. It doesn’t come, and he looks over to examine the man, who is standing at his side again, in confusion. He squints at him again through his blurred vision which only grew worse since his eyes have teared up thanks to the pain in his fingers.

“I’ll just lay my hand under your neck to lift your head a bit. Is that alright for you?” It feels like a balm to Barry when he realizes that the stranger is actually waiting for his agreement, before making any move. His tongue feels like sandpaper as he attempts to wet his lips. He wonders whether this is due to how long he has been out or maybe owing to the fact that he took that medication. In any case, he would give a lot for something to drink.

“O-ok-kay.”

“Good.” The other man nods. “I’ll slide my hand under your neck now.”

The touch is disturbing but not as bad as it could have been, and while Barry groans softly due to the unwelcome contact, he is glad that he doesn’t get sick or start to really lose his nerves over it. His head is lifted and a plastic cup is pressed against his chapped bottom chapped lip.

The water is cool and simply magnificent, and he is aware that he would drink it too quickly weren’t it for his current care-taker, who makes sure that he keeps a slow pace.
Once the cup is empty, his head laid back down onto the cool surface, which must belong to some kind of examination table, he sighs softly in relief.

“I can imagine you were thirsty, that is usually a side-effect with these sort of painkillers,” the stranger remarks.

Barry looks at him drowsily and mumbles a small, still raspy thanks. Before the other man can answer, the sound of a door being opened somewhere near him cuts through the room. Barry tenses immediately causing a white-hot pain to flare through his left hand and fresh tear flood his eyes.

“Doctor Elias!”

It’s Cameron.

Of course it would be that horrible man.

He sounds like he is in a very good mood, and Barry suddenly wishes for a cover he could pull over his head and hide underneath.

“How is our patient doing?” The man comes up to his other side, standing opposite Doctor Elias, and albeit Barry can’t make out his facial features, he knows he is beaming down on him.

“You broke two of his fingers,” the doctor deadpans.

“Yes, well,” Cameron actually sounds both amused and a bit sheepish. “I had to make clear how serious I was, and breaking his fingers was one of the least permanently damaging things I could have done, believe me.”

“I’m sure,” Dr. Elias agrees curtly and, despite the fact that he keeps his voice even, it is hard to miss that he doesn’t really think much of the damage inflicted upon Barry. “Then again, you also could have broken his nose, it would had brought your point over as well and it would be much easier and quicker to fix than this.”

“Don’t be like this, Darwin-”

“Doctor Elias,” the doctor corrects sharply and for a brief moment a palpable tension creeps up between them.

“Doctor,” Cameron grants calmly, and Barry feels himself getting sick? with apprehension when said man actually turns to him next and smiles. “It seems I’ve upset our resident physician.”

“I may be a doctor, but I’m not a physician” Dr. Elias interject, and he sounds audible miffed about this mix-up of his occupation. “And while I’m able to set broken bones, I would really rather not.”

“I know, and I am sorry for causing you so much trouble but, you’re here on your own free accord so, stop bitching.” It seems that the Cameron’s patience grows thin again, thereafter he is not in the mood for bickering. In fact, he turns to face Barry back, and even though his face is mostly just a nebulous mess to him, he still can discern a wide grin which holds holds too much white.

“How are you doing, Barry? I hope the doctor took good care of you.”

Barry only stares at him, he feels a bit like a deer caught in the headlights of a car that’s about to run him over any second now.

“Hey, now, there is no reason for that,” Cameron says in a surprisingly earnest tone. “I didn’t lie to
the good doctor, I hurt you because I had to. You did well, and I’m seriously sorry for breaking your fingers, but I had to get Snart to understand that I’m not joking around. That man can be so fucking stubborn.”

Following that, Barry still stays quiet, watching the criminal warily. He is startled when the other man barks a laugh, and winces in pain.

“You really are terrified of me, aren’t you?” This is a clearly an amusing realization to him. Barry shuts his eyes and turns his head to face away from the man.

“Is he alright?” There isn’t real concern in Cameron’s voice, but he sounds curious.

“He is in pain, and his abuser is standing over him gloating, do you really need me to answer that question for you?” Dr. Elias says matter-of-factly, but the annoyance he must feel is coming comes off him in waves.

“You didn’t give him any painkillers?”

“Of course I did” the doctor grouses and actually looks insulted by the insinuation that he wouldn’t do something as primal as that. “They aren’t really working on him, though.”

“Really? Why?”

“I don’t know.”

By the icy way Dr. Elias is saying that, it is pretty obvious that he dislikes said circumstance very much.

“Aren’t you some kind of genius?” Cameron quips amused.

“Are you here for a reason or, just to distract me to take care of the man you’ve brought here, in the first place?”

“You’re such an uptight asshole, Elias, you know that?”

“Just leave, and let me do my work in peace. You are always going on about how busy you are anyway, so don’t waste your time here.”

Barry tries to make himself as unobtrusive and little of a target as possible as the animosity thickening once more between both men is not lost on him. It is terrifying, and the tension seems to make the pain in his hand grow even worse.

“Very well then, you’re right. I do have more urgent things to attend to,” Cameron agrees way too cheerfully, and Barry is flooded by relief when he can hear him walk away. It is as if a weight has been lifted off his chest, and breathing becomes more bearable again.

“By the way, doctor,” Cameron stops at the door and faces them again, yet Barry is still not able to distinguish anything more than a smudged shape of a person.

“You should keep in mind that, you may be all tight with my employers but, they are far away from here, and accidents can happen much quicker than one would think.” The threat is so painfully obvious; it could have hung in big bold letters above the man’s head. “Your fingers are more important to your work than they are for a salesclerk, aren’t they?”

The doctor stays quiet, but Cameron seems satisfied, nonetheless.
“I will come around to check on you later again, Barry. Try to get better quick, would ya’?” With that, he opens the door and leaves.

The room is so silent, you can hear a pin drop, before Dr. Elias ends it with a softly exhaled sigh. Barry turns his attention back to the aforementioned man, who is also looking at him, and can’t help but to feel a bit worried by the fact that his eyesight is still deteriorated, and he’s not able to see clearly, no matter how hard he tries to focus.

“You have problems with your vision?” the doctor asks and studies him with a frown as if he had picked up on the troubles. Barry only nods slightly as he feels extremely groggy once more. It seems that Cameron’s visit has cost him quite a lot of energy.

“That’s odd” the doctor mutters under his breath, before he addresses Barry again. “Are there any other symptoms that are not connected to your injury? Like dizziness, sickness, for instance?”

Barry frowns and debates if he should point out that dizziness and sickness aren’t exactly something uncommon to experience, after having some of your bones forcefully broken. Then again, he doubts the doctor has that much experience with these kind of things.

“T-t-tired a-and w-w-weak,” he croaks and unsuccessfully tries to lift his right hand to show what he means.

“Exhaustion can be a side-effect… Maybe an allergic reaction to the opioid?”

Again, the doctor speaks more to himself than Barry and keeps studying him an instants longer before he vanishes from his visual field.

When he returns, he’s holding something that looks like a syringe in his hand.

“I will give you something for your circulation. Your present state is most likely of a psychological nature, and the buprenorphine is only adding to it,” Elias speaks calmly, and while Barry keeps eying him warily, he can’t but be grateful for his attempt to make this a bit easier on him.

“I’ll touch your arm now, to give you the shot.” Dr. Elias warns him. “There’s no reason to be alarmed.”

Barry shudders slightly at the contact but tries to hold still. Something cool and wet is swiped over a patch of his skin and the sharp alcoholic smell of disinfectant reaches his nose.

“You’re doing very well, Mr. Allen” Dr. Elias works very swiftly and the sting of the injection last for a few seconds only, before he has the needle pulled out again. A small cotton pad is pressed against where he has just been injected with the drug, and the doctor orders him to relax when he tenses up again.

“I’ll administer you some morphine in a bit. It will probably work better with the pain than the buprenorphine has” he tells him, and while he tries to appear confident about it, Barry has the feeling that he really isn’t. It is just his luck that his spoiled body would cause him trouble with this now, as well.

“Wh-where’s J-Jam-mes?”

Despite being so tired that he has trouble keeping his eyes open, he wants to know that his friend is safe. Or at least as safe as he can be under these circumstances.

“Mr. Lai?” Dr. Elias inquires and sounds surprised. “The man who came in with you? Is he your
Barry frowns and wishes for a straight answer from the man, but he still nods.

“I don’t know exactly, but I’m sure he is safe.” This doesn’t set any of his worries, and Dr. Elias seems to pick up on it. “If it helps to calm your nerves, I can go and check on his whereabouts.”

This is an unexpectedly kind offer, and Barry’s disbelief about it must be evident on his face as the other man chuckles curtly. “It’s no problem, I’ll just do a quick check up on him and make sure that he’s alright.”

They say not to look a gifted horse into the mouth, but Barry knows it is very unlikely that this stranger would display this random act of kindness to him out of the blue just like that. There is always a catch, especially with people like this doctor who is working for men like Cameron.

“You don’t trust me.” The statement catches Barry off-guard, but he doesn’t try to correct him. “Well, you seem like a smart person, so I’m not surprised,” Dr. Elias goes on, and while Barry still isn’t able to focus very well, he is pretty sure that the man is giving him a rueful smile.

“Y-you w-work w-with th-them,” Barry points out quietly, trying not to sound accusing. It probably isn’t a good idea to upset the man who is actually helping him right now.

“I do,” the doctor admits, “but that doesn’t mean that I agree with them or particularly like what they’re doing.”

“Th-that d-d-does-n’t r-real-ly m-m-make i-it a-anything b-b-better,” he remarks sluggishly which causes the other man to hum in agreement. “No, it doesn’t.”

They both fall silent after that, and Barry turns to face away from him. He admits to himself that he isn’t really angry at the doctor, and, though he may dislike the situation he is in, he knows that this is clearly not the other man’s fault. At any rate, he feels powerless and scared, and it is just so damn much to deal with when he can’t even be sure that he isn’t going to get James and himself killed, within the next twenty-four hours.

… or the Rogues.

“You should try and rest a bit, Mr. Allen.” Dr. Elias doesn’t sound upset, which is a good thing, whereas Barry isn’t sure he would dare to face him again otherwise.

“C-c-can y-y-you ch-check u-up o-o-o-on J-J-Jam-m-mes p-p-please?”

“Of course,” the doctor agrees. “I told you I would, didn’t I?”

He doesn’t seem bothered by his request, which is odd, but also both a relief and a bit unsettling, as Barry doesn’t have the faintest no idea why this stranger would agree to help him in any way.

“Just rest. I’ll look for your friend, and after that I’ll come back and give you some morphine for your hand.”

There isn’t really anything else Barry can do but comply. He is exhausted to the core, nevertheless the knowledge that the doctor might would go and check up on James, eases a bit some of his tension.

Barry doesn’t notice when his eyes shut. He thinks he mumbles a ‘thank you’ before everything
fades away, including the throbbing pain in his left hand.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is one I’ve looked really forward to. I was missing Len a lot, I didn’t really notice his absence so much when I first wrote this part of the story but going over it again, and posting it, actually made me realize that he and the other Rogues have been gone for a while now.

I love Cameron, well, I hate him, really, but at the same time he is so unbelievable fun to write, such a horrible character who offers so much riches when it comes to exploring his character and working with this resources of evil. ;)

Barry, on the other hand (and certainly Len as well) is probably cursing me for introducing him. Barry had to go through a lot again in this chapter, and the abuse he experiences is awful, and I’m aware that this upsets some of my readers who want for Barry’s life to finally pick up, and I’m really sorry about this. Things will eventually look up for him, but Singularity is just the first part of a two (maybe three?) part story arc, and it is probably the most daunting one of them when it comes to what Barry has to deal with. It won’t go on like this forever, though, I promise. :)

I really hope you enjoyed this chapter, I loved writing it, and it was a joy looking over it once more (especially after my beta did such a magnificent job editing it) even despite how dark it turned out to be in the end.

Thank you for bearing with me, and sticking with Barry through all the trauma he has to go through right now. <3
In the Lion's Den Part III

Chapter Summary

Barry and James are brought to the venue where Cameron has agreed to meet with the Rogues. Things turn ugly rather quickly.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited by my dear friend Katzerover. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It rains when Barry and James are finally ushered outside from wherever they were kept for the last day. Both of them have bags shoved over their heads and are pretty much blind to the world around them as they stumble their ways where the thugs are directing them with not so tender pushes.

Cameron walks in front of them, and Barry can hear him talk into his cell phone. The man isn’t speaking English, and while Barry isn’t really sure, he thinks it could be Spanish or Portuguese. There are bits he believes he recognizes from when he heard Marco speak it before, and even despite how worried he is right now, he can’t help but wonder what the man is currently talking about.

He wonders whether it has something to do with the Rogues…

This is probably a trap for his friends, he knows that, and he hates how helpless he feels that he can’t do anything to help them. He hasn’t hated his lack of powers this much in a long while.

As they walk, or stumble their way towards wherever they are lead to right now, Barry tries not to ignore the guilt that rests as a tight knot in the pit of his stomach. Any of this, everything that is going to happen, lays outside his reach of influence. It is a daunting realization.

Another push in his back nearly causes him to stumble, and he hisses when a sharp pain flashes through his broken fingers. He tries not to move his hurt hand too much, Dr. Elias immobilized his fingers with a splint to fix them, but even so it is nothing more than a temporary solution to keep the broken bones in their right position before he can get a real cast.

One of the last things he wants to do right now is to upset the injury by accident; it still hurts, but the sharp, nearly sickening pain has dulled down considerably by now, as the morphine has done a better job than the buprenorphine previously. It’s not enough to get the pain to vanish completely, but it helps, for which he is more than grateful.

He is also glad that Cameron told his men to cuff his hands in front of him and not behind his back like they did with James. Again, this is an unexpected and odd display of kindness from the dangerous man as it is most likely to spare him the extra discomfort and pain during the coming ride. It sets Barry off as it makes it harder to understand the criminal or to predict his reactions. Just the memory of how he touched him…
Barry grits his teeth and forces his mind towards another direction, unwilling to think about that awful experience.

He feels scared and really wants to get this over with. It is silly, but a part of him tries to assure him that things would be alright again the moment Len is around. He knows better, though, or should, at least.

Again, he is pushed and stumbles briefly before he gets his equilibrium back, causing him to yelp in pain as he moves his injured hand once again in response.

The notion to accidentally trip and worsen his injury in this way, is constantly on Barry’s mind, as it is a ridiculously difficult task to keep a proper footing and balance even without that jerk behind him.

He is still somewhat dizzy from the drugs, drained both physically and emotionally, unsettled, worried, and scared. It also certainly doesn’t help that he is as good as blind with the sack over his head.

When they are finally stop, Barry feels relief washing over him, and he wouldn’t have thought it could be possible to feel so glad about being finally ushered inside a car that belonged to his kidnapper. He follows Cameron’s lackey’s orders meekly, still worried about worsening his injury, till he is in the car seat at last.

“You’re alright there, Barry?” James flops next to him, his voice is low and a bit muffled by the layers of cloth between them, and he too sounds exhausted and tense. Barry feels another by now very familiar pang of guilt flood him as he is reminded once again that he is responsible for his friend’s presence, that he is the reason he has been dragged into this situation in the first place.

“Y-yes,” he utters and hates how his teeth are still chattering. He has been trembling like a leaf for the past two hours now, and he isn’t sure whether it is just his mind finally succumbed to this awful situation or whether it’s the drugs in his system.

Dr. Elias gave him a much higher dose than what be usual recommended for a man of his statue, but his body is obviously not reacting like it should to the medications, and this thought alone is quite disconcerting, so, once again, he shoves it forcefully away. He just can’t bring himself to be bothered by this as well right now, there is too much going on as it is, and being reminded how messed up his body has become is not helping.

“Come one, poppet, let’s get you buckled up,” a gruff voice says. Its owner must be one of Cameron’s henchmen, and Barry cringes away in a knee-jerk reaction to the unexpected contact when his shoulder is grabbed, but he is quickly, roughly pulled back and pushed in place for the man to fasten his seat belt. It leaves him shaken, his hand screams in pain as the thug is not really careful while adjusting it. Sickness and lightheadedness start to take over Barry one more time, then.

He hates being touched by strangers even if it is just a fleeting one, but this is so much worse. Unwanted memories flood his mind for a moment.

The feeling of hand on his body, hurting, forcing him to-

Barry shudders involuntarily, and squeezes his eyes shut even despite the fact that he is as good as blind. The pulse of his heart is throbbing loudly in his ears, and for a horrible instance he feels cut off from the world around him, pushed back into the past of when Michael and the others had their fun with him.

Then, he picks up on the noise next to him when, by the sound of it, James undergoes the same
treatment as he just did before the doors are slammed shut, and the car is finally started.

The ride to the docks goes by in relative silence save for Cameron, who stays on his phone for the whole duration of their drip, sounding calm, nearly amused as he talks to whoever is on the other end.

It takes them probably no more than ten to fifteen minutes to reach their destination, but it’s still a relief when the car finally stops, and they are ushered out of it again. The sense of moving with a nonexistent visual feedback has caused Barry to grow even more nauseated, and the smell of the nearby river isn’t exactly doing much to soothe his stomach either. The mere thought of throwing up while having this damn bag still over his head is disconcerting, and he tries to concentrate on the sound of the men around him instead.

A rather forceful push against his back indicates him to get moving again, and he does so reluctantly. He doesn’t want for Len and the others to be hurt, especially not because of him, but, like a good bait, he is luring them in all the same.

It has started to rain during their ride, and Barry’s shivering grows worse due to the temperature drop that came with the weather change.

The knot in his stomach tightens up as he breathes in the mixture of humidity and the stench of the docks surrounding them, and it is honestly a relief to him when they are finally reach a building and are lead inside. It has only been a short trip from the car to wherever they are now, but the experience of blindly tripping and stumbling across the concrete floor has been dreadful and exhausting all the same, even though he's unfortunate enough to have already become somewhat familiar with.

Judging by the sound of the rain drumming onto the roof above them, and the subtle echo of their footsteps, it is most likely the warehouse where Cameron told Len to meet up in.

The air is less moist and easier to breathe in here; it helps to settle his upset stomach a bit. His shoulder is grabbed then once again, and he is forced to stop.

“You’re early,” Cameron sounds nearly excited as he says so, still somewhere close by in front of him, and those words cause Barry to tense up once more in hope and worry. He would have given a lot to just get rid of that damn bag blocking his vision to see what is going on-

“Save the small-talk and let’s get this over with.” It’s Len, and he sounds harsh, vexed, and Barry bites onto his lower lip, fighting the urge to call for him, feeling immediately silly for it.

“That’s one of the very few reasons I’ve actually appreciated working with you, Lenny.” Cameron chuckles as he goes on, obviously not disheartened by the hostile tone of the other man. “You always cut directly to the point. You never fool around, going straight for the guts.”

“You chose the wrong day to waste my time with your damn chitchatting, Cameron, so cut the crap.” Barry notices how strained Len’s calm is. He is obviously fighting to keep his temper in check, and it is odd to hear him so close to lose the grip on his emotions, as this is Rogue business.

Or maybe not. Not entirely, at least.

Barry swallows around the lump that has formed in his throat and tries to ignore how his eyes have started to itch.

“Of course, we’re here for a reason, after all.” It doesn’t sit well with him how cheerful Cameron sounds, not at all like he is currently in a stand-off with a group of the Gems’ most notorious criminals. It causes a heavy, dreadful feeling to settle over him, and he wonders if Len is maybe so
wrought up because he, too, can sense how off the other criminal’s behavior is.

“Come on, then,” Cameron says with an audible smile. “Give me the data, and let me check whether I’m getting my portion of the deal, Lenny.”

“No,” Len sounds cold, angry, like he has not an ounce of patience left for any sort of the other man’s nonsense. “You send him over here, and afterward you get the data.”

Barry’s heart drops as these words sink in because it seems that Len hasn’t taken James in consideration as well. Before he can protest, Cameron cuts him off by barking a laugh, and it seems that the criminal has also picked up on this detail as well.

“I see.” Cameron chuckles. “So I’ve been dragging dead meat along this whole damn time? Pity, had I known you just want your little boy-toy, I wouldn’t have bothered keeping the Chink around. Well, I can take care of the little mistake right now.”

Cameron steps closer to them again, his footfalls are easy to follow, before the sound of what could only be the criminal’s gun being pulled out of its holster causes Barry’s heart lurch up to his throat.

“N-no!!! D-don’t! L-Len, p-please!”

Someone grabs his arm, presumably the thug who pushed him along before, and gives him a harsh tug making his broken fingers flair up pain. He whimpers in return.

“Shut up,” the criminal grunts sharply.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Barry.” Lisa huffs from somewhere in front of him. She doesn’t seem angered by his reaction, though, but more exasperated and even slightly amused. He envies her for finding anything funny in this situation.

“And you,” Lisa goes on with an audible sneer in her voice. “You ugly piece of shit, take your hands off him before you lose them.”

The crook’s grip on his arms only tightens in response, painfully viciously hard, and he growls at the woman. “Fuck you, you bottle-blond cunt-”

“Enough now! We don’t want to start insulting each other here, do we?” Cameron chuckles, and Barry exhales in relief when the grip on his upper arm finally loosens a bit again. He is pretty sure that he will bruise there.

Well, unless he dies in the next couple of minutes which would mean that bruising would become a rather obsolete thing to worry about.

“Now then.” Cameron is undoubtedly talking to Len again. “Bring me the data and let’s get this over with. I’m starting to grow a bit impatient here, and it’s never good for me to have a loaded gun in my hand when I’m in such a mood.”

“No,” Len refusescoldly. “You send them over first, then you get the data.”

“God, do you really have to be such a damn pain in the ass about everything?” Cameron’s voice is still light, but Barry can pick up on the edge that wasn’t there just a moment ago. He knows that Len is trying to make sure both James and him are getting out of here alive, however their kidnapper doesn’t seem inclined to compromise whatsoever.

Barry jumps slightly, breathing in sharply when suddenly something cold and hard is pressed against
his forehead.

It is the muzzle of the gun.

Instinctively, he tries to step back and get himself out of harm’s distance, but the thug behind him firms his grip on his arm once again and also grabs his neck tightly, making it unable for him to get away or even really move at all.

Barry freezes, the feeling of being held in place, forced to keep still, causes him to whimper softly, a mixture of fear and dread bites into him, making it difficult to breath.

He can hear James call out his name, alarmed. While his friend can’t see him due to the bag over his head, he probably has a considerable good idea of what’s transpiring with Barry right now.

The tension in the air is thick enough to cut through it, and Barry’s skin starts to itch again in such a horrible way that he wishes his hand were free. It feels like his skin is shrinking, like it is getting too tight for him, and it is such an upsetting feeling that he is hardly able to stop a sob. It is like ants are crawling all over him.

He hardly picks up on how his trembling has grown worse or how his teeth are chattering so loud now that it has to be audible to the people around him.

“See what you’re doing here, Lenny?” Cameron gives the muzzle a painfully hard shove. “You’re messing things up again! Your little sweetie isn’t doing so great, is he? Because you stupid arrogant fuck think you can mess with me!!!”

The man bellows the last words with such fury that Barry actually whimpers in fear. The criminal chuckles at that. “Look, he gets it. Your little fuck-boy gets it, but not you?! Really?! What the fuck, Snart?! Aren’t you supposed to be smart?! Aren’t you supposed to know that you don’t mess with the big boys?!”

Barry’s right side of his temple explodes in pain, and it takes him a second before he realizes that Carmon must have smashed to gun into it. His knees give in, he sacked to the ground, feeling dizzy and lightheaded. He can hear people crying his name, James again, but this time Lisa and Len as well. They sound so very angry...

It is strange how something like this can hold so much familiarity. Pain, dread, helplessness, and bone chilling fear, emotions that were his constant companions for years-

“You know what, Snart? Why don’t we change our little agreement?” Something nasty creeps into Cameron’s tone then. “Why don’t I simply shoot your little bitch before my men shoot you, and then, finally I’ll have the fucking data!”

“You touch him one more time, and I’ll strangle you with my bare hands!” Len snarls at the other criminal, and Barry whimpers softly when he realizes that he doesn’t doubt that his friend really means it. The notion is unsettling, and he wishes he could protest, tell him and the others that he doesn’t want them to kill anybody. He wants them to leave, he wants them to stay safe, but his head feels like it is about to split open and he can’t formulate a single word.

“What do you think of this idea,” Lisa joins in with a hiss. “We shoot your men, we get Barry, and keep the data. Then we show you what wonderful hosts we can be to pompous little fucks like you?”

“Why take him hostage.” Mick grunts, and Barry suddenly wonders whether all of the Rogues are currently present. “I can burn his skin off just as well.”
“Could we please not talk about burning people alive,” Hartley pipes up, and he sounds awful, like he is really fighting not to grow sick.

“You didn’t need to come along, the only thing you are good at right now is getting the rest of us sick as well,” Sam adds which in turn causes the ginger to huff in annoyance.

“Shut up.” Len obviously doesn’t find his colleague’s banter particularly amusing right now, and Barry can imagine the storming glare he shoots at them. He agrees with him, this is really not the time nor the place to joke around, but, even so, listening to his friends behaving as if they weren’t about to die, still helps to ease a bit of his apprehension and fear away.

Undeterred by the pain, Barry is glad to know that they’re still okay.

He has worried about them a lot over the last couple of weeks, he just wishes that he would have met them again under better circumstances.

“I appreciate your humor.” A shudder goes through Barry when he hears Cameron speak then, stepping closer to him again. His temple still hurts so much that it is overshadowing the pain from his fingers, and he picks up on the feeling of warm wetness running down the side of his face, blood.

“I really do.” Cameron sounds much calmer again, and it is nearly more frightening than having him screaming and yelling.

A hissing noise Barry hasn’t heard in a very long time cuts through the air, the sound of Len’s Cold gun powering up, and the men around him start to fan out, doubtlessly targeting the Rogues in return, as the tension in the air thickens.

“Step away from him.” Len seems to have gotten his grip back over his temper. He speaks in a low and nearly eerily calm voice, which is so much more reassuring that the previous agitation and anger he displayed mere minutes ago.

Barry relaxes a bit in response, feeling once again that silly certainty that his friend would make this awful situation okay again.

“Or you turn me into a popsicle?” Cameron sounds as if he wasn’t concerned at all about the direction things have started to head into. He seems actually amused by it, which can’t mean anything good, and while Barry doesn’t understand much of what is going on right now, he still knows things are about to get very ugly.

For a split-second, he feels an odd kind of deja vu overcome him, and it is as if he was back when he still wore the red costume, facing off one of so many unhinged individuals he was confronted with so many time. Just that this time, he is not in control of the situation, not able to do anything but wait and let the others handle it.

He feels helpless, he has been feeling helpless for a very long time now.

“I don’t think so, Lenny.” Cameron chuckles with an audible smile in his voice.

Barry closes his eyes and wishes James wouldn’t have to witness this. He wishes Len wouldn’t have to either-

“No!” Len outcry is one of surprise, fury, and terror, and Barry knows what is going to happen before he hears the gunshot pierce the air. The pain in his abdomen is immediate. It is a dozen times worse than the one from his temples or his hand. It is deafening, it blocks out anything else and for a long moment there is just the white-hot fire in his lower body, so intense, even breathing seems like
an impossible action.

Barry had been shot before, not that often thanks to his powers, but each time was an awful experience. The difference between his current situation and back then, is that he was able to heal ridiculously fast in the past, and the pain generally started to fade away after a few minutes even when the bullet didn’t go through.

This is no longer the case, though. He was never shot like this before, not as a normal human, not in his abdomen, and to make matters worse, it is probably the most excruciating pain he’s ever experienced.

Someone grabs his shoulders, and he is pulled away. The pain that seems to be about to swallow him whole, flares up in return, and he just wants to scream, till he realizes that he already is.

Then a hand is pressed against his stomach, applying pressure to the gunshot wound, and Barry thinks he’s about to throw up due to nauseating amount of pain this causes him in return. His attempts to get the person to release him are feeble, weak, and he breaks out in a cold sweat.

The bag is pulled away from his face and the air that hits his clammy skin, is soothingly cool and clear.

“-ry. Barry, look at me.”

It takes Barry a moment to focus on who is kneeling next to him, with both his hands pressed on his abdomen again.

“It’s okay, Barry,” James says, and while he looks like a mess, livid, pale, and with dark rings under his eyes, he speaks in a composed and soothing tone to him.

“You’ll be alright,” he assures Barry and gives him a comforting smile. “Don’t worry, you’ll be okay, we’ll get you out of here. You just have to stay with me, okay? Can you do that for me, Barry?”

Barry nods slightly and just tries to keep focused on his friend despite the seething pain. His mind feels sluggish, as if his thoughts have become thick and slow like actual molasses, and he has trouble thinking straight.

A loud crash can be heard next to them, and Barry realizes that James must have dragged him behind one of the nearby containers that are filling the warehouse. The fight between the Rogues and Cameron’s people seems to take place on the opposite side of their current hiding spot.

There are people shouting, and yelling, and Barry picks up on a vaguely familiar female voice. He tries to match it with a face or name but gives up as he starts to grow dizzier and more tired by the second.

“Barry, you must stay awake,” James tells him again, looking surprisingly panicked all of a sudden.

Barry wants to protest that, yes, he is awake, but can’t get his mouth to work other than the permanent chatter of his teeth.

It’s getting so cold…

There is another loud crashing noise close-by, and out of the corner of his eye he believes he can see the ominous massive wall of containers shake menacingly. He really hopes that nobody is able to make it fall as neither James nor him are in a safe position should this happen, and he really doesn’t
want to be squeezed in addition to being shot.

“I offered you a place at my side!” The woman who was screaming before, bellows again. She sounds both furious and hurt, and Barry shudders when he now recognizes the voice. It’s Blacksmith which is confusing, as he doesn’t understand why she would be here. The Blue Velvet and Blacksmith gave the impression to have split from what he grasped before.

Could Len have brought her along?

Barry tries to move his head a bit to look towards the direction of her voice but feels too weak to do so.

“I let you in my bed, you damn jackass!” Barry frowns and trembles. Is she talking to Len? Are they fighting? This is a worrying thought as his friends have their hands full with Cameron and his men as it is.

“Shhh, it’s fine. Everything’s fine, Barry.” James looks him straight into his eyes and gives him a tight smile. “Just hold on, you’re doing great.”

He tries to return it, not really sure what his friend is talking about anymore, before he hears Blacksmith again, sounding just as furious and closer this time. She isn’t the only one shouting, though, it looks like there are more people around than the initial handful of goons that showed up with them.

The air is filled with gunfire and yelling but even so, Blacksmith’s voice somehow gives the impression to raise above all of it as she screeches. “I’ll cut your chest open and rip you heart out for this, you damn bastard!!!”

“Don’t! Damn it, Amunet!” This is Len. Barry feels something in his chest tighten as he realizes once again that his friend’s life is currently in danger, and he can’t do anything.

“I’ll start with your little lover-boy first, though! I’ll cut his heart out and let’s see how you’re going to like it!” Something really nasty has creeped into her voice before she calls to her men. “Keep him busy!”

They have already sounded close enough that Barry assumed that they were just on the other side of the container James and he are hiding behind, and he hopes, despite knowing better, that she won’t be able find them.

Barry is terrified, hurt, and plain down exhausted, on top of his increasing dizziness, and he doesn’t like it when people fight, especially when they are this angry and screaming…

There are footsteps coming closer, running, and he can feel James grow stiff next to him and hiss a curse under his breath. Barry frowns in concern, worried about his friend, and with much more effort than should have been necessary, he is able to move his head a bit back at last, so he can see what has the other man so worried.

“There you are, pretty boy.” A familiar woman with long dark blue hair and dark skin grins down at him from where she just appeared around the corner of the container.

Blacksmith.

There is so much malice and hate in her gaze, it is frightening, and due to the increasing feeling of disorientation and confusion, it takes Barry a moment to remember why she is so angry at him.
“Let’s see if he still wants you when you’re nothing more than a corpse.” She hisses, and he can’t help but frown at her.

Right, she has quite a temper, she hasn’t been very nice when she visited him at work, either.

“Don’t!” James pleads abruptly, and Barry has the feeling that someone tries to rip his intestines out through the bullet wound. He can’t breathe, and for a horrible moment he is certain that he is going to die.

Then, the world around him comes back into focus and the pain subsides into the background once more, replaced by a feeling of utter disorientation and exhaustion.

Briefly, there is nothing but stunned silence around him. The lights above are too bright for him to make anything out from his whereabouts. His chest feels too tight all of a sudden, and he has to cough. Hot moist liquid gushes over his lips as he does so and the metallic taste of blood in his mouth is nearly overwhelming.

“Please, he needs help! He has been shot!” James sounds close to panicking now, his former calm is nearly completely gone, and Barry tries to glance over to his side, where his friend’s voice came from but he’s not able to get his head to move at all. His limbs feel like they are made of lead, like he is stuck in place.

Then, in a blink of an eye, hell breaks loose around him, and he notices how James and him get engulfed by other people, as they start to speak over each other in agitation. Somebody yells about hurrying up and getting him into the ER.

It is the last thing Barry hears before he passes out.

Chapter End Notes

So, and this the last part of the mini arch about the first confrontation between the Rogues and the BV. Well, technically not first, but probably their most violent so far.

I hope you guys enjoyed it, this is like the tenth version of it that I’ve written over time, and I really have to thank Katzerover for her imput and suggestions she had for it.

The screen of my laptop is dying (after having it for about 5 months... -_-* ), I'll send it in to get it fixed, which means that I'll probably be without my beloved companion for about two weeks. I'm not sure whether I'll update because of this next week or not, but I'll try. :)

And, before I leave you to it, thanks again to all you wonderful people who take the time to leave me a comment. I'm really lucky to have such amazing readers as you. <3
Hospital Stay Part I

Chapter Summary

Barry has to give his statement about what happened at the docks to two officers. He wishes he could have had another day or two to recover a bit more from his surgery, but at least James sticks around for support.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is now edited by the lovely Katzerover, all the remaining errors are on me. ;)) Thanks a lot, my dear! <3

The italic parts take place in the past, I try to make things a bit clearer this way because it probably can get a bit confusing otherwise with how I've embedded these section on the text.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry is glad that James decides to stay when the two officers from the KCPD arrive to take his statement about the incident at the docks. His friend had already given his own while Barry was still in surgery, and he probably has better things to do than stick around for this, especially after everything that happened, but even so he assured him that it was fine.

“It’s really no problem,” James told him for like the fifth time shortly before the two officers arrived, obviously not missing how apprehensive he was about the upcoming chat. “And you’ve nothing to worry about. You didn’t do anything they could hold against you, Barry.”

It goes over Barry’s head why James would show him this kind of support after everything he went through because of him. The guilt about what trouble he causes him has been sitting like heavy lump in the pit of his stomach since he was lucid enough after his surgery to remember what had occurred, and he thought about pointing out that he is the very reason they were kidnapped in the first place…

He decided to hold his tongue in the end, though. The notion to talk to the two cops on his own scared him enough to just be grateful for his friend’s decision to be there during the interview.

Being hurt in a hospital while being interrogated about what exactly got him there is something he is all too familiar with, and it causes memories to rear their heads of which he would have preferred that they stayed forgotten.

It doesn’t help that he is as good as immobile, or that he has troubles to concentrate on what the young officer sitting next to his bed is saying, and he tries not to show how dreadful the experience is and how intimidated he feels just by the cops’ mere presence. This could make him looks suspicious, guilty, and he is away that getting back to the Heights is ridiculous easy for someone like him.

He swallows nervously, his mouth feels dry and raw, and he wishes once again that his doctor hadn’t deemed him lucid enough be questioned about the kidnapping despite the fact that he is still on quite
heavy pain medications.

It is his second day in the hospital, and after spending the majority of yesterday in a drug induced sleep, it seems that his period of grace was over. At least, James had the opportunity to inform his statement to the police before the officers’ arrival.

“These people were after some information about a contract my employers are currently working out with another company in Taiwan. I told the police that they wanted me, and that you were just an unlucky by-stander who got involved by accident,” his friend explained to him shortly after Barry finished eating the tasteless broth he had for breakfast.

Finding out that James had lied for him, and gotten himself and his occupation in possible danger to cover for him, has left Barry pretty much speechless. A part of him is obviously grateful for his help, another one only adds to the guilt he is already feeling over causing this man so much trouble.

If it hadn’t been for Barry, James wouldn’t have been kidnapped and hurt in the first place, and against all reason his friend has still decided to help him instead of kicking him out of his life like most people would have done in his stead.

James made sure that he would not get in troubles for what happened to them.

After all the turmoil they went through because of him, the other man is still willing to help him.

“Y-y-you d-didn’t h-have t-to l-lie,” he told him in a faint, groggy voice after James informed him about what he had told the police. It had been difficult to speak at all, as the drugs they are giving him against the pain have the side-effect of making him feel quite tired, ever after he slept through the majority of the last one and a half days.

“I know.” James met his eyes with an earnest look, and for a couple of seconds he studied him with a thoughtful look and seemed as if he wanted to say something else to that matter but settled on changing the topic in the end-

“You can’t recall anything after you were shot?” Barry flushes slightly when he realizes that he briefly zoned out and turns back to the officer with a guilty expression. His head feels like it is stuffed with cotton, and staying focused on something is hard enough without him letting his mind drift off.

“N-no,” he affirms meekly.

“You couldn’t make out anybody?” the officer in charge of his interrogation asks again, and judging by the way he is frowning at his answer, he is clearly not satisfied with how little information Barry seemed able to give them.

Barry swallows, nervous, and tries not to feel so damn skittish of this man. His behavior gives away the wrong impression, like a guilty man, secretive, uneasy... a one-way ticket to Iron Heights, and the notion alone that he could be put there once again is terrifying enough that it makes it difficult to talk or think straight at all.

Barry shivers and winces, causing the pain in his abdomen to briefly flare up. He really wished the doctor may have given him another day to recover a bit more before he allowed the questioning to take place. The mixture of dizziness and pain makes it only harder to try and appear collected and not like he is trying to hide something.

Despite the apprehension of having to deal with the police, the officers haven’t been hostile towards him so far, though. They introduced themselves and explained to him why they were there, the usual
procedure Barry is still familiar enough with, and it actually helped to ease his worry a bit.

There is no palpable dislike involved in the way they treat him, but he doesn’t miss how they keep looking at him when he takes too long to respond due to his stammer, or when he isn’t able to remember some pieces of information James told them.

It isn’t that his friend came up with an especially elaborate story, he stuck as close to what took place as he could. The problem is that Barry really has issues putting his memory in order. His mind isn’t just feeling heavy and thick, but his thoughts just don’t make much sense at times when he tries to look back to some particular event from that two days, especially from right after he was shot.

Now, both officers exchange one of those looks again, like he is difficult on purpose, or like he is being difficult on purpose or like he is hiding something, and while they don’t really let it on, he is pretty sure that they know who he is.

Former cops with a history like Barry’s usually stay in the memory of their colleagues for a very long time, and seeing that the Keystone City police department works rather close with the one in Central City, he has no doubt whatsoever that the rumour mill did its work.

The train of thought is daunting and embarrassing, and Barry can’t stop himself, he glances over to James who is sitting opposite to the officer who is questioning him. It is mostly because the presence of these two policemen makes him uneasy, but he still knows that they could easily get the wrong idea from it.

“They put bags over our heads. Is it really that difficult to believe that he isn’t able to describe what the place they brought us to looked like?” James hasn’t missed the cops’ behaviour either, and Barry furrows his brows. His friend getting himself in trouble once more by trying to aid him is about the last thing he wants to happen.

“*You* were able to give us a layout of the place, Mr. Lai,” the officers who is doing the questioning steadies his gaze as he points this out. He has introduced himself as Officer Kimber, a man around Barry’s age with a soft, round face which holds a very sombre expression.

“Because I managed to pull the bag off while these people started to shoot each other.” His friend spat, clearly annoyed and displeased by the cop’s behaviour.

“But you couldn’t make out the face of the guy who brought you to this very hospital,” the other officer interrupts him notably incredulous. He is leaning against the wall next to the observation window that shows part of the pastel green hallway wall outside the room.

James’ face hardens at this statement, and he straightens up a bit, his patience paper thin by now.

“No, I told you I couldn’t. I already explained to one of your colleagues that, whoever helped us, was too fast,” he admonishes, and Barry nearly cringes, James makes a perfect teaches impersonation, who’s trying to make an especially slow student understand a hard task. The other man, Officer Miller, scowls in response, clearly not amused by being addressed in such a tone.

“One of our colleagues had the opportunity to talk to Jay Garrick about this, and he later told him that none of the twins’ speedsters were involved in your rescue,” Officer Kimber adds before his partner could response. He meets James’ gaze with a slight frown. “You’ve to agree that it is rather odd that you’re saved by a mystery person who seems to be as fast as one of them.”

“I do,” James agrees calmly as he leans back into his chair crossing his arms across his chest. “I also found it a rather odd experience to be kidnapped, honestly, or to have a friend of mine being tortured
I’d spill some information, which I didn’t have, by the way. I found it odd to learn what it sounds like when someone’s fingers are broken, or what it feels like to be hit over my head with enough force to lose consciousness.”

Barry watches how his friend hold the officers gaze coldly before a humourless smile spreads over his lips.

“Or maybe odd isn’t really the right word,” James concedes and for a moment an uncomfortable silence follows.

“I think we’re done here.” Officer Kimber says after clearing his throat, turning to Barry. His expression is mostly neutral, but Barry can still pick up on the slight discontent in the other man’s eyes as he regards him. “We’ll come back to you if some more questions turn up.”

Barry nods quietly and doesn’t miss how the officer doesn’t give the “Here’s my number, in case you remember anything else” speech. They obviously don’t believe that he would be of any help in any case.

Officer Kimber gets up and turns to James who is also on his feet again. “Thank you for your cooperation. You’ve my number in case you should remember something you haven’t so far. At any rate, my colleagues are currently talking to your employers and, should nothing else turn up, this should have been it for you. At least, till we get the guys who are responsible for the kidnapping.”

It remains unsaid that it is a very unlikely outcome for the police to apprehend anybody involved in what happened at the docks. The twins’ police departments weren’t even aware that the Blue Velvet had found footing in the twin cities before yesterday, and they also know next to nothing about a criminal with the alter ego of Blacksmith.

Barry watches how Officer Kimber gives James a faint but somewhat apologetic smile. “I’m sorry for what has happened to you.”

James purses his lips rather grimly but nods anyway. The officer seems a bit taken aback by his reaction but leaves it there and instead signs to his partner that it is time for them to take their leave. Officer Miller gives them a watered down version of an evil eye on his way out as he pulls the door shut behind them.

“What a joke,” James mutters, visibly annoyed as he watches the cops leave through the window for a moment longer. Then he turns to Barry, and his frown deepens when he notices how pale he got once again.

“Don’t mind them, they may be insensitive and tactless idiots, but I doubt that they’ll trouble either of us again, not anytime soon at least,” James assures him as he sits back down.

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat as he regards his friends for a moment before he turns his gaze to the whit hospital blanket that is covering him up to the chest. He tries to calm the tumult of emotions in his chest, and to not get overwhelmed by the gratefulness and relief he feels right then. He won’t start crying, not in front of James, not after what he has done for him so far. This would be the worst way possible to pay him back for his help.

“Th-th-thank y-y-you,” he says quietly. It is frustrating how he isn’t able to come up with a more adequate way of telling the other man how much his support means to him. “Th-thank y-y-you.”

His eyes start to itch; he huffs a dry chuckle, more due to how wired up he feels than due to really finding anything amusing about this situation.
James acknowledges it with a not, but otherwise stays quiet as he studies him quietly for a long moment.

This causes Barry to grow nervous again, and he bits his lower lip as he keeps his gaze fixed on the blanket in front of him.

“I trust you,” James finally says after what felt like a small and unnerving eternity but probably was no more than a minute or so. He doesn’t sound harsh, but there is an edge to his voice, a hardness that usually isn’t present when he talks to him. “I know that you’re a good person, Barry. I really do, and I get that you didn’t have it easy and a lot of bad stuff happened to you.”

Not sure how to answer to that, Barry remains in silence, feeling a leaden weight settle in the pit of his stomach as he waits for the other man to go on.

He knows what this is. He knows where this would lead to, and…

Barry tries to blink the tears away, and he is angry at himself for being such a jerk. It would be better for James to cut him out of his life, to leave him behind.

There is nothing he can offer but trouble.

Trouble and the misery that follows him around like his own damn shadow.

In the end, they all realizes that it is better to leave him behind. It is better for them, it really is, and even Barry himself knows so, despite what Mary, Eddie, and Mrs. Ming tell him, he knows from experience that there is just something off with him, and sooner or later this will catch up with anybody who is silly enough to stick around…

Barry thinks of Len, of the Rogues, and he the chilling, biting pain in his chest gets even worse.

It is only a question of time.

“I don’t trust your friends, though,” James goes on after a rather uncomfortably long pause, and he holds a hand up when Barry turns to him in protest. “That doesn’t mean that I’ll demand from you to cut them off, Barry. It’s really not my place to tell you what to do or not, and, as I’ve said before, I do trust you, and I’m sure you’ve your reason for being friends with those people.”

James briefly averts his eyes, glancing to the window that faces the hallway, and deep frown settles over his face as he seems to consider what to say next.

Barry wishes he would leave it at this, he doesn’t want him to keep talking. Despite knowing better, he doesn’t want his friend telling him that is probably better for both to not see each other again, or asking Barry to quit his job back at the store, to avoid endangering Mrs. Ming.

The mere thought notion of the dear old lady getting hurt because of his actions causes the nauseating feeling, that has been clinging to him since he woke up today in the morning, to spike once more, and he has to close his eyes for a moment due to its intensity.

He is a selfish bastard. This shouldn’t be so hard.

He would only end up rubbing part of his misery off at them, letting it infect their lives like he did with Iris and Wally…

“Barry.” James’ sounds worried, then, and when Barry opens them again, he notices that other man has fixed his attention back to him, and that there is still neither reproach nor anger in his eyes but a
palpable sadness.

“I know that you’re a good man,” his friend says, and it is strange to hear how certain he sounds of this, like he really believes it. The situation is strange and touching. Barry flushes when he feels a couple of tears finally run down his cheeks in response to these kind words while his friend carries on. “And I know that you don’t want to cause anybody any trouble, but I really want you to think about whom you put your trust in.”

It is palpable that James feels bad about bringing this up now, but he clearly still deems it necessary to be a point that has to be touched upon, and Barry doesn’t hold it against him. After all, for some reason he can’t grasp, James is just trying to look out for him.

“I don’t know what you did that caused you to end up in prison.” The other man meets his eyes firmly, nearly pleadingly. “But I don’t want to see you get back there again because you stick around the wrong sort of people.”

The hospital room falls back into a strained silent, and Barry forces himself to look away as he tries to understand why this man would care so much about him. Why anybody would, really.

He listens into the quietness around them and can’t help but wonder whether the woman who is also stationed in this room is listening in.

On of his temporary roommates, a young man who is currently getting an x-ray and had left shortly before the officers arrived to question Barry, leaving only the older woman who made no sound since the nurse picked their breakfast trays up about an hour ago. It is more likely that she has simply fallen asleep, but talking about any of this in the presence of some stranger, conscious or not, worries him.

“I-I d-didn’t w-w-want y-you t-t-to g-get i-in t-trouble b-because o-of m-me.” Barry finally says quietly as he keeps his eyes at his splinted hand resting next to him. He can’t bring himself to meet James’ eyes right now.

“I know,” James agrees calmly. “And I’m not angry at you for what has happened. None of this was your fault.”

Barry chews his lower lip once more and thinks about pointing out that this is not really true. The itching of his eyes has gotten worse again, and he lifts his right hand to brush the tears away, ashamed at himself for not being able to keep it together around the other man who had to put up with enough of his baggage as it is.

It is difficult to make sense of anything right now with the pain meds circulating through his body, especially of why he is feeling so miserable. He knows that it could have turned out so much worse, they could have been killed or worse.

It is thanks to James that Barry wasn’t interrogated like a criminal or sent straight back to Iron Heights’ infirmary instead being put into a public hospital. The image alone that he could just as well be within such a nightmarish place causes him to quiver. He grits his teeth in discomfort, as another sharp pang flashes unforgivingly through his abdomen in response.

“I think you should try to rest some more, Barry, you look exhausted.” James meets his worried look with a tired but warm smile, and it is then that Barry picks up on how exhausted his friend really looks.

Even so, he can’t help himself but ask. “C-c-can y-you s-stay?”
It should be embarrassing, asking James to wait around as if he is still a small and scared child, afraid of going to sleep without another person around. Maybe it is due to the drugs or his emotional state, but Barry can’t really get himself to care too much about it. He just doesn’t want to be left alone.

A surprised look crosses his friend’s face before it softens a bit and he nods. “Of course.”

Knowing that his friend would stay seems to show Barry’s body that it is okay to rest as his eyelids start to feel increasingly heavy all of a sudden, and he has difficulties to even just keep them open as he utters his thanks to the other man.

He relents to the exhaustion just a few seconds later and slips off into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up being shorter than it initially was, tbh. I decided to split it into two because I wanted to leave you with something today (and writing on my ebook is something I can do but do not particularly like because I just can't get used to the smaller keyboard).

After the amount of feedback I recieved for the last one I just couldn't skip today's update. You, my dear readers, are just amazing people, and thank you so much for your support (you're my James in this case ;).

Next chapter will have Mary and Eddy visit Barry, the one after that well re-introduce someone we haven't seen for a while, and then we finally get some Len-Barry alone time again. :)
Hospital Stay Part II

Chapter Summary

Eddy and Mary visit, and Barry learns a bit more about what exactly happened after he was shot at the docks.

Chapter Notes

This story has been edited by Katzerover! Thanks a lot for the marvellous job my dear! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Your poor sod, you’ve to stay in here for two weeks?” Eddy pulls a face and shoots him an exaggeratedly pitying look. “That sucks, hospital food is the worst.”

“Could you try not being so insufferable?” Mary chides their friend. “He was shot, Eddy. Do you really lament on him having to stay in hospital for a few weeks considering what else could have happened?”

“Jeez, just trying to lift the mood.”

“You could try and be a bit more sensitive.”

Barry watches his friends argue quietly with a tired, little smile. It is good to have them around again; he missed them, even though they’d visited him just yesterday, he has been feeling a bit lonely today with having nothing else to do but rest and try to move as little as possible, so he doesn’t agitate his abdomen again by accident.

“You know, making him feel like an invalid isn’t going to help him either;” Eddy points out rather tersely, causing the likely desired effect of Mary shooting him an admonishing look. She huffs and protests indignantly. “I don’t do that!”

Both of them arrived about an hour ago, shortly after Barry had finished the same tasteless soup for breakfast that the hospital feeds him for every meal. Not that it really bothers him, he is mostly just tired and not particularly hungry.

James would pass by later on today, as well. His friend didn’t have time to visit yesterday, but he assured him that he’d be stopping by this late afternoon. Barry still feels a bit overwhelmed when the other man is around, the fact that he kept him out of prison is something he would never forget, but it has also caused an uneasy worry to stick, whenever his friend is visiting.

Having James around is both soothing and conflicting at the same time. Barry is well aware that this feeling stems from the guilt of knowing what he put his friend through. It would probably be a long time before he can look the other man in the face, without having vividly in his mind how close he was to being killed due to him.
Barry frowns down at his lap and tries not to let his mind wander back to the other people he put in danger that day. He has company right now, there are people to concentrate on, and he forces himself to turn his attention back to Mary and Eddy who are still bickering among each other.

Having too much free time on his hand and nothing to fill it with, as he is really only allowed to sleep and rest, has quickly turned into one of the most dreaded aspects of his hospital stay; his thoughts don’t really care that he would rather not worry himself sick over his friends.

He has no news about Len’s and the other Rogues’ whereabouts, or at least how they are doing. It’s total radio silence.

As far as he knows they could be-

Barry plunges the notion away forcefully, angry at himself for being so damn pessimistic all the time and not having more trust in his friends. Len knows how to keep himself and the others safe; they probably got away with just some bumps and bruises. They are alright.

… they have to be.

He licks his lips that feel quite chapped all of a sudden, and closes his eyes.

Len and the others aren’t the only issue making him anxious right now. Both Jay and Wally know about what happened, and while Barry isn’t surprised by that, considering Blacksmith, the BV, and his friends weren’t exactly quiet about their confrontation in the docks, it is still upsetting because he is sure they find his involvement in that situation suspicious.

He knows that they keep a close eye on him, despite not showing up to interrogate him, yet. The chance that, this whole mess might still have even far direr consequences than what he already went through so far, is quite unnerving, is quite unnerving. Especially because nobody from his past life has turned up since his admission.

No one to ask questions and find out that all of this has been his fault all along.

He feels a bit like someone who is waiting for the second shoe to drop, and the uncertainty of what could be scares him; it is nearly worse than the persistent pain in his abdomen and hand.

“Bear, are you feeling alright?” Mary looks concerned. Barry feels his mind drifting off again, like a lazy bird and tries to keep himself focused on his friends. He gives her a weary smile. “Y-yes, I-I’m j-just a-a b-bit e-ex-x… t-tired.”

“You definitely look the part,” Eddy agrees and ignores Mary’s disapproving look.

“Should we leave? You probably want to rest, and we are keeping you up.” Mary is clearly feeling guilty about the prospect of causing him even more discomfort, while Eddy only rolls his eyes in fake exasperation, but stays put for once.

“N-no, p-please, s-s-stay! I-I-” Barry stops himself. It is embarrassing how much he sounds like a scared kid; he can feel his cheeks growing warm.

He averts his eyes and looks back to the butterfly needle in the back of his right hand, then he glances over to his left one, currently in a splint to immobilize his broken fingers. The dull pulsating pain is annoying, flaring up whenever he accidently moves them. Still, Barry is able to forget about it for the most part.

“We would like to stay.” Mary’s voice is soft. Barry tenses up a little when she puts a hand next to
his onto the cover, not touching but close enough for him to be aware of her presence, even without looking. A hot pain rushes through his abdomen, and he tries to stay relaxed and bite down on a groan. He fails on both.

She gasps softly, pulling her hand back. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Barry feels a well-known guilt settle over him as he can’t help but notice how worried his friend is because of him once again.

“I-it’s f-f-fine,” Barry assures her, and he means it. The pain is already subsiding again. He gives her a weary smile. “Y-you m-make a-all o-of th-this s-so m-much e-easier f-for m-me.” He looks over to Eddy then and adds. “B-both o-of y-you.”

“What else do you have us for? Other than hears us bickering, I mean?” The other man shrugs. Mary smiles amused and points out in a dry tone. “I think he wouldn’t mind the bickering part not to be included.”

“Says you,” Eddy disagrees with a smirk.

“You’re impossible.” Mary chuckles and regards Eddy with smiling eyes, before she looks at the digital clock above the entrance and briefly freezes.

“I have to make a call,” she explains and quickly gets up, reaching for her purse. She gives Barry an apologetic smile. “I’ll be back in a bit, it won’t take long, I promise.”

Then, she is out of the door, and both men are left watching her scurry past the window.

“Like a gerbil,” Eddy mutters under his breath and chuckles. His amusement dims like an agonizing candle when he turns back to Barry and finds him watching him with an unreadable expression.

The air between them become denser, heavier, in a matter of seconds; both of them fall into a rather uncomfortable silence as neither is really sure how to deal with the elephant in the room.

They haven’t been left alone, until now. The last two times Mary and James visited, Barry wasn’t feeling like himself enough to really put two and two together. However, his mind started to clear up from the medications, as a result, his thoughts had been boiling since last night, about the identity of the person that saved James and him.

Barry glances the curtains around his bed that give him at least some illusion of privacy. He makes sure the ones on his right side are still shut. He hears low voices from the other two patients and their visitors, right behind the thin layer of fabric.

Barry can’t help but worry whether any of them would pay Eddy and him any heed or not. Would it be dangerous to bring up what happened two nights ago...

“You think too loud.” Barry is startled out of his thoughts by Eddy’s voice. He really wants his body to stop reacting that way each time he gets surprised, especially now that he is feels like his stomach is only held together by stitches.

“Shit, sorry.” Like Mary, Eddy’s face contorts with guilt. He obviously doesn’t want to cause Barry more pain, even by accident.

“I-it’s f-fine,” he assures in a rather strained voice trying to breathe the pain away like he read in a book he borrowed from Mary a while ago.
“You don’t look fine,” Eddy points out rather grimly. “Not at all.”

“I a-am r-really, a-at l-l-least as f-far a-as I c-can b-be after b-being sh-shot.” It is not a very funny joke, Barry knows that, but he wants to lighten the mood his friend is in, the other man’s expression only grows darker in response.

Eddy studies him with a deep frown for a long moment before he looks elsewhere. “This wouldn’t have happened if I’d gotten there earlier.”

The words are quiet, they sound so bitter, that it actually makes Barry more concerned than surprised, about Eddy touching upon his own involvement in the first place.

“Y-you s-saved m-me…” He keeps his voice very low as he speaks, but he still sounds earnest as he meets Eddy’s bashful gaze and tries to make him understand what he did for James and him. “U-us,” he corrects himself and repeats it when his friend turns away with an incredulous frown. “Y-you s-s-saved b-both o-of u-us, E-Eddy.”

Barry is well aware this isn’t the place nor the time to have this conversation, not with the prospect of being overheard by someone. Still, he wants Eddy to understand that his intervention was something to be proud of, and Barry will never forget it.

Eddy looks rather ill and tenses up all at once, fighting the urge to fidget. Barry still remembers how it felt, having the speed force run through him and the unrest that follows along with it. What it was like to be a speedster; being worried, angry, or sad, and how those feelings caused the urge to run, to vibrate, to just move, so much so that it nearly became painful not to follow along.

It is also still vivid in his mind how he had to force himself to sit still instead, in a world he felt so alien at times with its slow pace...

“How d-did you kn-know wh-where w-we w-were?” Barry focuses his attention back back to Eddy, who bites his bottom lip, edgy. It is the first time that Barry sees him do that, it is a bit unsettling to watch, considering that his friend usually doesn’t seem to let anything affect his calm. Not like Len, who is really rather easy to rile up, but hides his emotions behind a mask of fake indifference and coldness.

“There was a doc around where the kept you, about 5’ 11”, brown curly hair, brown eyes?”

“D-doctor E-Elias?” Barry is kind of taken aback by Eddy knowing of the scientist.

Eddy’s smirk comes closer to a sour grimace; he looks like someone who has just bitten into a lemon. “Yes, the one and only.”

Confused, Barry frowns. “Y-you kn-know h-him?”

His friend shrugs and looks out of the window, where two nurses pass by the aisle. Again, he gnaws on his lower lip for a moment before he turns back to him with some reluctance.

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“He helped me with… you know.” Eddy makes a vague gesture with his hand that could pretty much mean anything, but Barry still gets it. “H-he kn-knows a-about y-you?”

“Sort of,” the other man agrees hesitantly and sighs. “After… for a while I wasn’t able to… to connect correctly to…” Eddy makes an unhappy face and shrugs again. “You know, how my…” He lowers his voice a bit more.

“Powers work is rather hard to understand, even for me, and he helped me to get a better grasp on...
them…,” Eddy explains and gives him a small apologetic smile. “I know that I’ve been rather meagre when it comes to information about this part of me, and I’m really grateful that you’ve respected this, Barry. It’s just not something I feel all that… comfortable about.”

He doesn’t elaborate whether he means that he feels uncomfortable discussing his powers or about them in general. Barry is pretty sure it is the later, though, and while he assumed as much after Eddy more or less behaved like nothing happened the morning after Kenneth tried to kill him, it is still sad to be proven right in this point.

“Th-thank y-you,” he says in a thin voice, earnestly.

“For letting you get shot?” Eddy tries to make light of this question, but it is hard to miss, he feels guilty about it.

“F-for s-saving J-James’ a-and m-my l-life,” Barry corrects him, adding. “Y-you’re an a-amazing f-friend, y-your p-powers d-don’t ch-change th-that, th-they j-just m-m-make it all th-that m-more obv-vious.”

An odd expression crosses the other man’s face, a mixture of panic and shame. For a split-second Barry is certain he would bolt. His friend’s opportunity to do so is cut short when Mary chooses this moment to re-enter the room.

Her eyes seek them out, and she frowns after she’s briefly taken them in. She turns to Eddy with suspicious look. “Did you put your foot in your mouth again?”

“What? Why me?” Eddy asks with a fake scoff. Barry is glad Eddy is relaxing again, even though his obvious tension abides.

“Because Barry is a sensible and thoughtful person, and you’re definitely none of these things,” Mary reminds him, but her stern expression cracks and is replaced by a more playful one as she concedes. “Well, you aren’t usually, but you’ve done alright so far for today, and who says that a blind squirrel can’t sometimes find a nut.”

“I’m touched by your faith in my ability to function like a normal human being,” Eddy replies tersely, but Barry knows that he is enjoying the banter with their friend, as he doesn’t miss how most of the tension has left him by now.

“Don’t pout, you do have your charms,” Mary admits and takes her seat again while putting her handbag onto the ground next to it.

“So you think I’m sexy?” Eddy inquires with a smirk, and Mary chuckles when he wiggles his eyebrows at her. She turns to Barry with an amused glint in her eyes and shakes her head. “Can you believe that man? How did we end up with him?”

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“Because you’re obscenely lucky?” Eddy suggests, grinning when Mary gives him an incredulous look. “More like you are the lucky one, Mister.”

“For having a five-foot-tall European woman constantly nagging my ears off?”

“Because you’re so much better in that regard?” Mary asks before she reminds him that they are there to spend time with Barry.

“I would, but it is difficult to hear him over your ongoing nagging,” Eddy deadpans. Mary, unimpressed, turns her attention to Barry.
“I’ll bring you something to read when we pass by tomorrow, so you don’t get bored while you’re alone” she promises, and Eddy adds that he would throw in a Playboy or some other saucy magazine as well. “You’re probably not up to it right now, but it still offers something nice to look at.”

Barry wishes he would be able to move enough to pull his blanket over his face, without causing himself severe pain. Sometimes his friend’s tendency to be crude is just embarrassing, especially with Mary around. He is grateful when she simply ignores Eddy.

“I’ve just finished a really great crime novel, and I’m sure you’ll like it. The author seems to be a huge nerd when it comes to scientific settings. Like the chemistry stuff you enjoy so much.”

“You do realize that you’ve just called him a nerd, don’t you?” Mary gives Eddy, who seems rather pleased with himself by pointing this out, a disapproving look. “I didn’t, but I don’t see what is bad about being a nerd, anyway.”

“You were clearly never a boy in high-school, then.”

Again, Mary decides that ignoring Eddy is likely the most sensible thing to do. She faces Barry. “Do you want me to fetch anything else for you?”

“N-no, th-the b-book i-is f-fine. Th-thank y-y-you.” Barry yawns and carefully lifts his right hand up to rub his eyes. Sleeps creeps up on him again.

“Maybe some clothes? Something comfortable you can wear instead of the gown?” Mary suggests. “Because they’ll allow him to wear anything else than that ugly thingy during the rest of his stay?”

Eddy asks and does have a point.

Barry knows the nurses won’t be happy with him putting anything on that could make the access to the bandages difficult. Not that he feels like moving to change his garments, anyway.

“Well, I’ll think of something,” Mary assures him and adds. “And as soon as you’re back home again and allowed to eat normal food, I’ll make you the most delicious lasagne you can imagine.”

“Th-thank y-you, M-Mary, I-I’m l-l-look-king f-forward t-to i-it.” Barry smiles with little intensity faintly and accepts Eddy’s offer with a slight nod. He isn’t sure when he would be up to anything other than sleeping or talking, but he tries to stay optimistic.

His doctor explained him, after he woke up the first morning here, that he was extremely lucky, the bullet just grazed his liver and stomach. Unfortunately, the projectile also went through part of his colon, which in itself is a much more unpleasant injury to recover from. The notion that someone in a future is going to keep check on his bowel movement, may any complication arise, is something he prefers not to think about too much.

Considering how much worse it could have been, like an injured spine, Barry tries not to feel too bad about it, though. If everything went well, he would be able to recover completely within the next five to seven weeks.

“Do you want to rest?” Mary’s soft voice startles Barry. He realizes he was about to drift off. He
looks over to her, noticing how she studies him with a slight worried look again.

“N-no, I-I’m f-fine,” he assures her before a rather big yawn debunks his claim.

“Sleep’s important for people who recover from being shot,” James points out wisely and winks when Barry frowns at him.

“Y-you’ve t-to l-leave i-in a-about an h-hour anyw-way.” After that he would probably spend the rest of today asleep as it is. Or, at least, till James passed by later afternoon.

“We’ll be coming back tomorrow, though,” Mary reminds him tentatively and adds. “We don’t have to leave just yet, Barry, it really doesn’t bother Eddy or me if you want to rest for a bit while we are here.”

“I d-don’t w-want y-you t-to w-waste y-your t-t-time.” Another yawn forces his mouth open, and Barry thinks he really shouldn’t be surprised that his own body is stabbing him in the back like this again.

“We don’t. They’ve some very interesting looking magazines laying around in the waiting room, and we’ll wake you up to say good-bye when we leave if you are asleep,” Mary assures him.

“She’s right, I’ve wanted to read up on the latest knitting-trend in Interweave for the last week.” Eddy deadpans but doesn’t seem really bothered by the prospect to wait around.

“Oh, shush!”

“What? I’m serious,” the other man protests, but his wide grin makes it obvious that he is messing around.

“Y-you d-don’t h-have t-to s-stay,” Barry reminds them once more, growing increasingly drowsier.

“We know that, Bar, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t want to.” Eddy leans back into his chair and pulls out his smartphone from his jeans pocket. He shows it to Barry with a smirk. “And don’t expect that everybody is such a technological recluse like yourself. I have my own video store on this little technological masterpiece.”

“We’re fine,” Mary agrees, and it really is a tempting offer. With how difficult is for him to keep his eyes open, it doesn’t take Barry much more to be convinced.

“Y-you c-c-can l-leave i-if y-you g-grow b-bored,” he mumbles while his body grows heavier by the second.

“Fat chance,” Eddy chuckles, and it is the last thing Barry hears before he nods off.

Chapter End Notes

So, we learned who the speedster was that saved Barry and James, and that Eddy knows Dr. Elias... that's certainly not going to be important later on. ;3

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, it is a bit shorter again as I initially intended to post this and the one from last week (which has been edited by now, btw) as one. The one for next week will be back to normal.
My laptop is still not back... :C But I'm hopeful that I'll get it next week, writing will be so much more comfortable again, then.

Next week welcomes James back as well as a secret visitor, and before long we'll finally have Barry and Len being together in a chapter again... I really miss those two directly interacting with each other.

Thank you for reading and till next Sunday! :)
“I-it i-isn’t th-that b-bad,” Barry assures James with an amused smile. His friend is eying the pale mush Barry is currently eating with a quite disgusted expression, an unconscious one, probably. It really isn’t the most appealing food, but he is still glad to have something besides the tasteless broth, he got for the first couple days of his stay here. Since yesterday, they’ve started to change his diet from an entirely fluid-restricted diet to paste-like food that still has no real flavor and certainly doesn’t help with his lack of appetite but must be a sign that his healing is coming along nicely, and he takes it as a good sign. Nurse Andrea, who usually brings him his breakfast and seems to have taken a liking to him, even promised him, she would make sure that the infamous hospital Jell-O is going to be added to his meal tonight. While Barry doesn’t really care about sweets, it would please Eddy at least, as his friend has started to complain about the ongoing lack of it by now. “No, of course not. It looks very… interesting?” James frowns down at the white bowl in front of Barry before he turns to him with an apologizing expression. “I don’t mean to spoil your appetite. I’ve just always been a picky eater, don’t mind me.” “I-it’s f-fine,” Barry assures him easily and takes another spoonful of the tasteless food before going on with a wry smile. “I’ve n-never b-been a p-picky eater, s-so d-don’t w-worry ab-bout it.” “Well, I hope this won’t change after I’ve taken you to my favourite Japanese restaurant in Central and spoil your taste buds,” the other man says as he frowns down at Barry’s meal. “This really is a poor excuse for a Christmas dinner, and I still owe you one, after all.” It takes Barry a moment to recall what his friend is talking about, and when he does, his stomach sinks. “Y-you d-don’t h-have t-to r-rep-pay m-me,” he reminds James. “I l-liked h-helping y-you out.” By now, he thought James would have forgotten all about his help with laying out the new parquet. He hoped so, at least, but it is kind of predictable that the other man still wants to take him somewhere high-brow and expensive. James mentioned a couple of places he had been to for business meetings or just with friends before,
and they always sound worlds apart from what Barry tends to visit when he wants to get himself an already prepared meal.

He has never really been a friend of expensive restaurants, even back then when he still worked as a forensic scientist. Being in places like those, usually made him feel rather uncomfortable; he generally went there when he had something to celebrate with Iris and Wally…

Barry lowers his face a bit, he doesn’t want James picking up on the pained expression that crosses his face at the notion of his former family.

Iris liked it when they went out for dinner, she never understood his reluctance but, she was able to tell his uneasiness, despite his attempts to hide it. They never went out eating in many occasions, particularly, especially after Wally joined them, as his nephew has a similar distaste for fancy restaurants like Barry did, but Barry always made sure to get a reservation in one of Iris’ favourite locations when they celebrated an anniversary or one of her published stories got noted. He can still remember those times clearly, how she was beaming with pride and excitement, how she kept smiling for days on end, being his sun, brightening his everyday life…

Her memory sits like a heavy cold stone in the pit of his stomach, and he forces himself to let go of it. Iris is gone. She has been for a long time. Barry has no right trying to find comfort from her at all.

Barry coughs lightly and flushes when he notices James is watching him with a thoughtful and rather sad expression.

“And I d-don’t n-need a-anyth-thign s-special f-for Ch-Christmas,” he forces himself to go on, stirring them back to their conversation. “I’ve ev-verything I n-need.”

He puts his spoon back down in tasteless mush left from his breakfast, and leans back into the pillow that the nurse pushed behind him to help him sit more comfortably during his meal.

This doesn’t mean he is oblivious to the fact that James and the others just mean well, but he feels ill at ease with the amount of money they’re willing to spend on him. He is most certain he can’t pay them back, and the idea of being a freeloading is daunting. It causes him to feels uneasy and rather disgusting.

Barry had been forced to live off people who never wanted him around for most of his childhood and youth; he despises the notion that he is being forced to do so, once again.

Though, it is unfair to compare his friends with his past foster parents. Unfair and insulting. And the notion that he would compare them to those people leaves a sour taste in his mouth.

Still, he doesn’t want to be a burden, he doesn’t want to give them any reason to leave him-

His cheeks flush bright red when he realizes what he has just been thinking and, he wishes, not for the first time, he could just forget how messed up he is, himself and his whole life.

“I think one can never have enough friends and good food” James says, meeting Barry’s reluctant glance with warm eyes. Those words bring to his mind how Mary and Eddy have already settled on postponing their Christmas celebration with him due to his current situation. Eddy insists that one can’t let these holidays pass without gorging oneself on a ridiculous amount of turkey, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, and pie, and, much to Barry’s exasperation, Mary sides with the other man for once.

They mean well, he knows that, but he really couldn’t care less about these kind of things right now
if he was completely honest. It just seems so bland and silly, everything else considered.

Len crosses his mind for a second, and Barry pushes the thought away, glad when James keeps talking so that he can concentrate on him.

“Christmas is only once a year,” his friend points out, “and do I have to remind you that you ached for days after crawling around my floor for nearly nine hours straight.”

“It w-wasn’t th-that b-bad,” Barry protests half-heartedly. His friend is not going to back down from this one, and it doesn’t sit well with him that James has picked up on how damaged his body is. It probably hadn’t been exactly hard to miss the stiffness of his movements after they’d finished laying out the new parquet, but he still feels like this is something private, not to be shared with anyone.

A familiar aversion settles over him at the thought of his own body and how broken it is. He fights the urge to scratch his arms that suddenly start to feel awfully itchy again.

Not willing to linger on this uncomfortable topic, Barry shoves the thought away and tries to suggest something else. “I c-could c-cook u-us s-someth-thing inst-stead. Y-you m-made me th-this amazing b-bento as it is alr-ready, anyw-way.”

James smiles and gives him a fond look. “I’m glad you enjoyed the bento, and I’d like you to cook us something, but that doesn’t mean we can’t-”

A knock causes the other man to stop momentarily, and they both turn their attention to the door. Barry hopes that it isn’t one of the nurses, he is not finished yet; he would definitively get one of those scolding looks for it and be reminded that he can’t take an hour to finish his meal.

His lack of appetite might very well cause an even longer stay, more than the already established following five days. He really wants to avoid that. Barry has no real quarrels with his hospital admittance, but it already costs a fortune; he doesn’t have the slightest idea of how he is going to afford any of that as it is. It is honestly a mystery to him how they haven’t kicked him out by now, seeing that he can digest something akin to actual food again.

While Central City’s nor Keystone City’s hospitals aren’t that notorious for being this shady toward patients, he knows they don’t like to fill their beds with people who can’t pay for them either-

Barry’s financial worries are brought to a sharp halt, when Jay opens the door and enters the room. He can feel the colour draining from his face, his throat closes up in response to the other man’s unexpected appearance. A heavy dread settles over Barry, wondering what is Jay doing here after he kept his distance for months.

Jay’s worried expression changes into a frown when their eyes meet, and something that looks a lot like resignation and like regret crosses his gaze. Despite everything that transpired, Barry can’t help himself but feel a bit bad for how he has just reacted to the other man’s arrival.

His attention is pulled away from Jay when James gets up from his seat next to him with a surprisingly grim look on his face, and Barry isn’t sure what to make of how tensed up his friend suddenly seems.

This odd behaviour doesn’t go by unnoticed by Jay either, who turns his attention towards James, stern look on his face. It is obvious that he doesn’t like to be scowled at, especially by a complete stranger.

“Who are you?” Barry flushes slightly in confusion and embarrassment over James brash voice that
is so unlike him. Then, he realizes what his own reaction toward Jay must have looked like to his friend, and he has to bite down on a groan.

This is definitely not how Barry wanted them to meet; not that he really thought that this occasion would ever take place after how Jay and he parted ways last time.

But, while it is undeniably frustrating that the situation is turning much more uncomfortable than it should be, it is also oddly reassuring to see how James is willing to stand up for him. Especially with how helpless Barry is with such limited movements. Not that James really can do much, considering who he is currently watching in this unusual hostile manner.

“I could ask you the same question, young man,” Jay replies in this no-nonsense voice, he likes to use on people who act out of line.

An odd expression crosses James, and Barry knows that his friend has just figured out, who the newcomer is.

“You’re Jay Garrick.” The realisation in James voice is more curiosity than the previous angry one, much to Barry’s relief.

Jay nods curtly, glancing briefly to Barry before he turns back to James. “And you are?”

“James.”

The older man’s irritation is nearly palpable when James fails to mention his last name. Eddy’s introduction to Jay, flares up in Barry’s mind, and his stomach sinks. He really doesn’t want Jay to get the wrong idea about James.

“James Lao,” his friend adds, taking notice of the other’s grim look and immediately gets what the problem is. “I’m Barry’s friend.”

“You’re the man the kidnappers initially were after,” Jay remarks. Barry knows he should not feel unsettled by his former friend already being aware of all the details of what occurred, but it still makes him nervous. At least he doesn’t seem to consider James as another troublemaker anymore, judging by the loss of hardness on his face.

“Well, yes.” James casts a wary glance at the older man. “You’re interested in that case?”

“In a way,” Jay agrees before he turns to Barry and gives him a faint smile. “Hello, Barry.”

As his voice is still deserting him, Barry only nods quietly in response.

“I hope I’m not bothering you? I don’t want to disrupt your visit from your friend here, I just wanted to see how you are doing and wish you a Merry Christmas.” It is quite saddening when it dawns on Barry how Jay seems uncertain about whether he is actually welcome or not. After what transpired the last time they saw each other, it isn’t really surprising, though. Being honest with himself, Barry is not even sure whether he is glad to have him turn up here or not.

Then again, Jay is the first and probably only person from his former life who cares enough to check up on him. This is something he is grateful for, despite the how painfully clear the memory of their last encounter is still in his mind.

“Th-thank y-you and it’s f-f-fine,” he tells him in a coarse voice and gives James an unsure, apologetic look. “H-he’s s-someone I kn-know f-from… f-from b-bef before m-my s-stay in p-prison. Y-you d-don’t m-mind h-him j-joining us b-briefly?”
“Of course not,” James assures him quickly and smiles. When he faces Jay, though, his amiable mask slips somewhat and his friendly demeanour seems at least somewhat forced. Barry can’t hold it against his friend, after he witnessed his own reaction toward older man’s presence before.

Jay grabs one of the chairs placed rightward the door and takes a sit next to James.

“How are you doing?” Jay asks. A palpable concern coats his voice when he scrutinizes Barry, and the latter can’t help but think how hurtful and confusing it is to have Jay believing the worst of him, and yet, caring about him at the same time. It is unfair, in a very painful way, and Barry has to swallow around the forming lump in his throat before he can answer. “B-better, I’ll p-prob-bably b-be able t-to l-leave in l-less th-than a w-week.”

This takes some of Jay’s worries, and he relaxes a bit. “That’s good to hear. I’m glad you’re healing is coming along nicely.”

Barry nods tiredly and expects the rather awkward silence that follows when neither of them is really sure how to proceed. He feels bad for James, who has been more or less forced into this, and wonders whether he should suggest for his friend to go and grab something to eat as he most likely hasn’t had lunch yet.

“You’ve someone to look after you for the first couple of days after staying at home again?” The question catches Barry off-guard as he hasn’t really thought about that too much, to be honest. So far, the most important thing was to finally get released from there, and he didn’t bother too much with worrying about what would come afterwards. He mostly just intends to stay a lot on his couch or in bed for the next week or two and sleep for the most part, so he would be able to go back to work, as quickly as possible.

Eddy and Mary would likely take over the part of checking on him, as would James probably do too, till he has to leave for his next business trip to Canada in about three weeks.

“I-I th-think s-so,” he answers a bit hesitantly.

“Of course you have.” James gives him one of this fondly exasperated looks, like he can’t believe how dense he can be at times. “I’ve talked with Mary about it, and we’ll rotate on staying at home with you.”

This is a piece of information Barry has been utterly unaware of so far. James met Mary and Eddy just a couple of days ago, and while they seemed to like each other well enough, he can’t recall them talking about anything like that while they were around. “Wh-what? Wh-when d-did y-you t-talk about th-that?”

“Just yesterday,” James quickly explains giving him a slightly apologetic look. “Mary called me after I left the hospital and asked me if I could meet up with Eddy and her to have dinner. She inquired whether I wanted to join in on looking after you as well, and I agreed, of course. I’m sorry I haven’t told you about this yet, but I was going to bring it up before…”

James trails off and glances over to Jay, who has been listening to them attentively, so far. Barry understands, and he certainly isn’t angry that all his friends get along so well as he has been a bit worried that James and Eddy could clash due to their different personalities. He is just a bit surprised that they seem to do so, even better than he hoped for.

“Th-there’s n-no r-reason t-to ap-pologize,” Barry assures him and smiles. “B-but y-you r-really d-don’t n-need t-to t-troub-ble y-yours-self s-so m-much. I’ll b-be f-fine on m-my own.”
“I don’t think that is a good idea.” Jay interjects then, sounding rather concerned by his words. “You’ve been severely injured, and you should have someone constantly around, at least for the first weak in case something happens.”

“I’ll b-be f-fine,” Barry disagrees, trying not to feel annoyed. The older man means well, so does James, and it isn’t their fault he doesn’t like the notion of being a burden to anybody, but it still rubs him the wrong way when Jay believes that he isn’t able to look after himself.

“It’s no trouble for us. None at all. I still have way too much overtime at work I need to get rid of, and after everything that happened over the last two weeks, my employers will be glad when I’m finally taking a break.”

“Y-you w-want t-to d-do s-so b-by b-being s-stuck in m-my a-ap-partm-ment?” Barry gives James an incredulous look and adds. “I’ll p-probably b-be a-asleep f-for m-most o-of th-the t-time.”

“That is fine with me, I’ve my pad and will be able to finally catch up on a couple of movies and books I intended to dig in for a while now.”

It is obvious that James means it and doesn’t seem to find the idea of spending his free time in Barry’s dingy old flat all that bad.

“Y-you c-could… y-you kn-know, y-you c-could d-do s-someth-thing f-fun,” he tries to protest once more, only to have James chuckle in response. “Believe it or not, I’m actually really looking forward to it.”

At his doubtful look, his friend sighs quietly and explains that either Eddy or Mary are most likely to pass by anyway during the day. “Eddy already made me agree that I’d let him teach me poker, so I’m pretty sure I’m not going to be bored.”

Despite still not really liking the idea of his friends having to bother with this, the thought of Eddy trying to tutor James in how to play poker is amusing. He doubts James is aware of what a cheat the other man is, and that he likely intends to clean him out as much as possible. He definitely would have to talk with Eddy about it when he visits tomorrow.

“Y-you r-really d-don’t h-have t-to,” Barry tries again.

“I know, Bar, we all do, but we still want to.” There is a slight sadness in James’ smile, and Barry decides to leave it at that as he doesn’t like his friends feeling bad for him.

Instead, he turns to Jay, who is watching them with a thoughtful expression and the familiar feeling of uneasy rears its ugly head again. He tries to ignore it and instead, asks the older man how he is doing. It has been a while since they talked the last time, after all.

“I’m doing fine, Barry,” Jay answers and his expression softens a bit as he does so. “Mostly busy, but otherwise everything is as usual.”

“A-and J-Joan? I h-hope s-she’s d-doing alright as w-well.” It has been an eternity since he has seen the dear older woman, and she must be in her mid-eighties by now. Not that this is all that much, due to her being a spouse of someone who is connected to the speed-force, but he still worries about her at times, and he can’t help but wonder whether he’d ever have the opportunity to see her again.

Then again, he knows he should be grateful that he never saw her look at him like he is some kind of monster, and he would rather keep it that way.

“Joan’s doing great.” Jay smiles and there is a fondness to it that only appears when he talks about
his wife. It dims just as quickly as it appeared, when he studies Barry for a moment, before he goes on more quietly. “She’s been worried about you after she learned that you were shot.”

Barry looks away. He doesn’t understand why Jay would bring this up. He has to know that this isn’t anything but painful to him. Well, maybe he does so because of it…

Jay is not a spiteful or mean person, though, and Barry, despite everything that happened between them, is well aware it.

It still doesn’t make it any easier.

“Barry,” Jay goes on in an unexpectedly soft-spoken tone. “Joan and I would like to invite you over for dinner when you’ve recovered again.”

Barry turns back and stares at the other man, wide eyes and utterly taken aback. If he had a list of things he would have never expected to hear from Jay, this would be somewhere within the top five.

“You don’t have to decide just yet,” the older keeps going when Barry fails to answer. “Get better first, and we’ll can talk about it afterwards, okay?”

Not trusting his voice to work, he simply nods silently. He has absolutely no idea, why Jay would want to invite him over to his home. Why he would ever agree to let him close to Joan. He knows Jay made clear that, he still cares about him, but, despite that fact, he continues to believe that he did commit those horrible crimes.

It doesn’t make any sense…

“I’m really glad this didn’t turn out any worse for you, Barry, and that you’ve such good friends to help you through your recovery,” Jay finally goes on, ending the uneasy silence that settled between them once again.

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and averts his eyes. It does feel good to hear him say that, surprisingly so, as he didn’t realize how much it still means to him that Jay doesn’t hate him. Barry really thought he lost Jay as well. He tried to convince himself that it doesn’t matter, but-

“Barry, I know that we haven’t parted ways on the best terms the last time around, and I want you to know that I’m sorry for how our conversation escalated. I should not have lost my temper like that. I know that we often disregard how hard all of this is on you as well and that you also just try to cope with everything that happened.” Jay sounds regretful, truly so, and Barry squeezes his eyes shut because he doesn’t want to be remembered of what he actually thinks of him.

“You probably won’t take me up on it, and I don’t hold it against you, but you can turn to me anytime you need help with something, okay?” The dull pain in Barry’s chest grows enough to overshadow the one in his abdomen at Jay’s words. It is difficult to not let himself crumble under the assault of emotions that seem to try and hack away on him, and he nods briefly, but can’t bring himself to open his eyes again.

Another brief and heavy silence follows and he knows that Jay is watching him. Suddenly, he just wants him to leave, as this is simply too much to deal with right now.

“I think I’ll leave you to your rest.” It is such a relief to hear the older man say that. Barry really doesn’t want to appear ungrateful or hostile, but he is not able to look at him yet.

“Is it alright if I borrow James for a moment?” The request is unexpected and a bit worrisome, but Barry doesn’t really mind in the end. He simply nods and tries to take deep and slow breaths while
Jay asks James if he could briefly follow him outside. After hesitating for a moment, the other man agrees.

“Take care, Barry.” Barry doesn’t replay, but he doubts that Jay expects him to do so. He hears them leaving the room.

Barry briefly thinks that he may get in trouble with the nurses, because he didn’t his meal, it doesn’t really seem important to him right now, though.

Instead, he reaches for the bed remote control and lowers his head down again. With some difficulty, he is able to pull the white blanket over his head with his right hand before trying to muffle his sobs. The other patients have visitors as well and they would most likely not pick up on him, which is at least a bit of a comfort.

Thankfully, it doesn’t take long for Barry’s exhausted mind to dull the pain enough that he is able to relax under his cover, which makes him feel a bit like a kid again. Back then, he also tried to hide like this, shielding himself from the world and its harshness. He is asleep when James returns about ten minutes later.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! :)  

I'm sorry for the later than usual upload, but I've spent this weekend with my family, and my mini-laptop isn't able to establish a wlan connection in my childhood home for whatever reason... -_-*

Jay is back, and Barry is left feeling utterly confused and overwhelmed once again... somehow Jay seems to has this effect on the poor guy. But James was there as well at least, and he did seem ready to butt head with the older speedster if necessary. :3

I hope you all had great Easter with your loved ones, and if you don’t celebrate it, I hope you’d a wonderful Sunday! <3
The heart monitor’s beeping is the first thing Barry’s drowsy mind picks up on, when he wakes up in the dim hospital room.

It seems he fell asleep after eating dinner, and he can’t really say he’s surprised as he has been feeling hardly anything, but tired lately.

Barry yawns, opening his mouth wide enough that his jaw pops, and rubs his eyes with his good hand while he wonders how late it may be.

It isn’t exactly dark due to the night light they’ve in the room, but he has troubles focusing on the clock above the door as he tries to read the time. His head hurts a little, something he picks up on just now, a slight throbbing sensation behind his temples, that is more an annoyance than pain.

He swallows and finds out what exactly must have woken him.

The medication they give him for his pain was changed again after the last one didn’t do a much better job than the first one. One of its side effects is that he is constantly thirsty, and it is generally uncomfortably enough to interrupt his sleep. Like it has done now, the third night in a row.

Tiredly, he looks over to his bed stand and is relieved to see that, either Mary or one of the nurses left him a full glass of water there. He reaches for it and flinches when the pain in his lower stomach area flare up in protest. It isn’t really that bad, but it tends to grow worse during the night time, likely because it is so much quieter and darker around him which makes it hard for him to distract his mind with anything else.

The water feels wonderful in his dry mouth and throat; he drains nearly all of it in a matter of seconds. His hand is shaking slightly as he puts the glass back onto the table with a soft clang, and he tries not to notice the butterfly needle that is still embedded in its back. It always causes his stomach to grow somewhat queasy, and he doesn’t want to get sick again.

The nurses are very nice and weren’t annoyed when he messed the bedding up the last couple of nights, after waking up from nightmares, but it still leaves him feeling unsettled and embarrassed.

He knows that people in hospitals tend to get sick, it is nothing he should worry about, but even so, he is afraid of some dire consequences that would likely never come. Life in Iron Heights has
imprinted some fears deep into his mind, and he doubts he would ever get rid of them again, no matter how much time has passed…

Letting his head drop back onto the pillow, he closes his eyes and takes a slow, deep breath.

The vaguely lit room is quiet, at least as quiet as it can be in a hospital at night. There is a cacophony of noises, but it has a calmer, more serene quality to it than during the day.

Barry listens to it for a short while. The soft snoring of his two roommates, how the old woman groans every once in a while, the beeping and hissing of the medical devices surrounding them…

There are also, the low sounds that reach him from the hallway, where two nurses are occupied with something close by the door. He can’t understand what they are saying, but their soft murmuring is relaxing and he tries to focus on them to distract himself from the still persisting pain in his lower abdomen.

It is when his eyes catch the thin hose that starts in the back of his hand, and he follows it up to the infusion bag, when he discovers that he is on a new drip. Apparently he missed one of the nurses exchanging it while he was asleep. He is somewhat glad for that; he hates it when they have to do it. The sensation of the needle in his hand being pushed around, even in the slightest, is extremely unsettling.

There, on the top of the IV, he can see the small butterfly Mary brought with her this morning, smiling slightly as he studies it. In the dim light its bright colours are hardly to make out, but they are still vivid in his mind. It was one of many nice gestures from his friends, that made his stay more bearable over the last week.

Barry looks for the clock above the entrance again and is able to make out it is already half past one in the morning. He slept nearly seven hours, which doesn’t really surprise him, due to how he hardly does anything else, other than resting, when nobody is around to keep him company.

Carefully, as not to disturb his wound, he adjusts his position when another familiar pain, flashes through his back. The mattress he is resting on right now, is undoubtedly in a much better condition than the one in his apartment, but he is a man of habit, and so is his back, as it is unable to warm up to it.

A pang through his abdomen makes him freeze. He decides he will make do with the discomfort, before accidently causing his stiches to reopen, even though he is aware that they most likely won’t. Still, he is kind of a wimp when it comes to sutures, he has always been, and the notion of having them in his body simply causes him a ridiculous amount of distress.

With a soft groan, he lets himself relax back into the mattress and tires to go back to sleep or to rest quietly at least. He really doesn’t want to disturb his roommates by accident.

Thus, Barry ends up listening to the nurses outside one more time, before they start to move away again, one of them laughing rather loudly for a moment, until she is able to catch herself and the faint sound of the other one chuckling, fades away with them.

The hallway is quiet once more.

The older woman, Susan, as he learned by now, groans softly and turns in her sleep. Barry looks over to her, remembering that her family visited her earlier that day. None of them said anything about it, but he picked up on the air of sadness surrounded the group. It was obvious that they don’t expect her to leave the hospital alive. An old small man, who hardly speaks a word in English,
probably the husband, cried when the others left.

The notion of her impending death is upsetting to Barry. He doesn’t really know her at all, just the few pieces of information the nurses slipped to him over the past week. As Susan’s English skills aren’t that great, and she seemed to prefer to stay to herself, Barry hadn’t spoken to her more than a couple of words so far; yet it is still a saddening thought that she would leave people behind, who will mourn her loss. He wonders what her husband will do. How he will cope with the sudden empty spot in his life which was once filled by his spouse…

Barry, carefully reaches up with his right hand and rubs his eyes.

This has been his ninth day in the hospital after being shot. He briefly wonders what that experience would have been like for him, if that happened just after his release from prison. Barry wouldn’t have expected anybody to visit him; it is humbling to think how much things have changed for the better.

Mary and Eddy have hardly missed a day so far, and they even brought Axel along that day. The kid was oddly quiet and tense. Barry was unsure whether he was angry at him or simply put off by being in a hospital.

When the visiting hours came to an end, Axel didn’t want to leave, though. He actually started to cuss one of the nurses, when she tried to help Mary to coax him into leaving. It was certainly not one of the kid’s finest moments, but he let himself be calmed somewhat when Eddy promised him that they would pass by again the following day.

The memory of that incident, still fills Barry with guilt for worrying the young teenager so much and he tries to force his thought towards a different direction.

The day before yesterday, James came by with his grandmother as well. It was good to see Mrs. Ming again and talk with her. She was worried, but didn’t make a fuss over it, something Barry was grateful for. It could get a little bit grating with Mary and even Eddy at times. Instead, she mostly told him stories about her childhood in China, from what her life was like in the small rice farmer village she grew up in, as one of six children.

Barry listened, thankful, as he didn’t feel well and thus hadn’t been up much to talking. James and her would pass by on Sunday again, which was only two days from then, and he is very much looking forward to it.

It still is hard for him to believe, that he has such nice people in his life. After everything that happened, he is no longer alone, and he tries to cling to that, instead of thinking about what he lost. It isn’t surprising that no one else has turned up, well other than Jay, that is. He didn’t expect it any other way.

It still leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, though.

“S-stupid…” He sighs quietly, trying to clear his mind of the memory of his former friends.

They do not longer consider him as anything, but a traitor and sick criminal, and no matter how much that thought hurts him, he must come to terms with it. None of them cares that he was shot; some would probably have preferred it for him to not…

Barry grits his teeth and forces himself to stay relaxed, unwilling to cause himself any additional pain, because he can’t keep his own mind in check.

It is late, he really should try to sleep some more instead of-
The sound of the door being quietly opened, causes him to let go of that string of thoughts and look at it instead.

A slit of the bright hallway light pierces the dark room. The first thing that comes to his mind is that it has to be one of the nurses, checking up on them.

That idea is quickly dismissed, though, when he notices that the person at the door has definitely, not the frame of any of the three female night nurses he has gotten to know, so far.

His body tenses up, causing his abdomen to burst out in pain, and him to hiss in response. He reaches for the remote that is resting next to his right hand, to call a nurse, but stops when the late visitor suddenly speaks.

“Don’t,” Len whispers sharply. The relief Barry feels at the realisation who came to see him, is nearly overwhelming. That last only for a second, though, before he really grasps what it means his friend being there. Instantly, his happiness is replaced by a nauseating worry.

“W-what are y-you d-doing h-here?” Barry asks agitatedly, trying to keep his voice down. He is aware that getting unwanted attention is the last thing either of them needs. Should the other patients or the nurses notice Len’s presence, both his friend and him, would be in a world of trouble. Not just because of the police, but due to the possibility that, the Blue Velvet and Blacksmith may also have people keeping an eye on him in case one of the Rogues turn up to visit him.

Barry watches Len with weary eyes, as he steps into the room, closing the door softly behind him, before making his way over to him, quietly. The other man is wearing dark blue jeans, a plain black shirt, and a dark brown bomber jacket, as well as a baseball cap, pulled low over his face. A simple outfit, one that would make it hard for anybody to recognize him at first glance, as Len’s criminal alter ego is generally much more well known.

“Hey.” Len’s voice sounds low and calm as he meets his eyes in the faint light. Barry wonders whether he should bother to ask him again about why he would be crazy enough to come here, but chooses not to. He is tired, in pain, yet it is just so damn good to see his friend again, alive and obviously not too badly hurt.

Warm fingers touch his, the ones from his hand with the needle embedded into it, and Barry reacts with an imperceptible shudder.

“How are you holding up?” Len asks quietly, brushing Barry’s knuckles with his own.

Barry chuckles and closes his eyes for a second. “I’m d-doing alr-right…”

He feels exhausted again, much more than a mere moment ago, and close to tears. He is smiling, though, as he had been worried sick about his friend, and it good to see Len again in person, and not on a picture attached to a newspaper’s article telling him of his demi se.

The other man slips his fingers under his hand, so he can hold it. He is careful not to touch the needle.

“I’m s-sor-ry…” The words have been itching to come out. Barry has tried them out in his mind time and time again, and he is glad that he can finally say them.

Len considers him with a frown, causing his features to harden in the sparse lighting of the room. “What for?”
Barry licks his lips. His mouth feels dry, causing his throat hurts when he tries to swallow.

“I called you…” Barry starts with a small voice before he abruptly breaks off and closes his eyes. He still feels so guilty about leading the Rogues to Carmen.

He has for days now.

Reluctantly, Barry proceeds. “You stumbled into their trap because of me…”

His words are met with silence. Barry knows it is just his mind messing with him, but the pain in his abdomen seems to grow more intense again, then.

“Oh for Christ’s sake.” Len nearly hisses, causing Barry to freeze, surprised and afraid. He has to bite down a yelp, as a warm hand cups his cheek, and it is when Len brushes the tears away with his thumb, that he realizes he has started to cry.

His face flushes in embarrassment, and keeping his eyes shut definitely seems like the more preferable thing to do right now.

“You’re such a damn moron for someone with an academic degree,” Len mutters exasperated, and even though Barry feels miserable, both emotionally and physically, and would like nothing more than hide under his blanket like a child, he stifles a chuckle in return. The amusement leaves him again and gets replaced by sombre regret, though. He opens his eyes again with a certain reluctance and meets the other man’s gaze with an unhappy frown.

“I called you-”

“Yes, and I gave you the mirror for exactly that reason.” Even in the darkness the other man’s frustration is plain on his face.

“I didn’t have it with me…”

Len frowns. “What?”

Barry chews on his bottom lip, averting his eyes. “I didn’t take it with me… I thought you… I thought it wouldn’t be a good idea because of… everything…”

A strained silence follows. Barry wouldn’t have thought it to be possible, but he begins to feel even worse than before.

It takes hardly no time for Len’s confusion to become frustration; he groans softly and reaches up with his free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“You left it at home,” he states. “In your fucking drawer or someplace as useless.”

Barry doesn’t reply, it would be rather redundant as it is.

“Look,” Len sighs. “It doesn’t matter-”

“It does,” Barry disagrees and hates how frustrated and helpless he feels right then. He can’t even sit up to have that conversation.

“I didn’t have to get you involved… I… they nearly killed you because of me.”

“No.” There is a low seething anger in Len’s voice. His friend neither stiffen, nor glares at him, but
Barry can see how very upset he got in an instant. He knows Len wouldn’t hurt him, despite this sudden change in his demeanour. It still scares him, though, and he doesn’t move a muscle. Len, of course, doesn’t miss it and huffs a sigh filled with frustration, before he gives Barry’s hand a light squeeze.

“None of this is on you. What happened was that you were kidnapped, had two of your fucking fingers broken and were shot because I was a stupid idiot. None of this is on you so stop guilt tripping yourself over a damn mistake I’ve made.” Len’s anger dissipates just as quickly as it came. He scowls again, noticing how pale Barry has turned and grimaces. “Relax.”

Barry trembles when Len moves his hand to close it with almost no pressure around his wrist, carefully avoiding the butterfly needle. It isn’t a threatening touch.

“Just concentrate on getting better, okay?” He seems calmer once more. Barry swallows and closes his eyes and another couple of hot tears to run down his face. The lump in his throat is now so big and uncomfortable, that he can’t bring himself to speak. The next couple of minutes he just concentrates on Len’s presence as they stay silent.

“I gotta go now.” Len tightens his hold on his wrist, and it is quite apparent he doesn’t like the idea.

“Are y-you s-safe?” Barry asks feebly, as he finally looks back to Len. “All of y-you?”

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Len assures him, and the right corner of his lips lifts slightly. He looks both amused and a bit exasperated. “It seems Amunet has other things to worry about, other than us.”

Barry isn’t sure what to think, or how he is supposed to understand that.

“Th-the B-Blue V-Velvet?”

There is a brief pause and even in the faint light he can make out how a disgruntled expression crosses Len’s face for a second, before he schools his face again.

“Something like that,” he answers simply and there is something to way he says it, that worries him.

“You should go back to rest.” The fingers leave his wrist. Barry can’t help, but make a small unhappy noise over the loss of contact.

“L-Len,” he protests weakly. He knows how stupid it is to try and get the other man to stay, seeing that, every minute he is there makes it more likely for him to be caught. Nonetheless, he doesn’t want him to leave, not so soon. It is just then, when he registers how much he has actually missed Len over the previous week.

For the last months, really.

A warm, calloused hand cups the left side of his face once more, and Barry holds his breath in surprise and confusion. The mild apprehension he feels due to the unexpected contact, quickly wanes again. Len makes a small calming noise, stroking his thumb over his cheekbone, in a display of tenderness.

Barry’s eyes close on their own accord, and he concentrates on the touch. It is so nice and soothing, it reaches something deep inside his chest, a sore and hurting spot that has been there for so long, that he has just got used to the discomfort.

Len moves his hand lower, and Barry quivers, opening his eyes again to look at him alarmed, when the other man’s thumb caresses his lower lip with a feather-like touch. He is barely aware of the
renewed pain in his middle region as he watches his friend intently, warily.

Again, Len makes a low soothing noise. His eyes are just a slim rim of blue against the dark pools of his pupils. There is also an emotion, which Barry only saw traces of it before. It scares him, but he relaxes again when nothing else happens, other than Len studying him quietly.

This is such an intimate touch, so different to how Len usually…

Barry isn’t sure how to take that, and while a part of him warns and orders him to turn his head to break the contact, another one can’t deny he enjoys the tentative display of affection, which speaks of the bond that has been developing between them for nearly two years.

Barry likes tenderness like that, it is something he hasn’t experienced in a long time, and even though he knows it can lead to pain, the sensation is very similar to the one he had with Iris in the past, calming, reassuring. The touch doesn’t hold that sharp threatening edge, like he has gradually connected to intimacy all over again…

“I won’t let them hurt you again.” The thumb on his lip stops, and Len holds his gaze. “I was an idiot to believe she would keep her end of the bargain.”

The other man sounds exhausted and spent. Guilt starts to spread in Barry, when he thinks of how much trouble he really caused Len and the others.

“I’m s-sorry,” he whispers quietly.

“Of course you are,” Len agrees drily, but he doesn’t seem annoyed. Instead his eyes soften, and he moves his hand to cup the back of Barry’s neck. “Just get better, okay?”

“C-can I s-see y-you again?” The idea that they may have to go on like before, and Barry having to keep his distance from them is disturbing to him. He doesn’t miss how Len relaxes somewhat with a fond expression that settles over his face, as he nods.

“Yeah,” Len agrees and strokes Barry’s cheekbone gently, one more time. A familiar heat spreads on his face in response to the intimate touch.

“Of course. We’ve to be more careful, though. Your friend…” He pauses for a moment and frowns as if remembering something. “He scared them off for now, but I’m not sure if they won’t come back for you, to get to us.”

Len gives Barry’s neck a subtle squeeze, when he notices his worried expression. “I won’t let her get you again. Not her nor, anyone else.”

Barry knows his friend means it, but also knows from experience, that things like those just tend to happen to him. He still nods wordlessly, meeting Len’s eyes, though.

They stay together like that for a little longer, both of them enjoying having the other close again, before Len finally speaks. “I’ve to go.”

“Y-yeah,” Barry agrees quietly and tries not to show how much he hates it, when the other man moves back.

“Just rest,” Len tells him once more before he turns. Barry watches him leave. Though it causes a lingering sadness in his chest, he also feels better and calmer than he has in a long time.
Finally, Len is back! *cheer*

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter. It is a little stepping stone when it comes to their relationship, the first part of two, tbh, the next one will follow in two chapters. :3

Thanks for reading, and thanks for leaving me your wonderful feedback! <3
Of Powers and Mirrors

Chapter Summary

Barry is released from hospital and finds a surprise waiting for him at home.

Chapter Notes

This story has been edited by my wonderful friend Katzerover. Thank you so much, my dear, for finding the time to help me with this! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The man-sized mirror definitely wasn’t there when Barry slept in his bedroom the last time around. Its presence is confusing enough, that he stops, blinking at the foreign object as he tries to come up with an explanation of what it could possibly be doing there or where it could come from.

“Everything alright?” James asks. He has been assisting Barry to make his way to the bedroom and shoots him a concerned look, due to his sudden pause.

“Th-the m-mirror” he utters confused. His mind is so nicely wrapped up in the drugs he got before he left the hospital, about forty minutes ago, that he isn’t sure how to formulate what exactly is troubling him about it.

He didn’t own a mirror before… did he?

Barry frowns, squinting at the mirror, not sure what to make of it. He likes mirrors well enough; they come in handy to get to the Rogues’ hideouts, after all, so he has no problem with it per se, but it is odd-

“Yeah, I moved it from the bathroom in here” Eddy explains easily. Barry turns to him, both surprised and even more confused about what his friend says. The other man was following close behind James and him, and came to a stop next to them. When he notices Barry’s uncertain look, he winks at him with an amused little smile before he elaborates. “You know, because your bathroom is about the size of a matchbox, and that thing is really just taking unnecessary space up in there. It’ll probably be much more useful in here anyway, right?”

Not sure how else to respond, Barry only nods and turns back to the new bedroom addition, still pretty sure he never owned a mirror like that, especially not in his bathroom.

“Come on, Barry, let’s get you to the bed,” James urges him tentatively on. He smiles once again, looking a tiny bit worried. “I’m sure things will clear up after you’ve rested a little”

“I-I’m t-tired” Barry agrees and let himself be lead to his bed.

The prospect of sleep is a welcome one, he has been drowsy since the nurse gave him the painkillers that morning; his body feels unusually heavy. Heavy but mostly painless, which is a nice change…
The bedding is fresh and cool. He groans softly when he lies down on it. He really missed his mattress, it may be crappy and old, but he got used to it over the years, and it almost feels like coming home all over again.

“Do you want me to get you some water?” James asks. He pulled the covers over him and is cupping his shoulder lightly. “Or tea?”

Barry undergoes another bout of drowsiness, so he is not really feel up to decide on anything right then. He makes a small noise and yawns.

“I think he doesn’t really care right now,” Eddy points out, audibly amused. Barry glances over to him and smiles. His friend snorts and shakes his head. “Man, I wanna have some of the shit they gave you.”

“Just rest, Barry, I’ll bring you something to drink in a moment, okay?” James squeezes his shoulder carefully, ignoring Eddy, and stands up again.

“Sleep tight, Rosebud.” Eddy winks at him. Barry watches both of them leave the room and close the door.

The window blinds dim the light in there, despite it being shortly after midday, and Barry lets his eyes move around his bedroom, feeling lethargic and lightheaded at the same time. After a couple of seconds his gaze lands on the mirror again, and he furrows his brow. He wonders if he could ask James or Eddy to cover it with something for him, when they come back. Having it around is kind of unsettling to him.

His drugged-induced exhaustion wins out in the end, before either of his friends returns though.

***

Barry wakes up to a man standing over him.

It is dark in the room, nearly pitch-black, which signalizes that night has come by, then. He must have slept at least a handful of hours.

Everything is silent around him. He can only hear the beating of his own heart in his ears, as he looks up to the tall shape next to his bed.

There is something threatening about the looming presence; something so painfully frightening that Barry isn’t sure whether he is still dreaming or not, as it could easily be another nightmare. He has them often enough, after all.

Barry tentatively tries to move his right hand and notices with surprise, that he can. Usually he is paralyzed in dreams like those, but the realisation that he isn’t, sends white-hot fear flashing through him. He gets completely still.

Whoever that is, doesn’t move an inch, not at all. He just stands there, looking down, watching Barry watch him.

The air feels charged, thick and static, just like before a storm.

It is the oddest, most bizarre sensation, as if he knew who that ominous being was, like he should recognize him at least. Barry freezes up, pain ravaging his inner organs, when he catches the slight crimson glimmer where the other man’s – thing’s? – eyes must be.
Then, the stranger is gone.

All happens so quickly that Barry needs a moment to grasp the fact that he is alone again. An uneasy feeling stays behind settled in the pit of his stomach, despite Barry’s efforts to rationalize with himself that it was just another nightmare. A jab of pain pierces his trail of thought, forcing his attention away from the now empty spot where his mind played a trick on him, a moment ago. Exhaling, he tries to lie down and loosen up again.

The unexpected sound of someone opening the bedroom door cuts through the silence.

Barry’s eyes need a moment to adjust to the sharp light coming from the floor. He grunts in discomfort, as he squints at the person’s silhouette assessing it.

“Hey, you’re awake.” His worry dissipates as soon as he recognizes Eddy’s voice. “Can I turn on the lights without your head exploding?”

Barry chuckles but scowls when his abdominal pain worsens again.

“Sure.”

The darkness is suddenly replaced with an unforgiving artificial luminosity, which shows Barry that it wasn’t a good idea after all.

“Good to see you finally awake, Bar.” His friend chuckles, as he makes his way over to him. “You really went out like a light.”

He sounds far too amused by his discomfort, and Barry gives him a disgruntled look for it.

“How are you doing, buddy?” The mattress moves slightly when Eddy sits down at its edge, next to Barry. His smirk wanes as soon as he gets a better look on him. “You alright? You’re looking a bit pale as death.”

Barry frowns and glances to the other side of his bed, where he thought he saw the figure. He turns back to Eddy and hesitates for an instant, before he somewhat reluctant, asks him if he was in there just a moment ago.

“No?” Eddy answers, rising an eyebrow. “You were probably still half asleep, Bar.” He chuckles.

“Right…”

It really seems like it was the afterglow of some nightmare, he can’t remember anymore, now lost, deep in his subconscious. He knows he should be glad about it, but there is an unnerving feeling holding onto him, refusing to let go.

A light touch on his arm snaps his attention back to Eddy, who is now watching him with a more serious expression. “Hey, you are completely safe here. Nobody will get to you with me around, okay?”

It is a comforting sensation, that Eddy could be there in a split of a second. Barry is glad he agreed to his friends’ little scheme of babysitting him around the clock, for at least the first couple of days. The idea of bothering them still doesn’t sit well with him, but he knows how much worse he would feel, without anybody else keeping him company, after another dream like that one.

“Thanks, E-Eddy.” Barry answers. He gives to the other man a faint smile, before the urge to yawn overcomes him, so he rubs his eyes.
“Wh-what t-time is it?” Barry mutters tiredly. He looks at his clock, on his bedside table.

“Half past three in the morning,” Eddy answers just as Barry reads the numbers.

“Th-that l-late?”

He really must have been out; he slept for more than twelve hours straight, without waking up once. It would at least, explain how bone-dry his mouth is and how uncomfortably full his bladder feels.

“Or early, depending on how you look at it.” Eddy points out.

“Y-you’re w-way t-too ch-cheerf-ful f-for h-how early i-it is.” Barry wipes his eyes once more and sighs. “C-can y-you h-help m-me u-up? I n-need t-to use th-the b-b-bathr-room.”

“Of course.”

Eddy is surprisingly gentle in getting him out of bed, and Barry is really grateful for it, because he hurts much more than he initially noticed, now that the medication wore off. He also doesn’t feel all that steady on his legs, so he leans heavily on his friend. Eddy walks away from the bathroom while he is using it, and helps him back to bed afterwards.

Just this small journey leaves Barry sore all over, and he groans softly when he is finally lying down again.

“I’ll make you some tea, okay?”

Barry hums in response and concentrates on his breathing. He tried to ease his pain a number of times over the last two weeks, with what he read in the book he got from Mary. It never really helped that much, but he always ended up more relaxed, which made it easier to deal with the throbbing in his abdomen, in a way.

He is dozing when he hears Eddy enter again. He slowly looks over to his friend, who is studying him with a frown. “Don’t take it the wrong way, Bar, but you look awful”

That certainly doesn’t deserve an answer. Barry stays quiet as he watches Eddy come over and put the cup of tea onto his bedside table.

“You want me to help you sit up?” Eddy asks.

The thought alone causes him to grimace, and Eddy makes a sympathetic noise.

“We can also wait for it to cool down more, and you can drink it without having to move that much?” he suggests, and Barry gives him a thankful look.

“C-can I’ve s-some w-water inst-stead?”

“Sure.” Eddy agrees readily. Suddenly, there is a glass of water in his hand. Just like that.

Barry’s eyes grow wide. He just stares at his friend for a long moment in disbelief. Eddy usually doesn’t use his powers around him like that; he has always seemed very reluctant to even just acknowledge them so far.

Aside from the night Barry learned about them and when the other man saved James’ and his lives, he hadn’t displayed them at all so far.

“Careful or your face will stay stuck like that.” Eddy says. Barry blinks and blushes, embarrassed
about his own reaction. “S-sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Eddy gives him a tight smile that is clearly fake and doesn’t reach his eyes. “I hope you don’t mind. I mean, me speeding around in your flat.”

It is such an odd thing to say that Barry can’t help but be amused by it. He chuckles softly. “Of course n-not, wh-why w-would I?”

Eddy studies him in silence, for a long moment. His expression is guarded, and Barry doesn’t like how obviously troubled his friend is by his own powers.

“I don’t know.” Eddy finally concedes with a shrug and averts his gaze to the still steaming tea cup in his hands. “I don’t wanna freak you out or anything.”

“Y-you d-don’t,” he assures him in a quiet voice. Barry wishes he could move better, or at least be able to use his left hand, because he wants to touch his friend, just as a small gesture of comfort.

“Y-you m-make m-me f-feels s-safe,” Barry says. It is a bit of a corny thing to say, but he means it, and he wants Eddy to understand that. He is really not bothered by what his friend can do. He would be quite a hypocrite in that regard, after all.

“Like your personal superhero?” Eddy asks and bats his eyes at him in an overdone manner. Barry smiles and nods. “J-just l-like th-that.”

The other man laughs in a soft manner, and his noticeable tension, fortunately, ebbs away.

“You could be the Lois Lane to my Superman.”

“A-and I th-thought I’m th-the s-sappy one.”

Eddy beams, obviously not insulted in the least. “A real man can stand to his emotions, may they be of anger, sadness, or eternal love.”

“Y-you’re awf-ful at th-this, y-you kn-know th-that?”

“You just don’t wanna admit how smitten you really are.”

Thankfully, his initial pain and discomfort are no longer borderline intolerable, what allows Barry to notice how at ease he feels in his bed, with a friend around to keep him company.

“Y-you’re r-right, I’m h-head o-ver h-heels f-for you.”

“Aha! I knew it! Nobody can withstand my charm.”

Barry laughs softly and closes his eyes. “Wh-when d-did J-James l-leave?”

“Around ten.”

“H-he s-stayed th-that l-long?”

James has to work tomorrow, or this day, by then. He has a short meeting of sorts, and some preparations for his trip to Canada, as far as Barry knows.

“We played a few rounds of poker,” Eddy explains with a smirk, that reminds Barry of a cat who caught the proverbial canary. He groans exasperated. “Y-you c-cleaned h-him o-out, d-didn’t y-you?”
Of course not,” his friend denies, but he seems much too pleased with himself, for it to be true.

“I asked y-you n-not t-to, h-he’s n-new t-to it. Y-you offered t-to t-teach h-him.”

While Eddy can be a really nice guy, he also is really amazing at being a jackass at times.

“And what better motivation to improve, than playing for actual money?” Eddy asks. At Barry’s dark look, Eddy sighs and at least tries to look a bit guilty, although he doesn’t wear it that well.

“Right, I won’t do it again,” Eddy offers and adds with a slight frown. “And you do know that the guy has money like hay, right?”

“D-does th-that r-really m-matter?”

“Of course, it isn’t as if two hundred bucks less will hurt him, but they can make all the difference for a poor fellow like me.”


That is more than half of his rent!

“What? No, of course not, I’ve just said some random number as an example” Eddy protests. Barry wonders whether his friend actually does it on purpose or just doesn’t know how fake his innocent expression looks.

“Y-you’re unbel-liveable”

He will have to apologize to James and tell him to stay away from Eddy when it comes to anything regarding money or bets.

“I’m not that bad,” Eddy disagrees before he lifts the glass of water. “You want to drink some?”

The cool water feels amazing; he lets Eddy assist him with lifting his upper body, so he doesn’t spill half of it all over himself. Barry empties it in one go, and sighs softly when he gets lowered back down again. He is so much better just by no longer being so thirsty.

“You want me to get you another one?”

“I’m f-fine, th-thanks”

Eddy puts the empty glass back on the bedside table. “How’s your belly doing?”

“H-hurts,” Barry answers truthfully. He rubs his eyes with his good hand. “B-but n-not a-as b-bad as before.”

“You missed your afternoon dose yesterday, so if you want, you can have some of your pain meds now.”

“Y-you w-would n-need t-to m-make m-me p-porridge, th-though” he points out. The pills he got for the pain are the strong kind, stronger than the doctors usually prescribe, yet they seem to be the only ones that are really working on him. To not get sick or hurt his stomach, Barry couldn’t take them without having eaten something in advance; and right then, that meant porridge or semolina pudding.

“That would be the case if I hadn’t been clever enough to already prepare it beforehand.” Eddy grins and gets up. “I’ll get you some”
“Thank you,” Barry says. He watches his friend leave the room, then he turns his gaze back to the ceiling. He feels tired again, which really shouldn’t be possible after how long he slept. Still, his eyelids get heavier by the second, and he only fights the urge to close them for about a minute before he gives in.

A tentative shake of his shoulder wakes him up again just a moment later, when Eddy returns with a bowl of porridge.

“If you go on like this you will fall into hibernation,” Eddy says. His friend puts his meal aside and grabs a second pillow out of his closet. Barry grimaces when Eddy helps him to sit up, in order to push it behind his back for support.

“You’ll feel less crappy as soon as you have some food and the pain killers in your system,” Eddy assures him, handing him the light blue ceramic bowl.

“I think I’d like to hibernate better.”

The food doesn’t hold any charm for him, but Barry still picks up the spoon and wills himself to eat, knowing that he needs the energy, if he wants to get better.

Eddy keeps talking for the most part, while Barry is finishing the small portion of the rather bland, but not bad porridge. It is nice to listen to him as he eats, which takes him about ten minutes. He lets Eddy help him lie back again, after receiving the pain killers that hopefully, would help with the renewed pain.

“You want to sleep a bit more?” Eddy asks.

Barry knits his brow, as he thinks about it.

“Not yet,” he tells Eddy. He looks back towards the mirror that stands in the left corner, opposite to his bed. “Can you tell me where the mirror comes from?”

“Do I really need to?” His friend is also looking at the reflective surface, that is about his size, what makes it a bit bigger than Barry. Eddy’s expression is a little bemused, when he looks back at Barry. “They really used the small mirror in your bathroom before? How did some of them fit even through that? I mean, Rory is a fucking beast. Does it even offer enough space for his shoulders?”

It doesn’t catch Barry off-guard to learn that, the new addition to his rather sparse furniture, comes from the Rogues; taking into consideration that Eddy clearly knew about its sudden appearance in his bedroom, he guessed he was somehow involved in getting it there.

“You’ve talked to them?”

“Yeah,” Eddy shrugs. He takes his seat next to him once again. “Somewhat. Mostly Snart, and, wow, isn’t that one tense fellow.”

That brings a faint smile upon Barry’s face, and he can’t say he is surprised. He knows Len and how uncommunicative he can get, especially when he is under a lot of pressure and edgy to begin with.

That night from about a week ago, comes to his mind, how the other man passed by in the early morning hours. It was such a relief to see him alive and well, even if it was just for a short time.

“Are they okay?” Barry asks. He tries not to let the heavy concern for his friends take a hold of him again. Len told him that the Rogues are fine, but he knew his friend would also say so if it wasn’t true, just to spare him the worry while he is hurt. They hardly had time to speak about
anything, as long as his brief secret visit lasted. Also, he still doesn’t know what exactly happened back at the docks, after James and him were taken to the hospital.

“I guess so. I haven’t really spent that much time with them. They seemed to do fine,” Eddy says.

“Are th-they s-safe?”

Despite Len telling him that they may have settled their problems with Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet, Barry isn’t sure if he really believes so. Both parties seemed rather hell-bent on getting to his friends, partly for some kind of information, partly out of personal grudge. Somehow, it is hard to buy they would simply let bygone be bygone. Things don’t work like that.

“They’re currently lying low in some bolthole of theirs,” Eddy tells him with a shrug. “I don’t think that this crazy bitch and the mob have the slightest idea where it is, so they are probably as safe as they can be right now.”

“Y-you’ve b-been th-there?” he asks surprised. He knows that Len generally doesn’t trust any outsiders with the locations the Rogues tend to frequent, when they have to lie low.

“No.” Eddy snorts. “They bolted through some reflective surface of an ice-wall Snart created with his gun, and didn’t invite me along.” His friend smiles in a troubled way. “It sounds freaky to read about this shit in the newspaper, but to actually see it makes all the difference.”

“Y-you w-went b-back th-there?” Barry asks. He hasn’t really thought about that being a possibility. He assumed that Eddy simply went home or maybe to a bar, or somewhere else, but not back to the docks. Why would he?

“Well, if I hadn’t been there, there probably wouldn’t be all that much left of the infamous Rogues. Don’t get me wrong, they are crazy, seriously, I really don’t wanna fight them.” Eddy frowns and pauses briefly.

Barry knows he won’t like what comes next.

“They were up against a fucking huge number, and that crazy nut of a woman actually had a few guys at hand that were not only lookalikes of a few of your friends but had similar gimmicks to them as well.”

“L-like th-the R-Rogues?” Barry frowns. This is quite a surprising and concerning piece of news. He has no doubt that a group of copycats could mean a world of trouble for the twins and his friends, especially if they work for someone like Blacksmith.

Eddy agrees with a hum.

“Some other guy in a Mirror Master outfit, a bald chick with a weather wand, and a guy with a heat gun,” he explains. “There were also two other freaks, some we actually know. Tar Pit and Double Down, really disgusting fellows, both of them”

Barry shudders at the mentioning of the last two, as he had more than one unwelcome run-in with them during his time in Iron Heights...

He pushes the memory away, not willing to let his mind wander there, and instead focuses on the rest of what Eddy has just told him. None of the other criminals he talked about ring a bell; he never heard of a second Mirror Master, a female Weather Wizard, or another Heat Wave. Neither Len nor any of the others ever mentioned anything of that sort, but it could also be that they simply didn’t tell him.
"Y-you w-went b-back t-to h-help th-them?"

While Eddy is a good friend, Barry has realized by then, that he most likely is so only to Mary and him. He generally doesn’t seem to care too much about anyone else, and though this doesn’t make him an actively bad person, he certainly is not an altruistic man. It makes no sense for Eddy to go back in the heat of a fight, for a couple of guys he hardly knows.

His friend seems to guess his line of thought as he chuckles and shrugs.

"Couldn’t let them die, could I now?" he asks with a smirk. “You’d have become all mopey again, and Mary would have totally given me the fault for it. You know how scary that woman can be”

The humour vanishes like a shadow and is replaced by a much colder and hard look when he goes on. “I also couldn’t let those fuckers get the stupid idea to come after you again.”

Barry feels his stomach drop. “Wh-what d-did y-you d-do?”

For a long moment, Eddy remains silent. He keeps looking at his hands, flat on his thighs instead, with a dark expression on his face.

The air in the room got heavier and harder to breathe, and Barry knows it is probably just his imagination, as he has just taken the pain medication, but once again, his pain is showing its ugly presence.

“I scared them.” Eddy finally concedes. He is to a moderate extent reluctant and glances at Barry, before looking at their reflection in the mirror. “I didn’t kill them, but I hurt a couple of them, just to show that I mean business.”

He snorts humourless, screwing his face. “I think I freaked your friends out pretty much as well by doing so. Snart looked ready to blast me with his gun, when I came close to them after…”

Eddy gnaws his bottom lip, in that still so unfamiliar, troubled way. Barry isn’t sure whether he really wants to know what happened after he was taken to the hospital, anymore. He believes that Eddy didn’t murder anybody, but he knows there are a number of other horrible things someone can do to a man, particularly when you have the abilities of a speedster.

Eddy glances at him again, an uneasy frown on his face, before he stares at his hands. “I can be pretty… horrifying, you know? I mean, I’m a rather chill guy but…”

Barry watches his friend pausing and nervously licking his lower lip.

Again, Eddy glances to him. “I’ve a really nasty streak, when someone actually is able to provoke me, like, a really nasty streak. It is as if my brain isn’t working right anymore, I feel calm and all, but I am not. I’ve done some really messed up things so far, not murder or shit like that but…”

It must be hurtful the way Eddy is digging his fingers in his thighs. The rest of his body appears surprisingly relaxed, just his hands look more like claws than anything else. Barry wants to tell him to relax, that he is hurting himself. He has been in the other man’s place before, though, and he knows how sometimes you just need the chance to talk and explain yourself.

He stays quiet and listens.

“Y-you can do some pretty sick things when you’re fast, not just running around but… I mean, you probably have seen the Flashes and the other speedsters move through stuff, like walls and shit, right?” Eddy gives him an uncertain look. He looks scared.
Barry feels sick as he thinks that he already knows where this is going, but he still nods.

“I don’t know if my powers work exactly like theirs,” Eddy proceeds and frowns “I can move through stuff as well, though, like walls, cars, trees, nearly anything, to be honest. Even other humans and... if I’m not careful I hurt them when I do so, I mess them up a little. Dr Elias said that I overload their cells with energy... that they kind of... pop.”

Eddy shudders. Barry feels a familiar dread settle over him as he listens to his friend.

“I also can simply destroy their tissue if I solidify when I haven’t completely passed through them. Believe me, that hurts like a bitch and not just to the other person. I found that out the hard way by accident.”

The image alone is disturbing, and Barry wonders again how long has the other man had this powers by then and how he got them. He can still remember when he himself got connected to the speed force, how overwhelming, confusing, and frightening that was at first, before he was able to learn to control his new abilities. It is also not lost on him, that this Dr Elias seems to know his friend quite well. Barry wonders who this man actually is.

“I’ve got the handle on it by now, though. I can move around without anybody noticing me; without me killing or crippling others by accident while I do so.” The smile Eddy gives him is not a particularly happy one. It is strained, and Eddy looks pale. “I’ve also learned a few neat tricks over time. I wonder if the other speedsters can do them as well. I used one of them on a couple of those guys in the warehouse, to make it apparent, that there would be someone around to make them hell to pay if they come after you again.”

When Eddy meets his eyes, Barry doesn’t look away. The grim, nearly stubborn way in which he is looking at Barry then, is like his friend daring him to tell him off for what he did. At the same time, Barry doesn’t miss his silent plea for him to understand, though. “I don’t want you to freak out and think that I’m some psycho or anything. I... I’m really not. I was just so angry after seeing what they did to you.”

“E-Eddy, I kn-know y-you aren’t a p-psychop-path.” Barry says. He wishes he could sit upright while having this conversation. He thinks it would make it easier. “I also kn-know th-that you’re n-not a b-bad p-person. Y-you s-saved our l-lives, J-James and I would never have been able to get out of th-there w-without y-your h-help. Th-that is s-someth-thing a g-good m-man d-does, s-someone wh-who c-cares f-for h-his f-friends.”

He really means it. Eddy may possess a lot of faults, probably way more than Barry is even aware of, but he has been nothing but a good, supportive friend towards him since they’ve met. That is something he would never forget.

“I’m n-not s-scared o-of y-you,” he goes on when Eddy is about to protest. “And I’m n-not g-going t-to j-judge y-you f-for wh-what y-you’ve d-done. I-I’m n-not h-happy about y-you h-hurting others, b-but i-it d-doesn’t m-mean I’m n-not g-gratef-ful f-for your h-help or th-that y-you’re l-looking out f-for m-me. J-just t-try t-to b-bring y-your p-point over w-without h-h-harming anyb-body f-from n-now on, okay?”

The slight incredulous, nearly wary way Eddy is looking at him, tugs at Barry’s heart. He is sure that his friend expected quite a different reaction from him. Again, he wonders about the other man, about his past. It is hard to miss he couldn’t have had the easiest one.

“Okay,” Eddy agrees finally after a moment. He still looks uncertain, but, at the same time, he also appears visibly relieved.
“I’m g-glad th-that w-we’ve m-met,” Barry isn’t sure why he has added that. It just seems important to him that his friend gets what he means to him.

“Me too, Bar,” Eddy agrees with a much more relaxed smile.

They fall silent after they are done talking, as they go after their own thoughts.

Suddenly, a rather worrying thing occurs to Barry, when he thinks back to that evening in the warehouse.

“D-did th-they s-see your f-face?” he asks concerned. Eddy meets his concerned expression with a smirk. “I may not be an expert on my powers, but I’m not a novice either. I didn’t give my identity away.”

“Y-you d-didn’t w-wear a-a c-costume, d-did y-you?” Barry asks and smiles in amusement at that thought. Eddy gives him a rather miffed glare at that. “Nah, I just vibrated my body to appear like an actual blur. I’m not a big fan of those garish skin-tight jumpsuits.”

“Y-you d-don’t l-like th-the F-Flash’s c-costume?”

They’ve never really touched upon the twin city’s most famous protector, as neither of them are all that jazzed breaching that particular topic for various reasons.

Still, Barry is curious.

“Well, there are definitely worse ones around,” Eddy admits and makes a face. “But you wouldn’t catch me in one of that stupid getups for any money in the world. I don’t understand how anybody with any sense of self-awareness can wear that without feeling like a complete moron.”

Barry can’t help but be a little insulted by that. Nevertheless, he doesn’t disagree with his friend. He always felt uncomfortable in his Flash costume. He liked the look of it, just not wearing it.

“Though I’ve read somewhere that it’s made up of actual energy,” Eddy adds grinning. “Which sounds totally badass. I think in that case I probably would put my vanity aside.”

“Wh-where’ve y-you r-read th-that?” In Barry’s time as the Flash, that little fact wasn’t really a common knowledge. He knows Wally does not have the same connection to the speed force like he once had. In this regard, he was quite similar to Hal, whose Green Lantern powers provide with a fitting costume.

In his case, it came from the speed force itself. Maybe Wally’s connection to it has changed, and he is able to perform that neat little trick then, as well. It is possible; Barry knows next to nothing about his nephew anymore, after all.

“No sure.” Eddy shrugs. “Probably in one of those gossip magazines Mary likes to hoard.”

Barry chuckles and reaches with his good hand up to rub his eyes. He still feels drowsy from sleeping so long, and being unable to do anything else but lying down in bed isn’t helping with that.

“Hey, sleeping beauty,” Eddy’s grin is audible in his voice. “You’re feeling up for a game?”

Barry smiles.

Chapter End Notes
I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter.

It reveals a bit more about Eddie and his powers, and what happened after Barry and James got away from the warehouse.

Thank you for reading and your feedback, it always brightens my day. <3
Barry is dozing when a soft noise catches his attention. It sounds like someone is tapping on glass, which is rather odd and unexpected, considering he is currently in his bedroom.

Confused and still quite drowsy, he opens his eyes and looks to the window above his bed. The blinds are shut, and it takes him a moment to recall that he lives on the second floor and someone would actually have to climb up the fire escape to come up here. He frowns.

A soft and slightly muffled chuckle reaches him from the other side of the room. He freezes.

Kenneth comes to his mind, closely followed by Cameron and the dread that comes after that memory of both men is nearly sickening.

Then, he realizes that James is there, outside in his living room, and the notion that something could have happened to his friend is even worse.

“It’s just us, Barry” a distorted, yet familiar voice says. The terror that clawed into him, fades away. His sleep-drunken mind feels sluggish; his abdomen hurts from the startle he got, but he pushes himself up a bit, so he can look over to the mirror, that is in his possession now. Moving continues to be an arduous task, and he grimaces, trying to ignore the pain.

It is rather obvious now that he is half awake, who decided to pay him such a late visit; despite the initial scare, he can’t help but smile as he turns his attention to the mirror.

“Hey, Allen,” Sam greets him. Barry can hardly make out the man or his features in the dim streetlight, that bathes the room through his window. He is pretty sure his friend is smirking, though. “I don’t understand what Len has been getting on about; you don’t look that bad.”

Sam seems to be well enough; his lacklustre humour is still intact, at least.

Barry watches how Sam’s amused grin wanes, when he notices Len’s irked expression, who is standing next to the other Rogue, both still in the mirror verse.
“Right,” the brunette goes on and steps off to the side, so Len can take his place. “I’ll just shut up.”

“I-it’s g-good t-to s-see y-you, S-Sam,” Barry tells him and means it. It is a relief to see his friend up and well. He was worried about all of them, in spite of Len’s and Eddy’s words of reassurance that the Rogues are doing well, everything considered.

Sam looks back to him with a grin in place once again, as he agrees. “Yeah, damn good to still be breathing, that’s for sure.” He then nods towards him. “And likewise, Allen.”

Barry is about to reply, when Len finally speaks up, cutting him off. “You’ve a babysitter around.”

His good mood falters somehow at the other man’s tone. He turns his attention to Len, frowning slightly, before he looks at to the door. James is out there, either working on something on his laptop or maybe sleeping, as it is already quite late.

“H-he’s h-helping m-me” Barry states simply. He lowers his voice now that he remembers James’ presence. Len’s dislike over that little fact is plain on his face, even in the dusky room. Barry really doesn’t feel up to an argument with him right then, especially about his friend.

“Yeah” Len agrees. The tense, subsequent moment of silence, makes it very clear what he really thinks of James being around.

It is disconcerting for Barry, that Len is in such a grim mood already; he has been looking forward to see him again…

Keeping himself up on his elbows for that long, turns out to be a very effective way to upset his abdomen again, as the pain intensifies, and Barry lowers himself back down. It is not a position he likes to have this conversation in, but he has hardly been out of the hospital for two days, and his body is still very much recovering.

He groans in a quiet manner, pressing his eyes shut while taking a couple of slow and deep breaths, trying to calm the sharp biting pain.

“Can I come through?” The quiet anger is gone from Len’s voice, he sounds calmer once again, which is both a surprising but also, welcomed change.

Barry hesitates for an instant and glances over to the door. There is no noise coming from the other side, which could mean that James has fallen asleep, but with the absence of a TV in his flat, it is hard to tell whether the other man isn’t doing something else.

“Don’t worry about your pal,” Sam tells him. “He’s snoozing.”

Upon hearing that, Barry relaxes.

“G-good, okay,” he agrees quietly and watches how Len steps out of the mirror. Before he makes his way over to Barry, though, he turns back to Sam. “You can return to the hideout, but keep an eye on that guy for me.”

“What?” Sam asks in faked surprise. “You don’t want me to stick around for your sappy reunion? You wouldn’t notice-”

“If you don’t want to end up with a frozen head, you zip off right now.”

“Always so damn pissy…”
Barry watches how Len keeps scowling at the mirror as Sam takes his leave before his friend turns back to him. Their eyes meet, and they study each other quietly for a long moment, across the dimly lit room.

It is good to see Len again, well and in one piece, even though his friend visited him already in the hospital. With everything that happened, Barry was worried that something else could go wrong for his friends, though, as he is still not sure what exactly is taking place with the Blue Velvet nor Blacksmith.

“H-hey.” Barry says quietly, smiling. He still feels tired, ridiculously so, for how much he has been sleeping the last couple of days, despite his nightmares, which had gotten worse again since his kidnapping.

For a second, the memory of Cameron kneeing before him, his hands on his thighs, leering up to him with those intense green eyes, with an unspoken promise of pain and something far worse in them, crosses his minds, and he shudders.

“Hey.” Len replies. He is still studying him with a somewhat somber look, before another silence settles between them.

Barry can’t help but wonder whether his friend is angry with him, and the notion is unexpectedly unsettling, dauntingly so.

“You look pale.” Len finally observes. While the frown stays on his face, his expression turns a little lighter as he makes his way over to him.

“And y-you’re a-a r-real ch-charmer.” Barry mutters and smiles when Len chuckles in response.

“No, not exactly my forte.” His friend points out before he nods to the edge of the mattress, next to Barry. “Mind if I sit?”

“G-go on.”

With most of the tension between them suddenly gone again, it hits Barry how nice it is to have him there. He has been worried about when exactly, he would have the possibility to see him or any of the others again, now that he is more or less under supervision around the clock. Of course, he should have expected that it wouldn’t exactly be something to stop Len, should his friend really want to visit.

Now, with the mirror in his possession, it will be much easier for the Rogues and Barry to pass between each other’s homes; that doesn’t mean, that he wouldn’t cover it as soon as he was mobile again, though.

Having something equal to an open door in his bedroom, is a little bit unsettling. Barry knows that only Sam can turn the mirror into a means of transportation, but he is also very much aware of the fact that some of the other Rogues have a rather particular kind of humour, and he really doesn’t want to end up on the receiving end of it.

“Y-you kn-know th-that I w-won’t l-let th-that th-thing s-stand ar-round l-like th-that in f-future, r-right?” Barry asks carefully. He is surprised to see that Len doesn’t seem bothered by him pointing that out.

“Put a sheet over it,” his friend suggests with a half-shrug. “That should do the job.”

Barry nods, still not quite sure and kind of wary about why Len doesn’t put up more of a fight upon
it. He honestly expected him to. “Ok-kay.”

Len hums in agreement, and Barry suddenly notices how close he is. Enough so, that he could touch him by moving his arm just a few inches. It is overwhelming, when it hits him, that he is lying in bed with another man so close by; although Len and him shared a bed on a number of times before.

He becomes painfully aware of how little he is still able to move on his own; for a second a familiar fear starts to creep its way up his mind as he realizes that he is pretty much helpless right now.

Barry tries to ignore it. Len wouldn’t hurt him, he knows that, and James is in the other room…

He is just being stupid again.

“Hey, you’re safe here.” Len says. He meets his eyes, and Barry feels immediately bad for the open concern he can see on the other man’s face.

“S-sorry, I’m j-just… I-I d-don’t kn-know w-why I alw-ways h-have t-to b-be s-so d-damn af-fraid…”

“You’ve been through a lot. I think you’ve every right to feel upset.” There is a tenderness to Len’s voice as he says this, something Barry picked up on before, and he has realized by now that his friend only uses it with him. Usually, he enjoys to be addressed with it, knowing that Len cares about him so much, but right now he feels horrible for how he isn’t able not to be scared of his friend, even if it is just a little.

“It’s n-not y-you. I-I’m n-n-not… I-I c-can’t h-help it, even ar-round M-Mary.” He doesn’t want Len to believe, he thinks of him like that. He knows the other man wouldn’t hurt him. It is hard for him to make sense of his emotions right then, though.

“It’s fine.” Len studies him thoughtfully but with calm as he says that. “I understand.”

Barry doesn’t. Sometimes, he is certain he is more trouble than it's worth, especially with how he is unable to function like any normal person.

“Are you recovering alright?” Len asks. The change of topic is gratefully accepted, and Barry nods. “F-fine, I’ll b-be up and g-going in a-about a w-week or t-two.”

Len’s expression makes it obvious that he thinks that to be a very doubtful prediction, and Barry has to avert his eyes as he cheeks grow warm.

“Or t-two t-to th-three,” he admits reluctantly.

The other man snorts, and Barry can feel him move the hand he has resting on the blanket next to his arm; enough so, that he can feel the tip of Len’s fingers brush against him. A fluttering sensation fills his belly, and his cheeks grow warm.

“You still seem in pain.” Len eyes him with a frown, seemingly unaware or ignoring Barry’s blush. “Didn’t they give you something for it?”

“Of c-course th-they d-did.” Barry licks his dry lips and bites the lower one, nervous.

“But it isn’t working?”

Barry shrugs. He can’t bring himself to meet his friend’s eyes.

They fall quiet for a moment, and while he isn’t looking, he still knows that he is being studied right
“You’ve always trouble with healing after getting injured.” Len remarks, sounding rather grim.

Barry doesn’t reply.

“Is it because of how they got rid of your powers?”

The question is like a slap. Barry closes his eyes, wishing that Len would not do that. Neither of them wanted to touch upon that mess of a topic so far; it is something they should not even acknowledge...

“Do they know?” Len asks. Although Barry fails to answer, and despite how miserable and tired he feels, he manages to chuckle. It comes out more pained than anything else.

Again, they become quiet for a minute, and when Len finally speaks again he sounds both harsh and worried. “Have they ever checked up on you? There’s clearly something not alright with you. Injuries aside, you seem to be constantly in pain—”


They hold each other’s eyes; Barry can plainly see what Len thinks of his reluctance to talk about that. It is understandable, Barry would feel the same way if their roles were reversed, but that is something he doesn’t want to discuss or even think about. Ever.

“Why the hell would they do such a messed up thing to you?”

Barry averts his gaze again and looks up to the ceiling. “Wh-what d-d-do y-you th-think?”

“Aren’t they supposed to be the good guys?” Len returns angry.

“Th-they th-th-think I-I k-k-kil-led I-I r-r-raped W-Wally…” Barry reminds him with some difficulty, as talking has become painful once again due to the growing lump in this throat.

Tears start to roll down the side of his face, and he huffs frustrated when he notices it. Barry didn’t even realized he was so close to crying again.

He reaches up with his good hand and roughly rubs his eyes. Upset with himself, with Len, and the world in general.

“Th-they… th-they th-think I-I r-r-raped W-Wally…” A sob escapes him, forcing its way out, despite his attempts to stop it, and he hates it. He hates all of it so much.

His abdomen hurts, the pain is sharp and intense. He wishes that Len would just leave him and his messed up life be…

“They’ve dealt with murderers and rapists before, they do it on a daily basis.” Len clearly doesn’t get it.

“Y-yeah b-b-but n-neither o-of th-them h-h-has b-been th-their f-f-friend—”

“So they are behaving like scum because they believe that one of their own betrayed them and that makes this shit alright?” For how angry Len sounds, he is surprisingly good at keeping his voice low. “Are you serious? That is utter bullshit.”

Barry doesn’t replay. It isn’t just that he doesn’t want to, but he can’t. His throat has closed up on
him once again, and he tries desperately to keep it together. He isn’t very successful as another sob
starts to force its way over his lips, followed by another one, and then he is pressing his hand on his
mouth to try and muffle them, while he squeezes his eyes shut.

“Barry…” The agitation is gone from Len’s voice. He sounds uncertain and sorry. He curses softly
under his breath, and Barry wants him gone so badly right then. He doesn’t want Len to see him like
that again.

At the same time the notion of Len leaving is terrifying, utterly, horribly terrifying-

“I’m going to touch your shoulder.” Len tells him calmly. “No need to freak out.”

Barry wants to protest, but he is only able to get out a muffled whimper. He can’t even bring himself
to look at Len, and he tries to brace himself for the touch he knows is going to come. It still startles
him nonetheless.

Len makes a soothing noise when he cups Barry’s shoulder and tells him that he is alright.

A white-hot anger flashes through him over those words. Barry wants to tell him that he can go to
hell. He wouldn’t feel so miserable if it weren’t for him, which is a big fat lie, and he knows so. But
his inside feels raw, like it has been cut open, and he hates how helpless he always is.

“Calm down, Barry.” Len’s voice is low and softly, and he starts to rub Barry’s shoulder tentatively.
“You’re going to hurt yourself if you keep this up.”

The other man’s hand moves up to Barry’s neck, and he holds it in that way of his that threatens to
break and hold Barry together at the same time.

“I-I-I…” It is difficult to speak with how he just can’t stop sobbing, and breathing becomes like a
chore. He feels like such an idiot. “I-I d-did-dn’t d-d-do i-it…”

“I know.” Len sounds so honest, so certain, and it hurts so much.

How can he believe him?

Nobody else did! Why would Len believe him? A criminal who hated him back then…

Barry squeezes his eyes shut as a pained noise escapes him, and he presses his neck into the other
man’s hand, seeking out the warmth and comfort his friend is able and willing to offer.

He knows, if he isn’t able to calm down soon, James will definitely hear him and things will go from
bad to worse...

Len squeezes his neck tentatively. “I know, baby.”

The endearment is unexpected, alien even; Barry actually freezes for a moment before looking at Len
with wide eyes.

Judging by how uncomfortable the other man looks in his own skin right now, it has been a slip of
the tongue. Still, Len doesn’t correct or try to defend himself. Instead, he just meets his gaze.

The thumb that rests below Barry’s earlobe starts to draw small circles there. It is an oddly intimate
but also soothing gesture, and Barry responds with a faint shudder.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” Len finally says.
Barry swallows with some difficulty, the lump in his throat still very much present. Hesitantly, he moves his left hand that has been resting on his chest to the one in contact with his neck. He touches Len’s gingerly, making the other man smile slightly in return.

“You look tired.” Len points out after they’ve stayed like that for a few moments, just enjoying each other’s closeness. “Do you want me to leave, so you can go back to sleep?”

“N-no.” Right then, having Len gone is probably the last thing Barry wants. “C-c-can y-you s-stay a b-bit l-longer?”

Len nods. “Sure.”

He gives Barry’s neck another light squeeze. “You look close to passing out, though.”

“Wh-when d-do I n-not?” Barry asks rather tersely, but his mood lightens when Len chuckles. “You still look gorgeous.”

The unimpressed look Barry gives him at that, earns him an amused smirk. “You do, baby.”

Barry frowns. “Is th-th-this g-going t-to b-be a th-thing n-now?”

“What do you mean?” Len is horrible at playing innocent, and Barry nearly rolls his eyes. “Y-you c-calling m-me s-stupid p-pet-n-names,” he clarifies.

“You don’t like it?” The hand on his neck moves slightly, so its thumb is just under his Adam’s apple, and Len rubs the area. Another shudder runs through Barry, and he closes his eyes close for a moment, caught off-guard by how intense and pleasant the sensation is. He makes a small pleased noise and flushes in embarrassment, as soon as he realizes what he is doing.

“I like it.” Len adds. He meets Barry’s uncertain look, with a surprisingly honest and open one. “It fits you.”

“B-baby? R-really?” Barry isn’t sure whether he is insulted by it or not. It isn’t as if he hasn’t been called that one before. Iris used to say that to him at times, but it had a completely different meaning with her. A pain shoots through his chest at the thought of his former wife, and he quickly pushes it away.

“I’m n-not a w-woman.” He points out, somewhat tersely.

The tentative caress on his throat stops, and Len lifts an eyebrow. Barry bites his lower lip and studies him with a frown. Len stays quiet and lets him.

“I-I’m… I kn-know th-that I’m n-not th-that…” His face grows uncomfortably warm, and he looks away. “I’m n-not r-really th-that m-m-mascul-line l-looking… b-but…”

He breaks off. To his absolute surprise, Len doesn’t laugh in his face, though. Instead, he pulls his hand back. Barry can’t help but feel the loss over the touch, and he wonders whether he has upset the other man. He glances over to him hesitantly.

Len is watching him with a rather serious expression that causes his stomach to sink.

“Barry, I don’t get why you’d think that anybody could mistake you for a woman, and I certainly
don’t.” He sounds angry again, and Barry regrets having touched upon this at all.

A tense minute passes between them, and Barry is not able to look at Len. It isn’t as if he wasn’t already odd enough, he has to make it worse, of course.

The touch on his arm startles him enough that he actually winces back, which causes a sharp pain to flash through his lower abdomen again.

“Relax.” Len grunts, but when Barry glances over to him he appears more concerned than angry. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I kn-know. Y-you j-just s-start-tled m-me.” Barry hates the idea of Len thinking that he is scared of him, even though a small part of him keeps urging him to be wary.

He watches how his friend’s frown deepen. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

“It’s f-fine, I’m th-the one wh-who’s s-scared of h-his own sh-shadow.” It is meant to be a joke, but Len’s face only darkens again for a second, and Barry wishes he could take back what he said earlier. He shouldn’t have touched upon his doubts, it only turned that into another awkward situation, and those are following him around like a lost puppy, as it is.

“I’m pretty sure nobody mistook the Flash to be a woman before.” Len finally points out. Barry glares at him but is caught off-guard when he notices his friend is actually teasing him. He seems calmer again.

“I-I… I h-hardly l-look l-like th-that any m-more.” Barry points out, and his cheeks flush once again. He has no idea why they suddenly crossed the line of acknowledging his past as a speedster. He has always assumed that Len wants to be reminded about that as little as he does.

“You were always lean.” Len shrugs.

“Th-thanks?” Barry asks doubtfully but feels his mood lift when his friend smirks.

Len’s expression quickly turns serious again, though. “Nobody with eyes in their heads would think that you aren’t a guy. I certainly don’t.”

It is odd and frightening to have Len watching him with such intensity, all of a sudden, and Barry can’t stop himself before he blurts out. “Y-you… I-I’m n-not g-gay.”

As soon as those words leave his mouth, he wishes he could take them back.

Barry doesn’t understand why he has just said what he did because, while it’s true, his relationship with Len is different and…

Still, he really meant what he said to Sam all those months ago. He is not gay.

To be honest, though, he never really felt like he belongs to any kind of sexual orientation.

He just never liked sex. At all.

He likes people, and some of them he even trusts. Not many, though. He has never been a people person, as most scared him on a level he doesn’t even want to understand. It has been like that for all of his life, as far as he can remember. Even before his stay in Iron Heights, and the ones he wanted in his life the most back then were Iris and, later, Wally.

And didn’t that turn out well for them?
Barry doesn’t want Len to think he doesn’t mean a lot to him, though. He does. There is something in the other man he can’t explain, something that pulls Barry to him.

“I-I l-l-like y-you. V-very m-much,” he proceeds quickly when the other man’s face closed off again.

Barry knows he hurt him, and he feels awful for it.

“Y-you’re… I w-w-want y-you t-to b-be c-c-close, all th-the t-time, y-you s-see?” He chuckles awkwardly and wishes Len wouldn’t watch him with those cold eyes.

“I-I… b-but I’m n-not… r-right. I-I’m… d-damaged.” Barry grimaces unhappily over how stupid that must sound, but there isn’t really any better or more fitting way to describe it.

A slight frown appears on the other man, and Barry hesitates, uncertain whether he really should go there or not. He swallows and wets his lips nervously once more.

“I d-don’t l-like g-get-ting int-timate w-with others, I n-never d-did. I f-feel… it m-makes m-me f-feel r-really b-bad a-and d-dirty…” He looks away, suddenly unable to meet Len’s eyes any longer.

“I kn-know th-that y-you d-d-do, th-though. L-like h-having s-sex, I m-m-mean, a-and… I-I… I c-couldn’t… y-you w-would j-just g-grow a-a-a-angry a-and f-frust-trated b-because I’m s-so… s-strange… and I-I d-don’t w-want y-you t-t-o… I-I w-want y-you t-t-o s-stay, L-Len, I r-really l-like y-y-you, and I d-don’t w-want t-t-o… ch-chase y-y-you away b-by h-how d-d-damaged I am.”

His eyes are itching again, but he can’t really be bothered by it right then. Len has already seen him cry once tonight. At least he isn’t sobbing this time.

A tension settles between them, and Barry expects the other man to get up and leave. He has clearly hurt and likely insulted him, and maybe it would be better for both of them if his visit ended here-

A low, somewhat exasperated sounding sigh causes Barry to look back at Len.

It is a relief to see that his friend is no longer watching him in a cold distant way. He looks tired and grim instead.

“I’m not blind, Barry, and I’m not stupid,” Len says, breaking the uneasy silence. “Believe it or not, you make it rather obvious that you aren’t that keen on the idea of having sex… and I haven’t expected you to be. After that shit those bastards put you through in the Heights, do you really think I don’t get how that has to have messed with you?”

Barry doesn’t like to be reminded that Len and the others do know what he went through in the penitentiary. He tries to forget it most of the time, otherwise he’d probably be unable to be around them.

“I d-don’t e-expect anything in this regard from you.” Len laughs humourlessly, before he pinches the bridge of his nose and huffs softly. He looks tense, unhappy, and very much like Barry feels. Then, he turns back to him and their eyes meet once more.

“Shit, I d-don’t e-expect anything in this regard from you,” his friend goes on and makes a vague gesture between both of them. He appears both frustrated and annoyed.

Len seems rather uncomfortable in his own skin for a second, nearly too quickly for Barry to pick up on it, before he schools his features again and snorts. “I’m n-not interested in guys; they’ve never done anything for me.”
Len studies him with a frown, but some of the wariness leaves his gaze as he does so. Barry isn’t surprised when a familiar conflicted expression appears on his friend’s face instead. He appears like he wants to say something but either isn’t sure how or feels like it gives too much away.

It is usually like that with Len, when they touch upon anything that would need him to acknowledge his feelings. He usually likes discussing what he feels about as much as a cat does taking a bath. Even less, maybe.

Barry understands, but it is still frustrating.

Finally, Len takes a deep breath and closes his eyes for a second before he focuses on him again. An unhappy, grim smile is on his lips. “It is different with you, though, and… I have no idea what to make of it.”

Barry doesn’t know how to respond to that.

He is pretty much on the same boat, after all-

The sound of somebody opening the bathroom door, causes them to freeze them for a second.

“I think I’m better get going,” Len says as he glances to the door with a rather sour look. “He’ll probably come and check up on you.”

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees quietly and can’t help but feel disappointed and hurt by how relieved the other man actually seems about that interruption.

Len doesn’t miss his change in mood and stops as he is about to get up. He reaches for Barry’s hand instead, which he has let go when noticing that James is awake outside the room, and gives it a slight squeeze.

“I’ll check up on you in the coming days again.”

“O-okay.”

The urge to cry hits Barry suddenly with full force, and he feels so stupid for it. He doesn’t know what he has expected to come from that conversation, but he is left raw and open with having given so much away from himself and now that they can’t finish it, it is a bit like he has been cheated. It also doesn’t help that he wants Len to stay.

“Hey.” Len reaches for his face with his other hand and cups his cheek. “It’s fine, nothing of this… we are fine, okay?”

Barry nods and squeezes his eyes shut and presses his cheek into the warm big palm. His breathe catches in his throat, and he freezes when he feels surprisingly soft lips briefly presses against his forehead.

“Get better.” Len murmurs, and his hot breath on Barry’s skin causes him to shudder slightly.

Barry opens his eyes again when the other man sits back. He gives him an astonished look, and Len smirks a little smugly.

Then, after squeezing his hand one last time, his friend gets up and walks back to the mirror. Sam appears within the minute after Len called him, which turns out to be a good thing because he has hardly re-entered the mirror when a soft knock cuts through the now returned silence.
“Barry? Are you awake?”

Barry can’t bring himself to look away from his own reflection when he answers James.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, it has both Len and Barry finally touch upon their feelings for each other, and is one I was really looking forward for a while now. Things between them will finally be able to move along now, it still will be in a slow pace, but they will be more open about it.

Btw, I hope nobody took it the wrong way that Barry blurted out that he isn’t gay. In his own mind he just isn’t, not gay, not straight, not anything. The notion of sex still terrifies him, but he is aware that he does has feelings for Len that go past simple friendship. He is simply not able nor really willing to label them just yet.

I mentioned before that I’m doing a rewrite of a rather large section of this story that is coming up and that the chapters that are already done are diminishing in number. I already finished the first two chapters of the rewrite (Yay!), but I’ve still decided to change my updating schedule to once every two weeks beginning with the next chapter.

Things happened in my life that lead to me being ridiculously busy right now, and it will stay like this for a long while. I just don’t have enough time to keep up a weekly schedule right now, and I want to give me enough leeway to go over the chapters I already have again and finish new ones so that it won’t come to me not posting for a couple of months at a time or something like that.

Singularity is unbelievably important to me, even though it is only a fanfiction, and I wanna see it done in the best way possible.

Thanks to all of you who stick with Singularity and me, I honestly appreciate every single one of you guys. <3
Chapter Summary

Barry’s friends insist on making up for the Christmas dinner he missed due to his stay in the hospital.

Chapter Notes

The story has been edited by my wonderful friend Katzerover. <3

“What a cute dog.”

Simultaneously, both Barry and Axel lift their gazes to where Mrs. Ming has appeared next to Barry’s old couch. She is studying the sheet of paper the teenager is currently working on with an appreciative expression, and Barry has to bite down on a chuckle when he realizes what she is talking about.

A deep red flush appears on Axel’s unusual pale cheeks, and he glares briefly at Barry, as if he knew exactly what he was thinking, before he turns back to the older woman.

“It isn’t a dog,” the teenager clarifies in a rather terse and craggy voice from his spot on the ground in front of the couch, which Barry is currently occupying. He gives Barry another dirty look when he notices his amused grin and pulls the blanket around his shoulders a bit tighter. Mary wrapped the boy in it before when he insisted on staying in that spot.

“Oh?” This seems to surprise Mrs. Ming, and she squints at the drawing. “Is it a horse, then?”

The flush on the boy's face intensifies, and he is about to explain that it isn’t that either when Eddy joins the old Chinese woman’s side. Barry doesn’t miss who Axel’s expression immediately turns sour, and he hides the drawing against his chest.

“What? We’ve a second Rembrandt in our midst?” Eddy smirks.

“Shut up.” The teen hisses, which turns out to be not such a good idea as it causes him to have another coughing fit. This saves him from reprimanded by both Barry and Mrs. Ming as he looks miserable enough that they take pity on him.

“Aw, don’t be shy, I’m sure your horsey looks really cute.”

“E-Eddy, s-stop b-being m-mean.” Barry gives his friend a chiding look which has next to no effect on him, of course.

“What are you talking about?” his friend asks in fake indignation. “I’m trying to morally support an up and coming artist. Don’t tell me you’re envious because you’re not the special one in our round,
anymore?”

Barry rolls his eyes and exchanges a clearly unimpressed look with Axel.

“I think you both draw very well.” Mrs. Ming proceeds diplomatically. “Barry just does so a while longer than you, Axel, so don’t feel discouraged because you aren’t as good as he is just yet. If you stay with it and do a lot of practicing, I am certain that you will becomes just as wonderful.”

This time, it is Barry who feels his cheeks turns warm and wishes she wouldn’t always praise him like that. Since she got the drawing he made for her birthday a few weeks ago, she is convinced that he belongs to the same circle of artists like Vermeer or Da Vinci, and it embarrasses him to no end. Not that he isn’t glad that she likes it, it is just a little uncomfortable when she tells all their customers, that he is certainly the next big artist in coming.

“And you, young man.” Mrs. Ming turns to Eddy, whose grin immediately wanes a bit. “Aren’t you supposed to work on the stuffing?”

“I was just taking a break,” his friend mutters, and Barry smiles when he notices the slightly uneasy way with which he eyes the older woman. For whatever reason, he seems to have problems to be his usual snarky self around her.

“Well, that is fine and good, but you should go back to work now.”

Eddy’s uneasiness around Mrs. Ming could also easily come from the fact that she doesn’t take any nonsense from him, and it is quite amusing to watch.

“Yes, Eddy, stop being such a slug,” Mary agrees from her spot at the table, where she is currently preparing the turkey. Seeing that Barry has no oven, they would take it over to Mary’s place and roast it in hers. They still insisted on preparing it here, though, so that he wouldn’t feel left out. Barry’s assurance that this really isn’t necessary fell on deaf ears.

“We can’t finish the turkey without the fillings, and it will probably need to roast around four hours,” Mary reminds their friend as she stuffs herbs under the bird’s skin.

“Well, if the boy would help, we probably would be quicker,” Eddy points out but is immediately shut down by Mrs. Ming.

“The poor kid has the flu, he is supposed to be resting and do nothing else. Contrary to you. You have a task that is waiting to be finished.” She gives him a meaningful look, and Eddy decides to accept defeat with a heavy sigh.

“You want some more tea, my dears?” Mrs. Ming asks after she turned back to Barry and Axel.

“Urgh, no, no more tea, please,” Axel protests with a disgusted look, and Barry isn’t sure whether the young teen is really that appalled by it or just exaggerating. He himself is quite familiar with Mrs. Ming’s herbal teas for colds, and while they do help, he has to agree with Axel that they don’t taste particularly good.

“You are sick,” the older woman reminds him kindly. “I know that it tastes bitter, but it will help you with your coughing, my boy.”

“But they taste disgusting, even with sugar.” Axel whines unhappily.

“I’ll d-drink one as w-well,” Barry offers and ignores the betrayed look Axel gives him for it.
A knock at the door interrupts their little discussion.

“Ah, James is finally back with the cranberries.” Mrs. Ming opens the door for her grandson, who is still partly covered in snow and has both of his hands full with brown grocery bags. It started to snow just a couple of days ago, and while the month of December has been unusually warm for the most part, the cold weather has hit this part of the country with a vengeance with the beginning of January.

This is one of the few reasons Barry is glad that he isn’t allowed to leave the house or work just yet. Using public trafficking service during this time of the year is a real nightmare.

“Some polar bears crossed your way outside?” Eddy jokes as the other man joins him at the table.

James nods in fake seriousness. “And penguins, which worries me even more. Those little guys seem to have been scheming.”


“Enough you two, talking is fine but just as long as you are working as well,” Marry interjects and puts a tray of cooled down roasted chestnuts in front of James. “Keep the time in mind, it’s already nearly noon.”

“You’re such a slave-driver, girly.” Eddy huffs, but Barry doesn’t miss that he exchanges an amused look with James.

“I-I c-can h-help t-too," he points out for probably the tenth time, but he is once again reminded that he should focus his energy on recovering.

“Dude, just enjoy it,” Eddy advises. “I’d immediately swap places with you if I could.”

“No surprise there.” Mary chuckles and he gives her a fake glare. “Hey, keep your eyes on the duck, little lady, and don’t eavesdrop on other people’s conversation.”

“You do realize that we are all in the same room, Eddy, don’t you?”

“Excuses, excuses.”

They are able to finish the turkey within the next twenty minutes, and James offers to help Mary and his grandmother to carry it to her apartment. Axel wants to tag along as well, probably bored by just being confided to sit all the time, and Mrs. Ming let him do so reluctantly.

Eddy joins Barry at the couch and they decide to play a game of Sixty-six.

“This better turns out to be the damn best stuffing any of you has ever tasted,” his friend says as he starts to shuffle the cards. “I put my heart’s blood into it.”

“I’m j-just g-glad wh-when I d-don’t g-get f-f-food’s p-poisoning f-from it.”

“Seriously, why am I even friends with such an ungrateful bunch like you,” Eddy laments. Barry accepts his cards with a chuckle. “F-free f-food?”

The other man makes a show of considering that. “Yeah, that is a good point.”

They play for about five minutes before there is another knock at the door.

“Seriously, guys? It’s open, do you really expect me to get up and move the damn door-handle for you?!?” Eddy calls out exasperatedly.
There is a slight pause, and Barry turns his head to look what is taking them. His stomach makes a small jump when Jay enters his flat somewhat hesitantly a moment later.

“Of course.” Eddy mutters under his breath, but stays quiet when Barry throws him a warning look.

“Hello, Barry, I hope I’m not disturbing anything?” Jay greets him after he stopped a step into the apartment, still looking uncertain whether he is welcome or not.

“No, it’s fine, just come in.” Barry gives the older man a friendly smile and doesn’t miss how Jay studies Eddy briefly with a not too amiable look, before he accepts his offer.

“You’re having friends over,” Jay remarks, after he closed the door and makes his way over to them. Barry notices the white bag in his hand.

“Is that a surprise?” Eddy sneers. “Seeing what a sicko he is, right?”

“Eddy!”

He kicks the other man’s thigh slightly and grimaces when this action causes a pain to flash through his own abdomen again.

“Hey, watch it, stupid.” Eddy sounds worried. “You don’t wanna end up in the ER again, do you?”

“Then try to be civil, at least,” he groused back before his gaze softens. “Please.”

A rather sullen expression crosses his friend’s face.

“I’m not here to cause any trouble.” Both of them look back to Jay, who joined then and stands now about a foot from the couch.

Eddy mumbles something under his breath, but too low for Barry to catch it. His friend lifts his hands in a placating manner, when he notices his wary expression and assures him that he would stay quiet from here on.

“It’s really no problem,” Barry says after he turned back to Jay. “What brings you here?”

The older man’s expression relaxes.

“Your friend, Mary asked me to pass by, she told me that you’re having a belated Christmas party.” Jay explains before he looks down to the bag in his hand and lifts it a bit. “Joan sends some of her Christmas Cake.”

It is a very nice gesture for his former friend to do, both to agree to pass by and to bring him something Joan made probably just for this occasion, as Christmas lays already a couple of weeks back. Barry’s throat starts to close up as he feels a deep gratitude towards the older man and greatly appreciates that kindness.

“That’s very kind of you,” he tells Jay with some difficulty and a probably somewhat wobbly smile. “And please tell Joan my thanks.”

“Of course.” Jay nods and relaxes visibly as he returns his smile. He then glances over to the table and kitchenette where still the used utensils as well as most of the food that is going to be cooked here can be seen. “You’re preparing a turkey?”

“Yes, Mary insisted on it. James and Mrs. Ming are also here… and Axel.” As he
says that, he glances towards Eddy with a warning glance, sensing that his friend seemed about ready to add his two cents to it.

“James?” Jay asks, and Barry is a bit surprised by how he doesn’t start to immediately reprimand him about having Axel around again. Maybe because there are enough other people around that it settles Jay’s nerves? Or maybe he takes pity on him as he is still recovering…

“You two seemed rather close at the hospital.” Jay explains when he notices his wary expression. “Isn’t his grandmother your employer?”

“Y-yes, M-Mrs. M-Ming-”

As if on a cue, the entrance to the apartment is opened, and Mrs. Ming and Axel get back in. The boy stops mid-sentence when he noticed Jay and scowl appears on his face, probably remembering what happened the last time around when Jay was here.

“Oh, do you have another guest, Barry?” the older woman asks as she gives Jay a friendly and welcoming smile.

“Th-this is J-Jay G-Garrick, an acquaint-tance of m-mine,” Barry introduces. “And th-this is B-Bo M-Ming, m-my emp-ployer and a v-very d-dear f-friend.”

It catches him off-guard then, when he sees something similar to hurt and regret cross Jay’s face for a brief moment, and he isn’t sure what to make of it.

“It is very nice to meet you, Mr. Garrick.” Mrs. Ming offers the older man a hand, which he readily accepts and bows slightly as she adds with a chuckle. “I haven’t recognized you without the helmet.”

“I hear that all the time,” Jay remarks with an amused smile. “And it is also very nice to finally meet you as well.”

Axel’s cough causes them to look over to the boy, and Barry notices that he is looking paler once again.

“You poor thing.” Mrs. Ming steps closer to the teenager and touches his forehead, which causes him to make an unhappy face. “Your temperature has risen. You should have stayed here while we brought the turkey to Mary’s place.”

Again, Barry shoots Eddy a warning glare just as the man is about to open his mouth.

“D-don’t.” He hisses lowly, really not interested in a repetition of the last time Jay was around as the same time as his friend. Eddy frowns but, thankfully, keeps quiet.

Barry turns back to the others, and tenses when he notices that Jay has been watching their brief exchange. He tries to ignore it and turns his attention back to the young teen.

“Axel, I’m s-sure th-that Eddy w-wouldn’t m-mind t-to b-bring you over t-to y-your ap-p-arment, s-so th-that y-you c-can l-lay d-down f-for a b-bit.”

“But I don’t want to,” the kid refuses stubbornly. Barry notices the slight flush that spread over his cheeks, which is likely the best indication that he was running a fever again.

“I’ll be bored, and I've hardly seen you at all the last month as it is.”

A panic rises in Barry’s chest, and he can’t help but gives Axel an exasperated look, who doesn’t
seem to have picked up on his mistake yet.

“Barry is right,” Mrs. Ming agrees and gives the boy a comforting look. “You need to rest, and it will take about four hours before the food is ready, anyway.”

“But I’ll be bored,” the teenager insists upset. “And I don’t wanna be the odd one out just because I’ve caught some stupid cold.”

“Stop being such a brat.” Eddy huffs and gets up. “You can nap on my couch for an hour or so. That still leaves you enough time to enjoy the rest of ours’ company and probably be less moody as it is.”

“I’m not moody!”

“Eddy, you’re not helping.” Barry gives his friend an exasperated look before he turns back to Axel who doesn’t seem all that steady on his feet.

“You can stay here and use the couch. I’ll lay down in the bedroom for a bit. I’m a bit exh-hausted, as it is.”

“I’m not tired,” Axel insists, and Barry doesn’t understand why he suddenly has to be so difficult. He sounds much more like a child again than an actual teenager.

“For Pete’s sake, then just sit down on the couch. That way you can rest and share your germs with Barry at the same time.”

Eddy nods to the spot where he has just sat next to Barry. This seems to be a suggestion Axel actually deems worthy to consider. He doesn’t notice the angry glare Barry gives Eddy and instead agrees after a moment.

“Fine, but I’m not tired,” he clarifies again and makes his way over to them.

Barry could hit his friend right now, and he would if he was in any state to do so. Instead, he gets up with some difficulties and pushes Eddy’s hand away when he is about to help him.

“Wh-why d-do y-you alw-ways h-have t-to b-be l-like th-this?” he hisses at him angrily. “Y-you th-think th-that’s f-funny?”

Eddy seems honestly taken aback before an annoyed frown crosses his face.

“No, I just wanted the kid to stop being a stubborn brat. What the hell are you worried about? There are three grown up here to ‘supervise’ you right now. There’s no way he can cause you any trouble over this.”

“Th-this isn’t a g-game, Eddy!”

“I know! How stupid do you think I am?!?” his friend asks exasperatedly and turns to Jay with a glare. “This is exactly the reason why I can’t stand him. He’s always making you miserable over some shit you haven’t even done!”

“Eddy, enough, y-you either sh-shut u-up r-right n-now or y-you c-can l-leave!”

Barry abdomen flares in pain so badly all of a sudden that he is certain he is going to be sick. Eddy grabs his upper arm just as Barry’s knees start to grow weak and helps him back down onto the couch.

“Because you have to be dramatic about everything,” his friend mutters under his breath, but when
Barry glances at him, he doesn’t appear angry anymore. Instead he meets his look with a rueful smile.

“You really should be more mindful around him.” Mrs. Ming has come over to them and is now giving Eddy a chiding look. “Getting him upset like this, really, Edward.”

The disgusted face the other man makes at being addressed with his full name, actually causes Barry to chuckle despite the throbbing pain that is currently spreading through his whole abdomen.

“And you shouldn’t be laughing, Barry.” she tells him sternly, while she tentatively urges him to lay back down. “Try to relax, and I’ll bring you a fresh cup of tea.”

“S-sorry,” he apologizes, feeling bad for causing them trouble again. Mrs. Ming squeezes his shoulder and gives him a warm smile. “It’s fine, Edward here can be quite good at riling up other people it seems.”

Eddy gives the older woman only a gloomy look and keeps quiet as she gets up and makes her way over to the small kitchenette. When he meets Barry’s gaze, he frowns again.

“You’re a jackass.” Axel grumbles, who is standing behind the backrest of the couch and is currently glaring daggers at Eddy. “Why do you wanna get him in trouble?”

“I don’t, brat,” Eddy replies without any bite and briefly glances towards Jay, which causes his expression to grow grimmer again. He makes a step closer so that he is next to Barry and crouches down.

“Look, I was being a dick, and I am sorry for that,” Eddy tells him in a low tone so only Barry can hear him. “But while you seem to forget about it, I can remember just too well how you end up every time he appears. You really don’t need to take this shit, Barry. If he really thinks so little of you then you don’t own him anything, no matter who he was to you once.”

Sometimes Barry still has a hard time to believe that Eddy could care so much to get this protective over him. Unfortunately, while his friend means well and probably even has a point, it isn’t that easy for Barry to follow his advice.

Jay has been one of his oldest friends, and while the friendship no longer exists, and he himself tried to get the other man to leave him be, there is still a small part of him left that hopes they could re-establish it one day, no matter how unlikely it is. It is probably not a very wise thing to do, and he is aware of it, which is also the reason why he can’t really bring himself to stay angry with Eddy.

“Y-you’re a g-good f-friend, Eddy,” Barry tells him honestly and watches how some of the tension leaves his friend at that.

Eddy studies him with a thoughtful look for a moment longer before he frowns. “But you won’t listen to me, right?”

“H-He m-meant a l-lot t-to m-me once, and h-he’s th-the only one wh-who s-still g-gives a d-d-damn about m-me f-from b-back th-then.”

“You’re so dumb for such a clever person,” his friend mutters before he shoots him a slight smile and gets up. His eyes briefly turn to Jay, and his face darkens again.

“I think I will help Bo with her tea.” That said, Eddy makes his way over to the older lady and signalizes for Axel to follow him.
“What? Why? I don’t want any more of that fricking tea,” the kid complains but is cut off from saying anything else as the entrance door opens again to let James and Mary in. Both of them are surprised to see Jay.

“Oh, hi,” James greets in his usual friendly manner and walks over to them to shake the older man’s hand. “This is a surprise to meet you here again today, Mr. Garrick.”

Jay accepts the hand, and Barry doesn’t miss how strained the smile is he gives James in return.

“I’m just passing by,” the older speedster explains before he glances at Barry. “I probably should get going again, anyway.”

“Y-you d-don’t h-have t-to l-leave.” Barry interjects and meets the other man’s doubtful gaze. “C- Could y-you m-maybe c-come h-here and t-take a s-seat?”

Barry pushes himself in a half sitting position with some effort and nods at the now free spot on the couch. “P-Please, you c-came all th-the w-way h-here, and w-we’ve h-hardly even ex-xchanged any w-words,” he adds when Jay hesitates.

“I can take this,” Mary offers who has stepped to James’ side and gives the older man a friendly but somewhat cautious smile. It probably isn’t lost on her that something happened before James’ and her return. “It is nice that you were able to make it, Mr.Garrick.”

“It is, Ms Nicolescu.”

“Just Mary, please.”

Jay nods and hands the white plastic bag over to the young woman. “Thank you, Mary.”

She gives him another smile before she urges James along to the kitchenette, where Eddy and Axel have found their way over to Mrs. Ming by now as well.

Jay watches them for a moment before he turns back to Barry and joins him on the couch.

“You have quite a full apartment today,” he remarks as he takes a seat next to him. “It’s good to see that you’ve people like them.”

“Y-yes, I’m r-really g-glad,” Barry agrees and glances over to his friends. “B-but I f-feel a b-bit b-bad f-for th-them h-hav-ving t-to s-spend th-their f-free t-time h-here and g-go th-through all th-that h-hassle.”

“To me it doesn’t seem as if they mind to be here,” Jay points out and when he notices Barry’s doubtful look, he asks. “What makes you think they don’t want to be here?”

“It’s n-not th-that, it’s j-just th-that th-they c-could sp-spend t-today at h-home, ins-instead of h-having t-to b-be in th-this d-dingy l-little p-place.”

Even Eddy’s flat looks much better than his one, and he is his next door neighbour. Barry realized a while ago that he probably got the short end of the stick when it comes to the apartments of this building.

“I doubt that this really matters to them. They want to be here because of you, Barry, not because of your apartment,” Jay reminds him, and it is nice for the older man to say so.

Barry hopes he is right; he really doesn’t want Mrs. Ming or James to be put off by where he lives.
They both have such nice places, after all.

“I j-just f-feel a b-bit. . . ” He breaks off when he realizes what he is actually doing. His stomach drops, he isn’t even sure why, but it just hits him that he is currently talking to Jay in a way he hasn’t in nearly a decade.

It is nice in a nostalgic kind of way, but he also feels worried about letting his guards down like this without even realizing it.

“It’s r-really n-nothing, I’m j-just b-being s-stupid.” Barry finishes lamely. He can’t meet the other man’s gaze.

Jay is watching him, he can feel it, and it causes his skin to crawl uncomfortably.

“Th-thank y-you again f-for… f-for p-passing b-by and th-the c-cake,” he says once more, unable to come up with something else, and ducks his head a bit when he can fell a blush creep over his face. “I r-really ap-preciate it.”

“You’re welcome, Barry.” Barry doesn’t miss the heaviness of the other man’s voice, and he forces himself to look up at him again. There is regret and hurt in Jay’s eyes, and it is so frustrating because Barry doesn’t understand what any of these means.

“How w-was y-your Ch-christm-mas? D-did M-Max and B-Bart s-spend it w-with y-you?” he asks just to break the uneasy moment, but he regrets it the moment the question left his mouth. He hopes that Jay doesn’t misunderstand him asking about Bart and get the wrong idea. It is already a miracle that he hasn’t remarked on Axel being here again, although Eddy has probably a point with too many adults being around for it to be possibly be dangerous for the teen.

His concern has to be plain on his face as Jay gives him a tight smile and asks him to relax before he proceeds. “Yes, both of them stayed with us for the day. It was the first Christmas for the boy around here, and we wanted it to be a nice experience for.”

“Th-that’s g-good,” Barry agrees. He knows how important it is for a kid to spend this time of the year in a warm and loving environment, and he is glad that Bart was able to have this experience. The Garricks have always been able to make anybody feel welcome in their home, and Iris, Wally, and he enjoyed every single one of the Christmas dinner they had over at their place.

Barry’s memories of past Christmases come to an end when notices that Jay’s expression has turned slightly troubled.

“Is everyth-thing all r-right?” he asks carefully, unsure how to take the other man’s sudden turn in mood. His question seems to snap Jay out of it, and he quickly agrees that everything is fine. Then, he pauses and studies Barry.

“Bart didn’t really like it very much, unfortunately.” Jay finally explains and sighs.

“What-what? Wh-why?” The notion is surprising to Barry, seeing that there had to be free food en masse, and he doubts there is anything that could spoil a young teenage speedster’s day that involves this.

Jay hesitates, and it takes Barry a second to realize that the other man is considering whether he should tell him or not. It looks like he is not the only one who let his guard down today, though Jay seems to do so on purpose.

“W-Wally and Bart don’t get along too well,” Jay finally explains. “They haven’t from the beginning
and putting both of them together in the same house for that day didn’t turn out to be such a wise decision.”

“Th-they f-fought?” The idea that Wally and Bart could dislike each other is both unsettling and painful, and Barry doesn’t need to ask what the reason for the animosity between Wally and Bart. It was undoubtedly him they have fought over.

“Yes,” Jay agrees. “And if it hadn’t been for Max threatening Bart with house arrest for the next month, the boy would probably have locked in the guestroom for the entire duration of the day.”

“I’m s-sorry.” Barry feels bad for the other man and everybody else involved as he can imagine what a damper this can put on one’s mood, especially on Christmas.

“We knew that this could happen,” Jay points out with an unhappy frown. “We just hoped that this would get them to find some common ground, but they are both stubborn to a fault.”

The older man chuckles at that, and Barry has to smile as well. He doesn’t doubt it, Wally could be like a mule when he thought he was in the right, and it seems that Bart is also quite strong-minded from what he has seen so far.

“Th-they p-prob-bably j-just n-need t-time t-to adjust,” Barry suggests, knowing that it can’t be easy for his nephew to have the grandson of the man around he holds responsible for most of the misery in his life.

Jay nods quietly but doesn’t seem very convinced, not that Barry can hold it against him. He doubts that this would change any time soon, either.

They sit together in silence for a minutes before Jay once again looks at his watch.

“I really should get going,” Jay says and turns to him with a faint smile. “I just wanted to pass by to say hello and give you the cake.”

“Ok-kay.” Barry nods and can’t help but feel disappointed. He wants for the older man to stay longer even though a part of him is glad that he is leaving already as he doesn’t want to take a chance for this visit to turn painful and disappointing again.

Somewhat hesitantly, he adds. “P-please, c-can y-you t-tell B-Bart I s-said h-hi th-the n-next t-time y-you s-see h-him?”

“Of course.” Jay, much to Barry’s surprise, doesn’t appear wary about his request as he agrees. Instead, he gets up and looks down at Barry with an unusually warm gaze. “I’m glad you’re doing alright, Barry.”

Barry nods quietly, unsure how to take the other man’s behaviour.

“You are leaving already, Mr. Garrick?” Mrs. Ming asks from her spot at the table.

“I fear I do have to, Mam. I have another appointment to take care of.”

Mrs. Ming chuckles smiles. “It was very nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Jay nods and wishes them all a nice afternoon before he finally leaves.

“What a nice man,” the older woman remarks afterwards, and Barry doesn’t have to look over to them to know that Eddy is rolling his eyes at her comment. Axel scoffs but doesn’t elaborate on it
when Mrs. Ming gives him a curious look.

“So, can I join you at the couch now?” the boy asks instead, causing Barry to smile.

“S-sure, j-join a-away.”

Chapter End Notes

And Jay is back… again. :3
I hope all of you who wished the worst kind of mishap on the older speedster are able to slowly warming up to him again. Though, I do also understand if it should take you a while.

And we got a belated Christmas dinner… the best kind of dinners. I really love the interactions of Barry and his friends in this one, it was just fun to write, and Axel seems to have picked up some interest in drawing himself. <3

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, and thanks to all of you who took the time to leave me feedback, it really means a lot to me. :)
“Why was I not aware that you can make crazy awesome stuff like this?” Axel shoves the last bit of the peanut-butter brownie in his mouth and washes it down with another gulp of milk. He sighs in satisfaction and slides lower on his chair. “That was fricking delicious.”

“It’s just a brownie,” Barry points out but can’t deny that he is quite pleased with all the praise he got for it so far.

“For you maybe.” Sam, who studies his cards without any real interest, glances over to him with a smirk. “For guys like us, who live mostly off canned stuff, this is like the second coming of the lord.”

“You really like to exaggerate, don’t you?” Barry snorts and shoots the other man an amused look.

“Nah, I can just appreciate eating something other than canned beans or tuna, for once in a while.” Sam shrugs.

Barry frowns, not really liking what he hears, and looks up from the sketch he is currently working on that started out as a simply doodle, but is currently on the way to become an actual piece.

“You do eat other things than just beans…” He looks over to Lisa who is sitting next to Roscoe and opposite to him and is currently filing her nails. “R-right?”

She gives him a bemused smiles and nods. “Yes, we get our vitamins and everything, don’t worry so much, Bar.”

“You know that I could get you fresh—”

“You aren’t supposed to lift or carry anything heavier than a towel,” Len cuts him off with a frown. “We can look after ourselves, don’t worry your head off.”

“And why would they want to eat that disgusting stuff anyway, when they don’t have to? I wouldn’t let any broccoli or lettuce, or stuff like that close to me either if I were them,” Axel declares, as he keeps eying another piece of brownie from the small stack that is still left on the plate Barry brought over.
“Greens are good for you,” Lisa remarks and glances at the teen. “Otherwise, you’ll always stay such a squirt.”

“I’m no squirt!”

“Right, you’re just not very tall,” Sam agrees and snorts when Axel flips him off.

“He started it,” the kid groused and defiantly crosses his arms in front of his chest, when Barry gives him a disapproving frown. “Y-you s-still d-don’t h-have t-to b-behave l-like th-this.”

Axel only grunts and keeps glaring dagger at Sam before he notices Mick entering the room again with a couple of beers he picked up from the fridge.

“Hey, can I have one?” the teen asks, perking up.

Mick snorts and aches an eyebrow. “So that you could turn into even more of a brat?”

“I’m not a brat!”

“He also isn’t a squirt,” Sam adds grinning, and Mick chuckles as he hands two of the three beers to Len and Dillon.

“What the hell!” Axel huffs in annoyance. “I’m just as tall as any other fourteen-year-old, you ugly-”

“A-Axel,” Barry warns the kid and really wishes his friends would stop teasing the teen like this. Unfortunately, most of them are still big kids in their own regard, despite their age, and Axel’s strong reaction seems to be quite entertaining to them.

“They are making fun of me!” Axel whines, glaring daggers in the round.

“We would never,” Sam denies in fake innocence.

“S-stop g-goading h-him on, w-would y-you’ve w-wanted p-people t-t-to t-treat y-you l-like th-this wh-when y-you w-were h-his age?”

“It’s just a joke, Allen.” Mick takes the seat next to Barry again and smirks. “They took your funny bone while you were at the hospital?”

“That would mean he had one in the first place,” Sam remarks. Barry glares, but his friend only chuckles. “Don’t give me that look, you established yourself as Mr. Sourpuss.”

“I’m n-no s-such th-thing.”

“No you aren’t,” Lisa agrees before she glances to the other two criminals. “These two have just troubles acting their age.”

“If your mind stays young, so does the rest of you,” Sam points out as he throws his wager to the heap in the middle of the table.

“Is that Snart?”

Barry is startled and turns warily to Mick, who noticed the sketch he is working on. The other man sounds both incredulous and very much amused by what he spots on the paper, and Barry’s face grow uncomfortably warm in turn.
Without thinking, he puts an arm over the sketch, before realizing that this is more or less a giveaway on its own. He half-heartedly glares at Mick, who grins in return and shrugs. “Whatever floats your boat.”

“Don’t be an ass,” Lisa warns the other Rogue, while Sam snickers and tries to get a look at the sketching as well. “Is he naked?”

“Shut up, Sam, for fuck’s sake!” The blond woman hisses and elbows the other man.

“What?” the brunette asks still chuckling while he rubs his side. “It’s just a question.”

“Urgh, thanks for that mental image,” Axel mutters and shrinks back when Len gives him a warning look.

“It’s just a s-s-sketch.” Barry frowns and is well aware that this is completely on his own. He really should have known better before sketching Len while being among his friends.

“You’re all kids.” Roscoe gives the round a disdainful look as he picks up another card to his hand.

“Shut up, Dillon.” Mick grunts, which results in both men menacingly glaring at each other.

“You’re all hopeless.” Lisa shakes her head. “Stop being such brats. Contrary to what you seem to think, you’re no teenagers anymore.”

“No need to get insulting. I was just wondering whether Barry was finally showing a bolder side of himself.”

“No, Scudder, you’re just being an ass again,” Lisa corrects him drily.

“Bite me, princess.”

“Not for all the money on the planet.”

“It isn’t bad.” Barry turns his attention from his bickering friends back to Mick with a wary expression.

“Seriously,” the taller man proceeds and points with the bottle in his hand, towards the sheet of paper. “I can make out Snart’s ugly mug and the stupid parka of his.”

He is pretty sure that Mick is both trying to be nice and pulling his leg at the same time.

“Th-thanks,” he mumbles and turns the sheet around, so the sketching is facing down.

“Come now, Barry, don’t let those idiots drag you down.” Lisa gives him an encouraging smile. “They are just being stupid.”

Barry nods but leaves the pencil and paper where they are. Instead, he picks up is glass of coke and sips on it while trying to ignore her exasperated gaze.

“Can I see the sketch?” Axel asks curiously and leans over the table to reach it, but doesn’t actually take it. “Can I? I won’t make fun of you, either.”

Sometimes Barry really wishes he would think more before putting himself in such uncomfortable situations like this. He sighs softly and nods.

“S-sure,” he agrees with a wane attempt of a smile and pushes the sheet over to the teen.
After studying it for a moment, Axel shoots him an impressed look.

“Looks cool, like the old guy,” Axel states, which amuses the Rogues quite a bit. Len ignores the quip.

“Let me see, kiddo,” Sam says and grabs the paper from Axel’s hands without waiting for him to agree.

“Hey! You stupid, ugly fart, I haven’t finished looking, yet.”

“Not my problem, squirt.”

“Fuck you!”

“Axel, w-watch y-you l-language.”

“Barry, he started it!”

“I did, but I’m too old to be scolded.” Sam grins diminishes somewhat, when he notices Barry’s warning look.

“I’ll shave your head when you’re asleep,” Axel promises darkly.

“You do that, and I’ll give you the favour right back.”

“S-Sam, s-stop g-goading h-him on.” Barry feels a headache creep up on him, and turns to the teen with a stern expression. “And n-no h-head sh-shaving anyb-body.”

“Oh, come on.” Axel whines and once again crosses his arms in a sullen manner.

“It is your turn, Scudder. You wanna stay in the damn game or not?” Len sounds irritated enough that it worries Barry. He is clearly growing impatient due the other men’s antics.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on it.” While Sam sets his bet, Lisa uses the chance to grab the drawing and take a look for herself.

“Hey, I didn’t even get a real peak yet,” Sam complains while Axel snickers gleefully.

“That’s karma for you,” the teen points out, not intimidated in the least by his neighbour’s glare.

“Wow,” Lisa says after she studied the sketch for a long minute, looking quite impressed. She turns back to Barry and chuckles. “I didn’t know you are that good, honey.”

“I-I’m n-not,” Barry protests weakly and wishes they would finally just drop this stupid topic.

“Take a look, Len, he did an amazing job. It actually looks like you.”

Len, who hasn’t shown any kind of interest in his colleagues’ antics so far, turns his attention to his sister with an annoyed frown. “Are we playing this fucking game or what?”

“Oh, shush, just take a glimpse, Lenny.” Lisa huffs and waves the drawing in front of her brother’s face. He glares at her for another moment, before he sighs and takes the offered paper.

Barry, whose stomach made a flip as soon as he realized what was about to happen, feels utterly mortified as the other man studies the sketch with a face that doesn’t give anything away.
“I-it’s j-just a s-s-sketch,” he explains nervously. “I w-was b-bored, I d-didn’t r-real-lize wh-what I w-was d-drawing, and it t-turned o-o out r-really b-badly-”

“For fuck’s sake, man, take a breather.” Mick snorts but eyes him with slight concern. “Or you gonna start hyperventilating.”

Barry glares at him unhappily before he turns back to Len. “I’m s-sorry, I-

“Stop freaking out.” Len grunts. “This is no big deal.”

The other man is looking at him, exasperated, before his expression softens. “It’s a good sketch.”

Barry feels his face grow uncomfortably warm again and nods wordlessly, not trusting his voice right now.

“Just good?” Lisa scoffs and glares at her brother as if he were an idiot. “You can’t draw fucking stick-figures, Len. You don’t have anything else to say to that? Good? Really?”

Len ignores the blond woman and hands the paper back to Barry, who swiftly folds it and keeps it close. He ignores Sam’s complain about not having had the chance to actually look at it yet.

The game proceeds for the next half an hour, without any further incident, and Hartley joins them after the second round, taking over for Mick who wants to sit this one out.

Barry, who doesn’t feel like playing poker, continues to read a book about Chinese medicine James lent him about a week prior to his latest business trip. Mrs. Ming helped him with his recovery by giving him a number of herbs and teas that actually worked better than the drugs the hospital prescribed him at times. This woke his curiosity, and after James picked up on his interest, he provided him with some literature about this topic, so he could read while he still had to stay in bed.

Thus, Barry zooms the people around him out for the most part while he concentrates on the text. At least till something catches his attention.

“- another Flash?”

The sentence he has been reading is lost on him, and Barry looks up to Axel, who is frowning sceptically at Sam.

“Yeah, there have been three so far,” the criminal agrees with a shrug.

“It’s a theory,” Hartley throws in without sounding particularly interested.

“Theory my ass.” Sam takes a swig of his bottle and leans back in his chair. “There were three so far.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“Piper, every idiot with eyes in his or her head ‘s aware of that.”

The redhead shoots his colleague an unimpressed look, but stays quiet as he turns back to his hand.

“Wait, why three? There has been Jay Garrick and the Flash,” Axel points out and sits up straighter, his interest clearly piqued as he watches them expectantly.

“You forget the mini-version of him.” Mick, who has just been listening so far, glances to Sam. “Who suddenly vanished from one week to the next.”
The other Rogue nods in agreement. “And the temper of our dear red speedy has gotten so much worse ever since.”

“You’re talking about Kid-Flash?” Axel asks. “I thought he died or stuff.”

Mick shrugs. “Possible, but there is just something fishy about it.”

“Like that red fuck suddenly not pulling any punches anymore?” Roscoe asks with a sneer.

“That, and his entire behaviour in general changing suddenly from one day to the next. Didn’t it, Len?” Lisa looks over to her brother and frowns when he simply grunts non-commentarial.

“Yeah, some bug had to have crawled up his ass and died there,” Sam agrees as he throws a fiver to the pool. “Raise.”

“A swarm of them would be more like it,” Mick adds with a grim frown. “That guy isn’t the same one.”

“Maybe something did happen to the kid, and he just didn’t take it too well?” Hartley, who is putting his wager to the growing heap in the centre of the table, seems to consider something before he adds. “They seemed to have a rather estranged relationship towards the end, didn’t they?”

“Being forced to run around in this gaudy outfit at such a young age would probably make anybody hate that dude,” Sam suggests with a nasty chuckle. “Maybe the infallible Flash even had a preference for kids in thight-”

“Shut your fucking trap, Scudder.”

The room becomes quiet for a second, and everybody turn their attention to Len, who looks to be about ready to go after the other man.

“What the hell is your problem, Snart-”

“Sam.” Hartley stops him in a sharp tone, and when the brunette turns to him in annoyance, he nods towards Barry, who is watching them quietly.

Again, the room falls quiet, and an uncomfortable tension spreads among them.

Barry knows that they are all looking at him now, but his mind feels sluggish, and he isn’t sure what to do.

“Hey.” Lisa meets his gaze with a smile and he watches her get up and walk over to him. “What do you think of us getting some tea from the kitchen, honey?”

It takes him a moment to realize what she has just said.

“O-ok-kay,” Barry agrees, surprised at how craggy his voice sounds.

“Good.” Lisa gives him another smile, and Barry gets up as well, his head feeling oddly heavy and light at the same time.

“I want some tea, too.” Axel jumps up and joins them, keeping a worried gaze at him, which Barry isn’t sure what to make of.

The others stay quiet as they leave the room, and Barry wonders if they are angry at him for making everything awkward once again.
The kitchen is just a few rooms further down the hallway, and Barry is tentatively urged to take a seat at the small camping table the Rogues put there.

“Here.” Lisa hands him a paper handkerchief, and he stares at it in confusion.

“To wipe your face,” Lisa explains in a gentle voice, and it still takes Barry another moment to realize that he has started crying again. He immediately wishes the ground would open up and swallow him whole.

“It’s fine,” Lisa assures him as his reaction isn’t lost on her. She then asks whether camomile tea would be fine with him.

He nods and tenses up when his friend cups his shoulder briefly, before she walks over to the small area where they put most of their cooking utensils, as well as the transportable heating plates, microwave, and the water cooker.

Barry wipes the tears away and blows his nose. It is so very embarrassing how he’s reacted again, especially with Len around, as he hates how weak he has to appear all the damn time. The only comfort is that he didn’t react worse…

“You alright, Barry?” Axel asks, sounding uncertain and surprisingly young, and it is obvious that he isn’t even trying to hide his concern. The boy is sitting opposite to him, watching him with wary eyes, and Barry gives him a forced, yet hopefully reassuring smile. “Y-Yes, j-just… I j-just over-r-react-ted.”

Another embarrassed flush heats his face up, and he directs his gaze to his hands that rest in front of him on the table.

“Nah, Scudders is a jackass,” Axel points out, and Barry can’t help but chuckle because the teen does have a point there.

“That he definitely is,” Lisa agrees wholeheartedly from her spot at the small counter, just a couple of feet away from them.

“H-he isn’t th-that b-bad, j-just… inc-considerate.”

“Says you.” Lisa sighs and makes a face. “Try to live with that guy. That will change your opinion quickly enough, believe me.”

Barry gives her a small tired smile, despite how drained he feels and how his head is starting to hurt again.

Maybe it would be a good idea for him and Axel to leave, it is already getting late, after all…

“You want to lay down for a minute?” Lisa asks and turns back to him after putting a mug of milk into the microwave. Despite her lighter tone, she is still watching him with a very much concerned expression. “You look rather pale.”

He thinks about it for a moment, something that seems to require a ridiculous amount of effort, and he can’t deny that resting sound quite alluring right now. It isn’t like he wants to go back to the others right now anyway, not after he made a complete fool out of himself, once again.

The thought is bitter.

“Ok-kay,” he eventually agrees quietly.
Lisa finishes preparing his cup of tea before he leaves for Len’s room to lie down. Axel looks like he wants to tag along, and Barry feels a familiar fondness for the boy as it is clear that he is really quite worried about him.

“Y-you w-wanna t-tag a-along a-and t-take a-a n-nap?” Barry offers, knowing quite well what the teen thinks of napping-time and isn’t surprised in the least when his young friend makes a face and declines.

They part their ways in front of the kitchen as Len’s and the other’s sleeping quarters are in the opposite direction to where the living area is.

There is music coming through the door of James’ room, and Barry can hear the younger blond enthusiastically singing along with the son that is playing as he passes his door. Marco’s room, on the other hand, is quiet, and the other man seems to be resting as his lights aren’t on. It is the same for Digger’s.

The first thing Barry does when he enters Len’s room, is tilting the small window to let some fresh air in. He never understood how the other man can stand it this stuffy.

The bed is undone, as usual, and while Barry prefers to keep his own neat, he isn’t bothered by it in the least. It remembers him of Len, and he wonders whether he has always been this sappy as he lies down. The covers are cool and everything smells like the other man, which is comforting and able to lull him to sleep within seconds.

The soft noise of the door being closed startles Barry awake some time later, and a well-known fear surges through him until he remembers where he is.

“It’s just me,” Len tells him quietly as he makes his way over to him. He didn’t bother to turn the lights on, but Barry is still able to make him out in the near pitch-black darkness as his eyes have adjusted to it by now.

Len stop next to his own side of the bed, and Barry watches him quietly as he takes his shoes off as well as his jeans and the sweatshirt he is wearing before he climbs in next to him.

It is a bit of a miracle to Barry how the other man isn’t freezing with only his boxer shorts and undershirt on. They aren’t heating the basement other than for the transportable heathers they put in the living room and their quarters, and even with the one currently running in here, it is still quite cold.

Len doesn’t seem to mind this, though, despite how he has been complaining about the excessive snowfall for weeks now, and it is oddly amusing to Barry how the other man is a bit of walking contradiction when it comes to the cold.

“Y-you f-finished p-playing?”

Len turns to his side, so they are facing each other. There is still nearly an arm’s length of space between them, something his friend is mindful enough to make sure of whenever they share a bed.

“Yes, ‘ve lost enough money for one night.”

“Y-you d-did r-rather w-w-well b-bef-fore.”

Len hums quietly, and Barry isn’t sure whether this is meant as an agreement or not. They fall quiet for a short while, then, the silence between them relaxed and comfortable.
“S-sorry f-for h-how I’ve r-reac-cted b-before,” Barry says quietly, somewhat reluctant to break the calm between them. He wants to apologize for how awkward he made the situation for the others again, though, and he more senses than sees how the other man turns his eyes on him, then.

He wonders whether Len is angry because of it…

“You’re feeling better?”

“Y-yes.”

Lisa can be heard outside the room, threatening James with eternal pain should he not hand her brush back right this moment. Barry listens to it without paying any real attention. His eyes are on Len, who is studying him right back.

“Th-they kn-know th-that W-Wally i-isn’t th-the s-second F-Flash?” That question has been bothering him since he left the others.

“There are rumours,” Len agrees.

“R-rumours?”

It is frightening to think that anybody could find out about this, especially the Rogues.

“Sam and the others have a point,” his friend remarks, and his frown is audible in his voice. “The new Flash is noticeable different from you in how he deals with the likes of us.”

He doesn’t speak it out, but Barry knows what he means is that Wally is more violent. It is a daunting change in his nephew’s behaviour, one that is most likely solely on him.

“D-do th-they s-s-susp-pect m-m-me?”

“No.” Len sounds certain, which is a relief and eases some of the tension away that has settled over Barry again.

“M-Maybe I-I sh-shouldn’t p-pass b-by f-for a-a wh-while?”

The suggestion alone is upsetting in a way, but Barry likes the notion of them finding out about his past as the Flash even less. It would end things between them, and the realisation how quickly this actually could happen is unsettling.

So far, he has hardly worried about it, he has been certain that nobody picked up on another person wearing the Flash costume, but now…

Now, he realizes, that it has been stupid to assume that this could go by unnoticed.

“Don’t be an idiot.” Len scoffs, and, suddenly, he does sound angry. “That would have no purpose. They would probably just get suspicious in the first place.”

Barry knows that the other man has a point there, but suddenly he is really afraid that he could give himself away by something he says or does.

“Th-they kn-know th-that I kn-know th-the F-Flash-es. H-how c-can th-they n-not e-exp-pect s-someth-thing t-to b-be g-g-going o-on?” he asks quietly and hates how coarse he is sounding once again.

Marco’s reaction when he learned that Barry has a connection to the Flash, is still fresh in his mind. It
scares him to think how badly the rest of them would take it.

“You worry too much—”

“How can I worry too much about this?” Barry demands upset, and can’t help but huff in frustration when speaking becomes more difficult for him again. He hates how stupid it makes him sound.

“Barry, they don’t know anything, and they don’t suspect anything, so stop panicking over damn what ifs.” Len sounds calmer once more, much calmer than Barry feels.

“But what if they find out?”

It isn’t hard to answer this for himself.

“I… I can’t change who I was, Len,” he reminds him bitterly and averts his eyes. “And I don’t want to, but I… you’re my friends.”

The other man stays quiet, and Barry can’t bring himself to look at him.

“Should it come to them finding out,” Len finally says smoothly. “We’re going to deal with it. But there is no reason for you to worry yourself sick over something that hasn’t even happened yet.”

Barry tenses up when he feels a light touch to his upper arm, and he shoots Len a wary look.

“Nothing will happen to you.” His friend’s hand moves to his back, and Barry lets himself tentatively be urged closer till their bodies are just a couple of inches apart.

“You give them too little credit,” Len goes on quietly, and Barry shudders when he cups the back of his neck in this tender way of his, that seems so unlike the other man. “They would probably be angry, but they would get over it in the end.”

Len’s thumb caresses the spot beneath his earlobe, causing Barry to shudder in response.

“I… I don’t…” There is familiar lump in his throat, making it difficult to speak. “They won’t hate me…”

“Maybe,” Len agrees. “But I doubt it. They’ve grown fond of your cooking. I don’t think they would jeopardize that just to harbor a grudge.”

Despite himself, Barry huffs a laugh at that.

“Lisa told me that your hideouts have become cleaner since I’m around.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t count on that bringing you any favor by the rest of them, though.”

“Hartley likes it,” Barry points out.

“Hartley also likes rats, he doesn’t count.” Len makes a disgusted face that reminds Barry again that he isn’t a friend of the other Rogue’s pets. “That’s mean.”

“I’m supposed to be mean.” Len scratches the base of the back of Barry’s head lightly with his fingernails and smirks when his eyes close briefly in response. “I’m not a nice man.”

Barry hums quietly and reaches for Len’s arm.
“Y-you a-aren’t a-a b-bad o-one e-either,” Barry points out and opens his eyes to meet Len’s gaze.

His friend scoffs at that but looks amused. “I can be.”

They hold each other’s gazes as he goes on. “I’m not all the time, though, but this certainly isn’t making me to one of the good guys, either.”

“Y-you’re f-for m-me.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Barry frowns but can’t find it in himself to feel insulted. He knows that Len doesn’t get what he means. “I d-don’t n-need you t-to ch-change.”

Len lifts an eyebrow. “But you would like me to?”

“A b-bit,” Barry agrees somewhat hesitantly. “B-but w-we are wh-who w-we are, and I s-still… I-I d-don’t w-want you t-to b-be s-someone else.”

The fingers at the back of his neck stop, and he briefly worries that he has upset the other man somehow.

Len is studying him now, with an expression that is hard for Barry to interpret in the dark.

“It doesn’t bother me,” Len finally says and squeezes his neck lightly. “Your stammer, it never has.”

Barry’s eyes are itching again as he swallows around the growing lump in his throat. He didn’t expect this, and he isn’t sure why it means as much to him as it does, but it is such an absurdly reassuring thing to know.

“Th-thank y-you,” Barry utters and squeezes his eyes shut.

When Len moves closer, he let him.

The hand on his neck moves lower and starts to caress his back in slow strokes, while he can feel Len’ warm breath on the bridge of his nose.

“You should rest.”

Barry shudders lightly and nods. Hesitantly, he moves the hand he had resting on his friend’s arm around his back. It is scary and exhilarating at the same time, and he waits for Len to react. When he doesn’t, Barry relaxes and slowly let go of the breath he hasn’t even been aware of holding.

“Go to sleep, baby.”

The feeling of Len touching him, and the warmth of his body so close to his own, follows Barry into his dreams.

Chapter End Notes

This, my dear readers, was the last chapter before the rewritten part starts, and even though I was quite apprehensive about reaching this point, I’ve to say I’ve actually gotten really excited about it as well by now. :)
So far, I’ve five chapters for the rewritten part done, which means that I can keep my regular schedule for at least a while longer, and I hope you guys are as happy about this as I am (and, boy, am I happy about it X).

Regarding this chapter in particular, I’m honestly not as happy with the flow of it as I would like to be. For some reason, it was a bit difficult for me to edit and smooth it out. Even so, I like what we touched upon here as Barry finally found out that the Rogues aren’t as oblivious to another man having taken over the mantle of the Flash as he hoped they would be, and I’m really looking forward to where this goes.

The next chapter will introduce a skip in time from about seven months, and we will meet someone again we haven’t seen in a long while (much to Barry’s grief).

Thank you lovelies for all your feedback, you’re making this to an even more enjoyable ride for me, and I’m glad many of you decided to hop on and join me for it! <3
I Wish You’d Be Mine/ I Wish I Could Be Whole

Chapter Summary

Barry is reminded of how powerless he really is, and Len caught himself the flue.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my dear Katzerover. Thanks for being such a wonderful help, my dear! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It is early September, just a couple of days till Barry’s fourth year out of prison begins, when the news on the radio talks about some kind of crisis taking place in the East.

He stops moping the floor and walks over to the counter to listen, as uneasiness settles in the bottom of his stomach.

The newscaster hardly knows any details, just that Washington seems to be under some kind of attack and the JLA arrived there mere minutes ago. They don’t mention anyone in particular, and while there are speculations on who could be responsible for what is happening, those are just that, speculations.

It is a daunting experience to be unable to do anything, to just stand by and listen. Barry recalls the previous times when something big enough happened that it justified an emergency broadcast, and, as if in response to that news, the aches in his body, in his limbs and joints, become so much more intense all of a sudden.

He lifts his right hand and studies it, noticing the way most of the joints feel too warm and are slightly pulsing.

Dr. Elias comes to his mind, and Eddie, trying to assure him that he can trust the scientist…

The memory slips from Barry’s grasp, and he turns to the radio with an uneasy frown when the newscaster mentions the Teen Titans have just arrived on the scene of the fight.

Bart come to his mind, and it is as if his heart is suddenly up his throat-

The entrance bell chimes, cutting through the tense moment, and Barry turns automatically, still unable to completely shake the thought off that Bart is somewhere out there fighting, putting himself in serious danger.

“Hey, Barry,” James greets him as he makes his way over to him, a friendly smile on his lips that quickly wanes and is replaced by a much more serious and slightly concerned expression as he takes note that something must be wrong. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes.” Barry utters, voice faint and trembling as his vocal cords seems to be very much against the
idea of doing their job once again. He swallows and glances back to the radio but reconsiders and
shoots his friend an unhappy look. “W-well, n-no, th-there’s b-been an at-tack.”

“An attack?” James frowns, and studies him with concern before he turns to the radio and pauses to
listen

“Ah, I see,” he says and grimaces slightly. “Damn it. Where’s it happening?”

“W-Washingt-ton.”

“You know someone there?”

Barry smiles faintly, and nods because it isn’t entirely a lie and it would explain why he appears to be
so shaken by this. “A f-friend.”

“I’m sure they’ll be alright.” James assures him with a comforting smile. “The JLA is already there,
which usually includes the Flash, and he’s probably gotten all the people out of the fighting zone
already.”

Wally probably has. The problem is only that the people Barry is mostly worried about are the ones
who try to keep whoever is attacking away from the citizens.

“Y-yeah,” he agrees quietly as he turns back to the radio, biting his lower lip.

If he just wasn’t so useless-

“Does your hand hurt?” Barry turns to James in confusion and freezes when he realizes that he is
rubbing his right wrist.

“N-no.” He forces his arms down and feels an uncomfortable heat spread over his cheeks. “I’m j-just
w-worried, th-that’s all.”

James looks at him with sympathy, but Barry doesn’t miss the doubt that is still persisting in his
friend’s eyes. Yet, he doesn’t try to probe, for which Barry is grateful.

“W-welcome b-back b-by th-the w-way,” Barry says with a genuine smile. It is good to see his
friend again after nearly a month of him being abroad.

“Thank you.” James grins. “Believe me, it’s good to be back. Staying in a hotel room for weeks on
end isn’t as fun as it may sound, even if it’s upper class.”

Barry chuckles, well aware that the actual reason why his friend missed the US so much is likely due
to the lack of Dunkin Donuts in Sydney. His friends love for the fried sweet is nearly obsessive at
times.

“How’s lao lao?” James’ expression becomes more somber at the mentioning of his grandmother. “Is
she doing better today?”

Mrs. Ming has gotten sick a couple of days ago, the third time in just as many months, and due to his
grandson’s absence, it has been mostly on Barry to look after her, though Mary and Axel helped as
well at times.

“Yes, sh-she’s s-sleeping,” Barry explains and feels an all too familiar worry creep up again. The
emotion is persistent and a near-constant companion to him these days whenever he thinks about his
employer.
“Good.” James gives him a tight smile and glances to the doorway behind the counter that leads to the stairs, worry still plain to see in his eyes. “I’m glad that I won’t have to leave the country for more than a couple of days till the rest of the year.”

Barry is glad to hear that, for both James and Mrs. Ming. He knows that his friend feels guilty for how much time he had to spend out of the US this year due to his job while his grandmother’s health is getting worse.

“That’s great,” he agrees warmly. “She’ll be happy to hear that.”

While Mrs. Ming never outright says anything as she knows that her grandson has to travel a lot for work, it is still obvious how much she misses him at times, and Barry is sure that having him around more often again will be good for her.

“By the way, I’ve something for you,” James tells him, sounding less glum and more excited again.

Barry lifts his eyebrows in played surprise, as it has become kind of a ritual between them that James would get him something whenever he has to travel abroad, and he has also picked up on the two bags in his friend’s hands by now.

Though, he really hopes that only the smaller one is meant for him. Getting presents is a bit of a sore topic for him, but he has made his peace by now with the fact that it just seems to be in James’ nature to get something from his trips for people he likes.

Thankfully, so far it has been limited to rather inexpensive souvenirs one usually gets in tourist shops or on the airport. Not that this makes them any less special to Barry, and he has actually grown quite fond of those little knick-knacks.

It is also good to see that the prospect of giving him something, seems to have lifted his friend’s mood considerably again, as his eyes are twinkling with badly hidden anticipation.

“You do?” Barry asks in fake curiosity and watches how James takes the white and smaller bag of the two he has in his right hand to present it to him.

“Indeed.” His friend grins. “Souvenirs.”

Barry chuckles and accept the bag but can’t help but point out once again, “Y-you d-didn’t have t-to g-get me anything.”

“And I still did.” James returns fondly. “So deal with it.”

There is a mug in the bag, a big white one with the print *I *HEART* Sydney* in big bold letters on it.

“A mug?” Barry asks in feign surprise. “Wh-who w-would have th-thought.”

James seems to have a preference for mugs when it comes to getting him something while on his business trips. By now Barry has a quite impressive little collection of six pieces, seven with this one. Most of them were from somewhere inside the country, but he had also one from Canada, England and now Australia.

“Indeed.” James looks quite pleased with himself. “But this one is special.”

Barry arches an eyebrow and turns back to the mug, studying it curiously. “H-how?”

“It glows in the dark!”
Barry snorts and shoots his friend an amused look. “You r-really w-went all out f-for me th-this time, d-didn’t you?”

“Of course,” James agrees. “Just the best for my friends.”

The radio starts to play music again, then, which means that the emergency newscast is over for now, and Barry tries to push the persisting worry about Bart, Wally, and the others away, as he thanks his friend again for the nice little gift.

“I’ve something else for you as well, though,” James points out and lifts the other bag he has been still holding, a much bigger one.

Barry frowns and studies it, feeling reluctant to accept something else especially because he’s pretty sure that this present probably cost quite a bit more than some cheesy souvenir mug.

“Y-you d-didn’t n-need t-to g-get m-me a-anything else,” he reminds James who is still offering the bag to him.

“I know,” James agrees. “But from this Friday on you’ve only two more years to go until your parole is finally over. That’s something to celebrate, isn’t it?”

A cold and heavy feeling settles into the pit of Barry’s stomach as he is reminded of that, and he tries to keep the ugly emotion from showing on his face.

No, he wants to say, it’s really not.

Nothing of this part of his life is worth celebrating. If he could, he would forget that this even exists…

He stays quiet, though, and accepts the offered bag with a smile he hopes doesn’t look as forced as it feels. “Th-thank y-you.”

James frowns, but Barry turns to examine his present, hoping his friend would get that he doesn’t want to talk about this.

A small startled noise escapes him as he finds a thick hardcover book inside. It explains the weight of the bag, and as he pulls it out, he can’t help but notice how smooth and expensive the cover feels.

It’s a book about traditional oil painting, about advanced techniques by an artist named Virgil Elliot, someone Barry has read about in the past, and just by the look of it he can tell that it has to have cost quite a lot of money.

“I c-can’t ac-cept it.” He glances to the other man nervously, a bit worried that he would upset him. “It’s t-too m-much.”

James studies him for a second, and Barry braces himself for him trying to convince him otherwise.

Okay,” His friend says instead and smiles when he notices his surprised expression. “It’s fine, Barry, really. I suspected you wouldn’t accept it, and I understand why, but thanks to you my interest in the finer arts has been woken as well, so why not leave it here in the store, so you can look through it whenever there isn’t anything else to do or when you take your break, and I’ll borrow it from time to time?”

“S-sure,” Barry agrees, relieved about the offer. He really would like to read the book, and this way it is like he is just borrowing it from James. “Thank you.”
The other man smiles warmly and tells him that he is going to head up to see his grandmother.

Due to the current low on customers, Barry uses the time to look through the art book, studying the different exhibited pieces with interest.

It is the ring of the entrance bell that finally pulls his focus away from the book, and a smile spreads over his lips when he looks up and spots Axel entering the store. Behind the young teen, another boy is tagging along, Sam, one of Axel’s friends he sometimes brings along when he just passes by to get a coke or something.

“Hey, Barry,” Axel greets him and returns his smile with a wide grin as he walks over to him.
“Thought I’d pass by and save you from being bored to death.”

Sam who has accompanied Axel a couple of times so far, nods slightly at Barry, shoulders slouched and hands buried deep in the pockets of his jacket. “Mr. A.”

Barry can’t help but find it amusing to be addressed as Mr. A and returns the young teens greeting with a friendly. “H-hello, S-Sam.” He turns to Axel, then, smiling amused. “Y-you t-two are b-bored?”

“Why?” Axel shoots him a fake frown. “What’s that supposed to mean? You think we’d only pass by when we’ve nothing better to do?”

“Or y-you w-want s-something,” Barry agrees without missing a beat. Sam snorts and Axel grins.

“You know me too well,” the boy agrees, sounding quite pleased by the fact. He then turns to his Sam and tells him to pick two cokes for them.

As Axel tends to help out every other day by now, Mrs. Ming has told him that he could take himself snacks for free whenever he wants in return. She doesn’t seem to mind when he brings a friend along at times, and Axel has never brought more than one along so far, knowing that the business of the store isn’t going too well right now.

“Y-you’re h-having a g-good d-day?”

“Sure thing,” the teen agrees and glances down at the bar when he notices the open book in front of Barry. He aches an eyebrow. “You’re carrying artsy books now as well?”

“N-no, it’s J-James’.”

“He bought you a book?” Axel frowns, looking clearly unimpressed. “Couldn’t he have gotten you something cool instead? Like a smart phone or stuff?”

Barry feels a bit annoyed that Axel’s first conclusion is that it is a present from James, even though he’s pretty much spot on.

“It’s J-James’,” Barry insists. “H-he j-just leaves it here f-for me t-to t-take a l-look wh-when I’ve th-the t-time.”

“Uhu.” Axel clearly doesn’t buy it but leaves it at that, even though Barry would have preferred that the kid would stop grinning at him as if he knew that something else is going on here. Which it isn’t.

As if on cue, James appears at the doorway behind the counter.

“You’re having troubles with underage delinquents again?” he asks Barry, not at all surprised to see
Axel there whom he is eying in amusement.

“Hardy-harr.” Axel rolls his eyes and nods to the art book at the counter. “You got me something as well?”

“You told me you don’t like mugs.” James reminds him as he comes to stand next to Barry.

“Yeah, because mugs suck.”

“Axel.” Barry warns him, and the teen huffs, crossing his arms in front of chest. “Yeah, yeah, mugs don’t suck, they’re the greatest invention since sliced bread. I know.”

James chuckles at this but quickly stops when Barry shoots him a look.

“What sucks?” Sam asks as he joins them with two cokes and a bag of chips in his hands. His expression looks as bored as ever, and he only nods at James after eying him for a moment, apparently not deeming him worthy enough to get a verbal greeting.

“Your face,” Axel chimes up and quickly evades a punch to his shoulder.

“Boys, no fighting within the store,” James reminds them and nods to the door. “Outside is fine, though.”

Both boys snort and chuckle while Barry makes do with a soft huff but has to smile as well as they are really just monkeying around, and Axel has generally gotten much better when it comes to his manners and the language he usually uses.

“You’re here to offer some free help? The storage room would need a good cleaning, and you two could earn—” James question is cut off when both boys quickly come up with some urgent reasons why they have to leave again right away.

“It’s a pity,” Axel tells them, already on his way towards the exit with Sam following close behind. “We’d have loved to slave away for you otherwise.” He then turns to Barry. “Bye Barry!”

“See ya, Mr. A,” Sam adds just as the entrance door swings shut again and both boys are out the store.

“Mr. A?” James shoots him a bemused look.

Barry shrugs but smiles. “Axel’s f-friends c-call m-me t-that for wh-whatever r-reason. Th-they p-probably th-think it’s c-cool.”

“They should call you B.A. if they really wanted to sound cool,” James suggests as he turns to him and rests with his hip against the counter.

“M-most of th-them p-probably h-have n-no id-dea wh-who the A t-team even is,” Barry points out amused and watches how his friend makes a face at that.

“We are getting old, aren’t we?” James asks him with such a morose look that Barry has to laugh outright.

“Sp-speak for yours-self.” The grin he shoots his friend slips away again, and his expression dims as he looks back to the radio.

“Any news on the situation in Washington?” James inquires and eyes Barry with a concerned frown as his reaction was obviously not lost on him.
Barry forcefully pushes the feeling of dread away that tries to regain a hold of him, and gives his friend a small smile as he shakes his head. “N-no, th-they j-just s-said th-that th-the c-center h-has b-been evac-cuated by now.”

“That’s good,” James says and gives him an encouraging look. “I’m sure your friend made it out there in time.”

“Y-yeah.” Barry agrees quietly, even though he knows that Wally, Jay, and the rest are probably still currently trying to get rid of whatever threat has decided to attack the capital city. James can’t know that, though, and Barry appreciates his words. “I kn-know. Th-thanks”

He should have gotten used to this by now, to the helplessness that settles over him like a smothering blanket every time he learns that his former colleagues are out there fighting some threat to humanity, but the reality is that it hasn’t gotten any easier so far. Especially when any of the speedsters are involved…

Barry can only hope that James is right.

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The staircase to Len’s building is still alien to Barry. He knows that Len doesn’t like it when he turns up here, and by now he has realized that it is mostly for his own safety, but…

After work he felt restless, and he knows that Len is staying in his apartment right now because he has caught himself a bug and prefers to hole himself up in his own four walls, away from the other Rogues.

Len not feeling well worries him, has since he learned of it two days ago from Sam when the other man checked up on him, and he thinks that his intent to cook his friend some chicken soup with noodles would be a good excuse to pass by.

The plastic bag with the ingredients feels heavy in his right hand, causing a slight ache in his wrist, but he hardly picks up on it as he makes his way up the stairs.

James actually suggested to him that he could cook Len something when Barry mentioned that the other man is sick. They both still walk around the topic of the Rogues being his friends like on eggshells, but James clearly noticed that Len being sick has him worried, and insisted on giving him a 50% employee discount when he wanted to pay for everything after finishing the closing.

“W-we d-don’t h-have emp-ployee d-discount,” Barry pointed out with a frown, but James waved him off and winked. “We do for our best employees.”

It has been nice, even though Barry still feels a bit guilty about having hardly paid eight bucks for the chicken, mirepoix, ginger, and noodles.

After worrying for the most day about the crisis in Washington, Barry is glad he has something he can look forward to and focus on. He learned in the news that the fight is still going on and that most of Washington DC has been evacuated by now. They still aren’t sure who exactly is behind this attack, but some reports said that it has something to do with aliens that seem to belong to an organization similar to the Green Lanterns. They also wield rings as weapons but wearing yellow costumes…

Barry has no idea who these guys could be, and he doesn’t really want to think too much about it either, as any Green Lantern business usually reminds him of Hal…
He generally tries to avoid being reminded of his dead former best friend.

The building is quiet around him; the only noise are his steps as he proceeds up to Len’s floor.

There is fresh coating of paint on the wall, its smell still lingers in the air, and Barry can’t help but notice that the walls of the staircase look nicer than the last time he has been around. It gives the inside of the building something welcoming, and he wishes that the owner of his apartment complex would decide to invest some money in something like a fresh paintjob for their staircase as well.

… not that this is likely to happen considering what a stingy person she is.

His stomach feels fluttery as he stops in front of Len’s door, and he awkwardly shifts his weight from one foot to the other as he tries to prep talk himself into not being so nervous.

The last time he decided to pass by, Len shut the door into his face, and they ended up not talking for over a month…

That was over a year ago by now, though, and Len and him… their relationship has changed, and it is really dumb of him getting so worried about simply passing by to see how his sick friend is doing.

Barry takes a deep breath, lifts his hand, and knocks.

He doesn’t have to wait long before he picks up on movement inside the flat, but his stomach drops the moment he notices that these footsteps can’t belong to Len.

Maybe Lisa-

The door opens and the familiar face of Izzy greets him, looking just the same as the last time he met the prostitute which lays also already over a year back.

She still looks beautiful, and Barry suddenly feels like a scarecrow next to her.

Her big brown eyes narrow when she spots him, and an annoyed frown settles over her face as she eyes him wordlessly for a long minute. The way she looks at him makes Barry feel like an unwelcome intruder, and to her he probably is.

He should have considered that Izzy could be here…

He just though…

He’s an idiot.

Of course Len would still see her. Why wouldn’t he?

God, he is so stupid! He has no right to feel hurt…

The pang in his jaw joints startles him slightly, and he realizes how tensed up he has grown in response to Izzy’s presence.

“S-sor-ry.” Barry utters, and all of a sudden being there is just too much.

At least Len isn’t around to grow angry this time-

“Wait!” Izzy’s tells him sharply, the irritation plain in her voice, and Barry, who has turned around and just made a step towards the stairs again, stops.
Reluctantly, Barry turns back to her and shoots her an uneasy, questioning look.

“You don’t need to run off like a frightened puppy,” Izzy grouses with an irked huff, crossing her arms under her ample bosom. “I’m not going to bite you, you know?”

This is certainly not what Barry has expected to hear from her considering how she was more than eager to get rid of him the last couple of times they’d met. He shifts awkwardly as he tries to make sense of her and watches how her frown forms into a scowl, her eyes boring into his in a nearly angry manner. The plain display of hostility only last for a second, though, then she forces her features to relax again, and her eyes drop to his hands instead.

She arches an elegant eyebrow. “You’ve food with you?"

Barry glances down to the white shopping bag in his hand and nods. “Y-yes, I-I w-wanted t-to m-make L-Len a s-soup.” He shrugs a bit helplessly.

Izzy keeps studying the bag in Barry’s hand with such an intense look that he is surprised it hasn’t burst up in flames yet.

“You’re a decent cook, aren’t you?” Izzy meets his eyes with slightly pinched lips and steps back, opening the door wider. “I was thinking about ordering food, but it seems I can save some bucks.”

He just stares at her for a couple of seconds, taken aback by the fact that she is actually inviting him in. A flash of annoyance replaces the surprise rather quickly again, though, as he realizes that she seems to just assume that he is going to cook for her as well.

Seeing that he did come here to prepare Len some soup, and it looks as if his friend hasn’t eaten yet, Barry ignores his irritation he feels for that woman and only nods curtly before he enters wordlessly.

It is not hard to find his way to the kitchen due to the apartment not being that big, but he stops briefly in the living room when he spots Len on the couch, asleep.

“He’s the flu,” Izzy informs him. She meets his surprised look evenly. “You probably knew that already, though.”

Barry hums in agreement, not sure what to say, and turns back to Len.

His friend looks pale, with dark rings under his eyes, but his face is relaxed, and it occurs on Barry that Len hasn’t picked up on him entering the apartment, which is a bit unsettling as the other man is usually very aware of his surroundings, even when he rests. This in itself is probably the clearest sign that he really can’t be feeling well.

The urge to walk over to Len and touch him overcomes Barry out of the blue, and it is so intense that he nearly gives in.

Instead, after a glance back to Izzy, he makes his way over to the kitchen, and puts the items on the counter.

Len’s kitchen is small, and it is not hard to find the cabinet with the pots, or where he has the salt and pepper stashed away. Concerning any other spices, it doesn’t look very promising, though, not that Barry is surprised by that, as Len and most of the other Rogues usually live on takeout when Lisa or him don’t provide them with an alternative to it.

Barry cleans the chicken and puts it into the waiting pot with water as a whole. He adds pepper, salt, and the vegetables, closes the lid and let it start to cook on a small flame, all the while ignoring Izzy’s
gaze that keeps lingering on him as he works.

“You’d make a great housewife,” The woman remarks, but without the usual bite as she watches him from the kitchen entrance. It is still clearly intended to be an insult, and Barry decides to ignore her.

Then, just as he washes his hands, she adds. “He likes your cooking.”

Surprised, Barry turns to her. Izzy snorts rather unladylike and walks over to the counter next to the cooking plates. She pushes herself up on it to take a seat.

Izzy’s eyes are not exactly hostile when she meets his, but they aren’t friendly either. “I can’t cook worth shit. The couple of times I tried to make him something… well, it turned out rather disastrous.” She huffs a humorless chuckle and leans against the fridge next to her, studying him for a minute or so with a slowly growing frown.

“You’re not even good looking.” Barry can’t help but bristle at these words, unconsciously crossing his hands in front of his chest, which causes Izzy to smirk. “And you’re so damn self-conscious, it’s sad.”

“Y-you kn-know.” Barry starts and tries to ignore how humiliated he is feeling again thanks to her. “I-I r-really c-couldn’t c-care l-less wh-what y-you th-think of m-me.”

“Good.” Her smile is wide and hostile. “Because you wouldn’t like it.”

Barry presses his lips together tightly. He hates how riled up he feels, how these woman’s words sting, though he knows they really shouldn’t mean anything to him.

“Cat got your tongue?” Izzy chuckles, eyes sharp and angry, and Barry meets them, despite how uneasy her gaze makes him feel. Her next words are cut off by coughing, though, and both of them turn to the couch.

“Izzy?” Len sounds hoarse, groggy. Barry feels once again the flutter in his stomach, as well as the silly need to walk over to him.

“I’m here,” Izzy replies and meets Barry’s eyes, glaring at him like he has somehow wronged her. She adds. “You’ve a visitor.”

Len grunts. “I’m fine, Liz. It’s just the flu, I told you so yester-” The word is cut off by another coughing fit, and Barry grimaces slightly, feeling bad for his friend.

“’S not your sister,” Izzy clarifies when the coughing stops, and Barry doesn’t miss how her fingers dig into the edge of the counter she is sitting on as she proceeds. “Your sweetheart decided to pass by and make you soup.”

A brief pause.

“Barry?” Len pushes himself up, looking nearly as white as a ghost, when he looks over to them.

A flush creeps over Barry’s cheeks, a nearly painfully intense one. He shouldn’t react like this as Len probably didn’t pick up on Izzy’s choice of words due to him being sick, but he can’t help it.

“Y-yeah,” Barry answers but stops and coughs lightly as his voice sounds embarrassingly thin. “I… I th-though I’d p-pass b-by…” He shrugs helpless and isn’t surprised when Len doesn’t look particularly happy about his idea to visit.
“Did you let one of the others know that you’re coming here?” Len asks gruffly.

“Y-yes, S-Sam,” Barry replies somewhat annoyed by the other man treating him like a child. “A-and I’ve th-the m-mirror w-with m-me. D-don’t t-treat m-me l-like I’m unab-ble t-to t-take c-care of m-myself, L-Len.”

The other man glares at him, and Barry forces himself not to glance to Izzy when she snorts incredulously.

Instead, Barry goes back to quickly check up on the soup. Then, he makes his way over to Len, who still looks irked and like he is generally in a rather bad mood right now. Not that Barry is surprised, his friend probably feels like crap.

Len studies Barry, as he crouches down next to him. “You shouldn’t have come.”

Barry hesitates but replies softly. “I was worried about you.”

The grimness in Len’s expression wanes and is replaced by surprises, before his eyes soften, and he studies Barry with a much warmer, fonder look again.

Hesitantly, Barry lays his hand on Len’s arm, still a bit apprehensive about initiating contact like this one between them, but no longer scared of it. Len’s eyes flicker down to where Barry is touching him, and his body seems to relax some more in response to it.

“I’m fine,” Len tells him as he lays back, exhaling a sigh, without breaking eye contact. “It’s just the flu.”

“I kn-know,” Barry agrees quietly.

They look at each other for a long moment.

It is nice, calming, and intimate in a harmless way, and Barry wants to tell Len…

He isn’t sure.

That he still worries about him even though it is just the flu? That he just doesn’t want Len to be sick and feel awful?

Barry gets startled out of his musing when Len moves his arm and grasp his hand, loosely but securely.

“You’ve work tomorrow,” Len reminds Barry, and considering that it is already eleven pm, he has a point. Len doesn’t sound gruff anymore, though, and he starts to draw small circles with his thumb on the back of Barry’s hand.

“I…” Barry swallows and carefully squeeze Len’s hand back. “I j-just w-wanted t-to s-see you.”

They haven’t seen much from each other the past month. Len usually only passes by on the weekends as Barry tends to be the one who comes over to the hideout most of the time as it is. With the Rogues having been rather busy the last couple of weeks in preparation of an upcoming heist, Barry preferred to make his presence around them rather scarce, though.

At least till he learned that Len is sick.

“He also makes you dinner,” Izzy remarks as she leans over the back of the couch, meeting Barry’s eyes briefly before her gaze moves on to their connected hands and lingers there.
Len notices this too as he let go and pulls his back, resting it on his stomach while he meets Izzy’s amused and slightly taunting smirk with a cool expression.

Barry tries not to show the hurt he feels by this, instead he gets up again, and mutters that he is going to look after the soup.

The quiet voices of Len and Izzy reach him in the kitchen as he busies himself with cleaning so he wouldn’t have to return to them after checking up on the progress of Len’s meal. He tries not to be hurt by how Len still is ashamed about his feels for him, not that he really has any right to be so in the first place as they aren’t… they’ve never…

Barry frowns down at the sink he is currently scrubbing, angry at himself for his feeling towards the other man when he is still so broken at the same time.

He has no right to be upset about Izzy, he has no right to hold it against Len that he needs someone else. Len is a grown man with a normal libido, if Barry wasn’t so messed up and terrified of the notion of getting intimate himself, the other man wouldn’t need to find his relief somewhere else.

“If you keep that up, you’re going to scrub a hole in the sink.” Barry freezes while his cheeks flushing in response. He shoots a glance over his shoulder to see Izzy watch him with an amused glint in her eyes.

He straightens up, lips pursed.

Izzy chuckles, arms once again crossed below her bosom, and tilts her head slightly. “You’re always so tense, you know that.” When he fails to answer, her grin grows and she shrugs. “Then again, if I could never get it up—”

“Izzy!” Len pushes himself again into an upright position, visibly angry. “I told you to—”

“Yes, I heard you the fucking first time!” She yells back, glaring. “I’ll piss off like the good little whore I’m now that your girlfriend has arrived! It’s a real pity he can’t get it up for you, otherwise you wouldn’t need to put up with me every other night, is it!?—”

“Leave.” Len orders her, coldly. “Or you can worry about finding another john who keeps up with your fucking temper.”

The auburn haired woman actually bares her teeth at Len, looking furious. “Fine! Fuck you too, you miserable bastard! See if I play nurse for you again!”

After another withering look in Barry’s direction, she whirls around, grabs her coat that rested over the back of the couch, and storms off. She shuts the door with enough force that the whole building must have heard it.

The silence that follows Izzy’s departure quickly turns uncomfortable, and Barry knows that he wasn’t meant to see any of this.

Awkwardly, he shifts and glances to Len.

His friend is glaring at the door, and it isn’t lost on Barry how exhausted he looks. Then, Len turns his attention to him, and his irked expression eases away a bit. “Ignore her, she’s been moody for a while now.”

Barry wonders whether Izzy’s bad mood could be connected to him, and quickly decides that he really doesn’t want to know. If he could have helped it, he would have preferred not to learn about
Izzy and her obviously still existing part in Len’s life in the first place.

He nods and turns back to the kitchen, checking up on the soup once more.

They don’t talk for the next fifteen minutes it takes till the soup and the noodles are done. Barry keeps himself busy by going back to cleaning while Len turns the TV on and zaps around for a while but eventually settles on some baseball game.

When the meal is finally ready, Barry fills two bowls with soup and noodles, adds a carrot to each, and makes his way back into the living room.

Len rubs his eyes when he notices him and turns slightly as he pushes himself up in a sitting position. He accepts the bowl with a nod. “Thanks.”

Barry smiles and takes a seat on the spot Len cleared for him.

They watch the game for the next couple minutes, neither speaking while they eat, and Barry can’t say that he is particularly hungry, even though he hasn’t eaten anything since lunch more than ten hours ago. He still eats, though, because he has been able to gain some weight again over the past seven months, and he really wants to keep it like that as he prefers not to look like a walking skeleton.

“You should be a chef.”

Barry pauses for a second. He turns his head to face Len, an eyebrow ached incredulously.

The other man smiles slightly, and Barry doesn’t miss that he doesn’t look as sickly pale anymore.

“All you make tastes delicious, even just some soup with noodles,” Len explains, watching with visible amusement how Barry flushes and ducks his head a little.

“It’s really nothing special,” Barry murmurs, feeling embarrassed but also happy about the praise.

“It is,” Len disagrees with a surprising earnestness that catches Barry off-guard. He is saved from trying to come up with something to reply to his friend’s words, when the baseball game is interrupted by another special newscast about the still ongoing fight in Washington DC.

The dread that has been following Barry around since this morning, eases away when he learns that the fighting there has finally come to an end. He relaxes even more when he hears that there seem to be no casualties among the heroes that were involved.

“Yellow Lantern?” Len asks incredulously, causing Barry to look back to him.

Apparently, Len hasn’t been aware of what was going on in Washington DC, not that it surprises Barry considering that his friend probably hasn’t put a priority on keeping up with the news today.

“Because having a bunch of green interstellar meddlers hasn’t been bad enough.” Len snorts but the frown on his face tells Barry that he isn’t finding this especially funny.

Barry hums quietly, and lowers his gaze down on his lap.

He tries not to ponder over any kind of Lantern or superhero business in general. Now that he knows that Wally, Jay, and the rest is doing fine, he would rather forget that topic again…

“The Flashes were there as well,” Len states, and Barry shoots him a look, meeting his eyes briefly.
He turns back to his meal and nods.

They fall quiet again and the program soon returns to the baseball game.

After finishing their late dinner, Barry takes the bowls back to the kitchen, does the couple of dishes, and puts the pot with the leftover soup into the fridge, while Len lays down once again.

It is already past midnight when he checks the clock the next time, which means that it would take him at least two hours to get home, and it would be a good idea to get going if he wanted to get any sleep at all tonight. As he listens to Len, who is on the best way to cough his lungs up by the sound of it, he decides that he would stay a bit longer, so that he can make him a remedy that would hopefully help his bronchi to calm down and enable him to get some more rest.

Having brought ginger powder and grinded black pepper with himself, he starts to prepare a tea while listening to the TV program that changed from the baseball game to some action flick a while ago.

Len nodded off again when Barry walks back to him about five minutes later. He is snoring softly, and Barry pauses to watch him as a familiar fondness settles over him. He takes the TV control and turns it off. Then, he carefully crouches down next to the other man, ignoring the pang in his knees as he does so.

“What time ‘s it?” Len asks drowsy just when Barry is about to wake him. He opens his eyes slowly, blinks a couple of times as he seems to have troubles to focus on him.

“A b-bit after m-midnight,” Barry answers with a soft smile and watches how Len pushes himself up.

“You’ve to work tomorrow,” Len reminds him once again, frowning, and Barry shrugs lightly. “It’s f-fine, I’m ab-bout t-to leave.”

Len studies him, only briefly glancing down at the glass of tea in his hand.

“You can use my bed,” Len decides and cuts Barry off as he is about to protest. “I’m staying on the couch, anyway. For some reason it’s easier for me to sleep here, and I don’t need you to catch this bug from me as well.”

“Y-you sh-should s-sleep in your b-bed.” Barry objects. “You’re s-sick, th-the c-couch-”

“I’m more comfortable here,” Len assures him. He reaches out for Barry, grasping his wrist lightly that is holding the tea. Barry tenses up for a second but relaxes again. “You need rest as well. You’ve had a long day, and you’ve to get up again in not even five hours.”

“Y-your b-back w-won’t l-like th-this,” Barry remarks but doesn’t really try to refuse again. He knows that Len is right, and he is actually getting pretty tired now.

“I’m not that old yet.” Len smirks and gives his hand a slight squeeze. “I think I can take a couple more years sleeping on a crappy couch till I really have to worry about this.”

“Y-you’re n-nearly f-fifty,” Barry points out and smiles amused when he gets a dark glare in return.

“H-here,” Barry offers the glass with the remedy to Len. “Th-this sh-should h-help w-with y-your c-cough.”

“That looks repulsing.” Len eyes the glass with a disgusted look but reaches for it nonetheless.
“It is,” Barry agrees and can’t keep from grinning as his friend huffs a sigh. “It w-will h-help y-you, th-though.”

“So you say,” Len mutters and takes a sip which causes him to make a face as if he has just tasted something rotten.

“C-come n-now, it’s n-not th-that b-bad.”

“You wanna take try?” His friend offers, but Barry declines with a wave. “I’m n-not s-sick.”

“The comment about everything you touch turning out good?” Len studies the drink with a pinched expression and shoots him a frown. “I take it back.”

Barry chuckles and reaches for Len’s wrist, squeezing it fondly. “Y-you’ll l-live, and it w-will h-help y-you.”

“Or I die of food-poisoning,” Len grumbles but takes another reluctant sip.

“I’ll t-take a qu-quick sh-shower,” Barry says, still smiling. As he tries to get up, though, Len’s free hand grabs his wrist, keeping him in place and causing him to tense up involuntarily.

“It’s fine,” Len tells him calmly and loosens his grasp enough that it would be easy for Barry to break free. “I just…”

He breaks off and purses his lips, looking both annoyed and helpless as he seems to try and come up with the right words. His expression becomes more certain again as he finally proceeds. “Don’t let yourself be bothered by Izzy, she knows nothing.”

“Y-you m-mean a l-lot t-to h-her,” Barry returns quietly with a sad smile and takes hold of Len’s wrist in return. “And sh-she c-can… sh-she c-can g-give y-you wh-wha-what y-you n-need.”

Saying this hurts. Just thinking about this is painful, like a coiled up pulsing knot in his chest, and he averts his eyes to the ground.

Len studies him, he can feel it, but he can’t bring himself to meet his eyes.

“She’s aware of how I feel,” Len says rather gruff. His voice gets a bit softer again. “And she’ll never be you.”

Barry’s eyes widen briefly, and he looks back to the other man, his lips slightly parted but unable to come up with something to say in return.

“Thank you.” Len squeezes his wrist and gives him a tried but honest smile. “For passing by.”

He then let go of him, and Barry doesn’t move for another moment before he slowly gets up again.

“R-rest,” Barry tells him and tries not to notice how coarse his voice sound.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter!

It was rather difficult to write, but I hope it turned out well enough. I takes place
between six and seven months after the last one, as I decided to skip stuff that didn’t really add something new and would only drag the pacing down.

In this chapter, it turned out that Len is actually still seeing Izzy, and I hope he isn’t too much in the dog house for it now, though it is a pretty shitty thing to so. The reason for it are many, and it will be touched upon this in upcoming chapters and have repercussions later on.

We also learned about yellow Lanterns, wonder who that could be... ;)

Btw, I love mugs you get in tourist shops, so I’m really happy I could push my mug enthusiasm onto James. <3

Next chapter will be in two weeks and thank you for reading!
“Thanks.” Jay accepts the cup of coffee with a nod, and Barry takes a seat opposite to him.

It is late Friday night, close to quarter to eleven, and Barry just got home from work. He feels a bit exhausted, but even so he is glad that Jay decided to pass by. The fight with the now dubbed Yellow Lanterns lays already two days back, and while Barry learned from the media that his former friends and colleagues were able to defeat them without any losses on their sides, it is still good to have the opportunity to ask Jay himself how everybody is doing.

“Y-you’re ok-kay?” he inquires after he took a sip of his tea, noticing that Jay is studying his own cup with a rather grim expression. The older man looks up, the frown gone, and gives him a faint but honest smile. “I’m good, Barry. The last couple of days have just been rather stressful.”

Barry remembers all too well how exhausting those kind of confrontations can be, especially with opponents as strong as the Lanterns. He doesn’t understand what is going on with the Yellow Lanterns, who they are, or whether their powers work like the ones of their green counterparts, but he doesn’t doubt that it must have been a hard fight to get them to back off and recede.

“E-everyb-body else is d-doing alr-right as w-well?” He nervously turns the warm cup in his hands, wishing he could ask more directly about Wally and Bart, but… it probably would make him look suspicious. Neither of them is supposed to be any of his concern, and even though Jay tends to inform him about how Bart is doing, he is worried that he would look suspicious should he want to know about the boy on his own.

“They’re all fine,” Jay answers as he leans back into his chair, his smile a bit strained. “We’re still a bit rattled up but things are under control again and nobody got too badly hurt.”

“G-good.” It is a relief to hear that. The JLA hasn’t given any official statement yet about what exactly happened, but Barry knows that some of the Teen Titans had also been involved in the fight, including Bart, which made him worry about the boy’s well-being.

Learning first hand from Jay that everybody is ceasing a worry he has carried around with him since he learned about the attack.
“Bart did very well,” Jay says out of the blue, and Barry freezes. “He’s improved quite a lot over the last couple of months, especially when it comes to him working with the team.”

It is odd, hearing Jay tell him about this. Not about Bart per se, the other man did so on occasion before just to keep him in the loop when it comes to the child…

This is touching hero business, though. Hero business he is no longer any part of and has no right to know about. Most of his former colleagues would probably be quite unhappy to learn that Jay mentioned any of this to him.

“He wants to impress Max,” the older man goes on. “And you.”

Jay meets Barry’s surprised and wary eyes with a calm, considering look. “He knows that he can’t tell you in person about how he is doing, so he hopes that you’d picked up on the whole business in DC via the news.”

Unsure how to reply, and a bit afraid that this could get him in trouble, Barry only nods and gazes back to the white mug in his hands.

A brief silence follows, and Barry knows that Jay is watching him. It makes him nervous. Nervous and a bit nauseous.

“Do you’ve anything planned next week on Sunday?” The question catches him off-guard, and Barry glances back up to Jay, meeting his eyes with a confused frown.

“N-no,” he stammers, suddenly worried that the other man could be on to his friendship with the Rogues, seeing that he often spends the majority of his Sundays over at whatever hideout they are currently using.

Jay frowns briefly, probably noticing his increasing nervousness. He must have gotten used to Barry reacting rather badly to the most unobtrusive seeming things, though, as he doesn’t ask him about it, and instead smiles. “Good, because if you’ve time, I’d like to make true on my offer to invite you over for dinner.”

It would be an understatement to say that this is unexpected, and it must be plain on Barry’s face as Jay gives him a sympathetic look as he goes on. “Just if you’ve time of course, Barry, and if you want to. Bart would be there too, the boy’s birthday is coming up, and we thought we’d celebrate it with his favorite food and a cake.”

Barry didn’t know that Bart’s birthday is coming up. Not that he knows much about the kid, and even though there isn’t much he can do about it, considering his situation, he still feels bad when he realizes once again how little he is aware of when it comes to the boy.

“He would love to have you there,” Jay proceeds, and judging by the somewhat saddened way he is studying Barry now, he knows what is going through his head. “He’s asking about you a lot.”

Barry feels his face heat up and lowers his eyes back to the table, fighting the urge to fidget. There is no way that Jay nor anybody else could hold it against Barry when Bart wanted to know about him, but it still makes him feel a bit uneasy. Not that he really believes anymore that Jay would use Bart’s curiosity against him.

Over the last couple of months, Jay started to pass by again every once in a while, and their conversations usually stay off anything connected to Barry’s allegedly shady past.

It still is a mystery to him why Jay would let this topic suddenly drop like this, but he can’t say that
he minds. It is nice to have his former friend visit him again without feeling like he is constantly expecting the worst of him.

“Max will also be there,” Jay goes on when Barry stays quiet. “He and Bart could pick you up on their way over to us, he already told me that it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Y-you…” Barry bites his lower lips and meets Jay’s gaze somewhat uncertainly. “It’s p-probab-bly b-better if I’m n-not ar-round, I d-don’t w-want t-to m-make th-things… awk-kward.”

And there is probably nothing more awkward on a child’s birthday party than an alleged pedophilic relative among the guests.

Not to mention that it wouldn’t end well for him if Wally…

“It would be just the five of us,” Jay explains with a slight frown, though he appears to be more concerned than annoyed. “And Bart would love to have you there.”

Barry is surprised hearing that. “I-it’s j-just…”

He shifts nervously on his chair, unsure what to make of that. “Wh-why w-would y-you w-want t-to h-have m-me th-there as w-well?” It is a rather blunt question, but the invitation to Bart’s birthday dinner causes some alarm bells to ring in his mind.

Jay studies him with a grim expression for a moment, and even though part of Barry is worried that the other man could be annoyed with him, he somehow senses that this anger is not directed towards him.

“Because Bart has been asking about you a lot, and he would like to have you there.” The older speedster gives him a tight smile. “As would Joan and I. It has been a while since we’ve had a dinner together.”

Because you believe I’m a pedophilic rapist and murderer, Barry thinks bitterly but doesn’t say it out loud.

It isn’t like he is really angry at Jay anymore. He never really was. The other man has a good reason to think the worst of him, as do the others…

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and averts his eyes back to the tea cup in his hands.

The thought of having dinner with Jay and Joan holds something oddly comforting, though. Barry always loved it when Iris, Wally, and he went over there, or the nice elderly couple came to them to spend an evening together.

Jay and he had a close relationship back then, and the older hero liked him pretty much from the very beginning. It probably was due to how polite Barry was, how careful about using his powers during a fight, and how he just wanted to help and didn’t expect anything in return. Jay always acts out of selflessness as he sees his powers more as a kind of responsibility than a privilege, and Barry was pretty much felt the same when he still had his own.

It took no time for them to become friends, and just a bit more till he got to know Joan, and he introduced Jay to Iris. Wally was added a couple years later, and… they’ve been his family…

“You don’t have to, Barry,” Jay goes on. He sounds tired all of a sudden and a little disappointed. “It is just an invitation; nobody will hold it against you if you decline.”
“N-no,” Barry says as he starts to nervously turn the cup in his hands. “I’d l-like t-to c-come… i-if y-you th-think th-that’s ok-kay.”

It is odd to watch Jay relax as he hears his answer, or how his expression lightens again.

As if the other man really wants him to be there.

And it makes no sense.

“Good.” Jay smiles. “Bart will be happy to hear that you’re coming.” He seems to hesitate but eventually adds. “As will Joan and I.”

Barry shoots the other man a wary look and stays quiet, not sure what to do or say as he is still pretty much confused by any of them wanting him to join in the first place.

Their conversation turns into a different direction when Jay asks him how he is doing, much to Barry’s relief. His suspicion about the invitation to Bart’s birthday dinner sticks around in the back of his mind, but he is able to start to relax somewhat at the change of topic.

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“We have to take you to the Saloon the next time we go,” Hartley tells him with a very determined expression as he puts his wager down.

Like so many times before when Barry passed by at the hideout in the past, he found the others involved in another game of poker. Not really feeling like playing tonight, he took the seat next to Len, and has made do with watching them for the last hour or so.

“I th-think I’ll p-pass,” Barry says, not really liking the idea of visiting the infamous bar in the Keys. “I’m n-not b-big on b-bars.”

“Or having fun,” Sam adds with a smirk and skillfully ignores the glare he gets in return.

“You’ll love it!” James, who is currently balancing on the two back legs of his chair, shoots him a wider grin, obviously liking the idea of Barry joining them at their favorite bar. “The beer is cheap and not too bad, and you’ll always find something entertaining there like bar fights, lots and lots of bar fights!”

Frowning, Barry is about to reply that he really would rather not visit such a place when Mick cuts him off. “Yeah, gettin’ out will do you some good. You could use some fun.”

“Yeah,” Digger agrees, frowning at Barry. “I’ve known ye for bloody years now, mate, and never seen ye shitfaced.”

Lisa snorts, lowering her can of beer again she picked up without taking a sip as she addresses her colleagues in general. “Your definition of fun is questionable at best. Leave him be, if he doesn’t wanna go to that sordid place it’s because he has still enough brain cells left to realize what a shithole it really is.”

“Funny, you never seem to have no problem with how sordid that place is when you join us there,” Sam points out, snacking on a handful of chips.

“I’m used to that kind of environment.” Lisa shrugs, shifting her cards around as she studies them without much interest.
“He’s never been there,” Hartley points out, smiling at Barry. “And it really isn’t that bad.”

“Yeah it is.” Sam snorts, and Barry doesn’t miss how the other man briefly focuses on the glass of water in front of him before looking back to his hand. Barry really hopes nobody else picks up on it, otherwise they would get their own version of a bar fight here if it becomes known that Sam is cheating.

Again.

Biting down on a sigh, he only half listens to how Hartley and Sam start to debate about the Saloon and whether it is really as seedy of a place as everybody seems to say.

Len’s eyes meet his when Barry glances over to him, and the dizzyingly, fluttery feeling settles back into his stomach as he realizes that the other man is watching him. Barry’s cheeks grow warm, and he ducks his head, before he shoots his friend a shy smile. It is probably ridiculous how pleased he is when Len returns it, amused and fond-

“You two are so sugary sweet, my teeth are starting to ache!” James’ voice is loud and boisterous enough to cut through the tender moment. Barry tries not to crawl under the table in embarrassment, whereas Len shoots an icy glare at the other Rogue in response.

Lisa actually groans in exasperation and tells James to shut up. “Keep your stupid comments to yourself, Tricks, they aren’t funny!”

James gasps, sounding honestly aghast by what his friend has just said, and points an accusing finger at her. “You don’t find it funny because you’re a humorless chicken!”

Mick, who just took a pull on his bottle, spits a mouthful out as he snorts in response, and Digger joins right in. Sam also chuckles, but seeing that he actually sits within hitting range of Lisa, he tries to keep it down.

It’s not really a funny joke, it’s more the bizarreness of the whole situation that is amusing, and even Barry can’t help but smile.

While Hartley tries to calm James down who grew even more upset after Lisa threw her empty can of beer at him, Barry gets up to make himself some tea in the small makeshift kitchen this hideout has to offer.

Marco is there when he enters, rummaging through the fridge, probably looking for some kind of snack.

“You’re going to cook?” The Latin asks hopefully as he spots him, and Barry shoots him an amused look, aching an eyebrow. “No?”

Marco heaves a sigh and turns back to the interior of the fridge, which is mostly filled with left over fast-food.

Barry decides that he really needs to stock them up on fresh food again. Since their fight with Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet, they’ve all be more careful with their outings, which is the clever thing to do, but also made itself know by an increase in aggression and a decrease on anything edible that isn’t canned.

“Who’s winning?” Marco asks as he closes the fridge again, a bottle of beer in hand, and Barry can’t help but frown when he notices this. He’s pretty sure that this is what his friend just choose as a substitute for an actual meal, and that doesn’t sit well with him as the Rogues are drinking too much
beer right now as it is.

“S-Sam,” he answers and starts to look through the cabinets for something he could use to prepare a quick dish meanwhile his tea is steeping.

“Fucking cheat.” Marco snorts and opens his bottle with the back of a lightener as he leans back against the fridge door. “I’ve told Cold a thousand times already that we should ban him from playing poker with the rest of us.”

“B-because you’re s-such an innoc-cent s-soul,” Barry asks amused as he pulls out a box of still unopened rice and two big cans of peas.

“I’m not trying to cheat every time we play,” the other man points out and nods to him. “I thought you’re not cooking, Allen.”

“I c-can’t l-let y-you l-live on b-beer and ch-chips alone, c-can I?” he asks and grabs one of the bigger pots.

“I’d say you’re such a mom,” Marco snarks. “But I do want you to prepare something so I’ll stay quiet.”

“As if anybody of y-you even kn-knew h-how t-to d-do s-so,” Barry retorts as he starts to fill the pot with water. He glances to the other man. “Y-you’ve s-seen s-some ch-cheese ar-round?”

“Not in a long while.” Marco walks over to him, looking over the couple of ingredients Barry got out. “Watcha making?”

“P-pea r-risotto,” he explains and nods to the cupboard next to the fridge. “C-can y-you g-get m-me th-the f-flour? A-and b-butter?”

Marco does, and he also helps him with opening the cans when he picks up on how Barry has trouble to do so himself.

“Th-thanks,” Barry mutters, flushed, and accepts the can without meeting the other man’s eyes. Things like opening canned food is something that becomes more and more painful for him these days, and he hates how much this makes him feel like an invalid.

“You really should have your hands looked at,” Marco tells him as Barry accepts the second can, a slight frown on the Latin’s face as he studies him.

Barry hums as he stirs the cooking rice and tries not to think of how mucked up his body has become.

A brief silence settles over them which is not tense or uncomfortable, and Barry is grateful once again for how easily the Rogues generally back off from topics he doesn’t want to talk about.

“You want me to help?” Marco asks. The offer is unexpected, and Barry shoots the other man a surprised look which earns him a shrug in response. “I can’t cook worth shit, but I can assist.”

“Ok-kay,” Barry agrees, and points to the flour and the butter he left at the counter next to the fridge. “T-take a f-fourth c-cup of f-flour, and add a sp-spoonful of b-butter. Th-then m-mix it t-till it’s p-paste l-like.”

“That doesn’t sound appetizing,” Marco remarks but does as he is told. “What’s that supposed to be?”
“W-we’ll use th-this as a th-thickener ins stead of ch-cheese.”

“I see…” His friend sounds audibly skeptical, and Barry can’t help but smile, a bit bemused that Marco would want to help him in the first place.

The other man sticks around while the food cooks, and Barry picks up once more how comfortable he feels by the criminal’s presence these days. It’s not only with Marco like this, but all of the Rogues as well, and even though a part of him still feels guilty about it, he generally tries to focus on how nice it is to be accepted into this group of misfits.

What Digger said before crosses Barry’s mind as he stirs the risotto, and it is then that he really thinks about how he has known these people for years now. Not as the Flash, not as a criminal investigator, but just as Barry… another criminal like them.

Barry watches the cooking rice absentmindedly and can’t help but think how odd life can be at times. He wouldn’t have thought that he would end up here a decade ago.

“You’re a loud thinker.” Marco’s voice startles him momentarily. Barry frowns lightly at the other man and doesn’t need to ask what he means as some of the Rogues can be surprisingly observant if they chose to be.

“You fourth year out of prison starts in a week, doesn’t it?” the Latin asks and eyes him attentively. “That means two more to go till you’re done with your parole.”

Barry inklings his head wordlessly and turns back to the risotto, not feeling like touching upon this topic at all.

It is then than he realizes that his invitation to Bart’s birthday dinner falls onto the very same day his third year of parole ends. An uneasy apprehension settle over him, and he really hopes that nobody would remember that little fact during the dinner and bring it up.

“You’ve ever thought about what you’re going to do afterwards?” Marco proceeds.

“No,” Barry answers truthfully and shrugs. “It’s s-still f-far off.”

In three years a lot can happen, and he doesn’t want to try and picture himself someplace he wouldn’t end up anyway because something is going to get wrong again in his life.

“Time flies by ridiculously fast when you’re our age,” Marco points out sagely. Barry snorts as he shoots his friend an amused look. “Y-you’re a y-year y-younger th-than m-me.”

“So?” The criminal shrugs, but his smirk belies his serious tone. “We’re getting old, and it’s better to face it how it is.”

“Aren’t y-you upl-lifting?” Barry grins, turns the hot plate off and asks Marco for the cheese substitute.

“Just facing the cold, hard facts,” the other man argues as he hands him the bowl. “And we’re rather lucky as we are that we’ve gotten this old, considering our occupations.”

“I w-wouldn’t c-call it an oc-upation p-per se.” Barry shoots Marco discontent look as he stirs the risotto. “And y-you w-wouldn’t h-have t-to w-worry ab-bout n-not g-getting older if you w-would n-not g-get y-yourself in l-life r-risking s-situations t-to b-begin w-with.”
“True,” Marco agrees easily, and Barry tries not to be annoyed by how his friends tend to put themselves well-knowingly in harm’s way every time they pull a heist.

At times he feels as if they don’t even care about the possible repercussions, and even though he knows that this isn’t really the case, he is also very much aware of how his friends do enjoy the thrill of the dangerous situations they get themselves in on a regular basis.

“Don’t make such a long face, Allen.” Marco meets his eyes with an amused expression. “We know what we’re doing, we’ve been in this business for more than two decades by now.”

Sometimes it isn’t the lack of experience that gets people killed, Barry wants to say but doesn’t. He doesn’t want to discuss any of this. It really isn’t his place to complain, and despite how comfortable he started to feel around Marco and the others over the years, he would only really touch upon these kind of things with Len, and even then only reluctantly.

“Y-yeah,” he agrees quietly instead, and gives the other man a tight but not unkind smile. “G-get me a p-plate if you w-want s-some r-ris-sotto.”

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Barry is about to leave the store when James turns up at the entrance to the small floor that leads to the backdoor exit.

“Hey,” James greets him, smiling. “You’re heading home?”

“Y-yeah.” Barry slings his backpack over his right shoulder, and turns to the other man. “Y-you n-need s-someth-thing?”

“No,” James starts but seems to reconsider for a split second before he proceeds. “Well, yes, but it’s nothing work related,” he explains. “You see, a friend of mine got us tickets for the opening night of a new exhibition in the Gilbert’s art gallery next month. Yesterday, she learned that she’s to make a trip to England around that time, though, and gave me her ticket to find someone else who’d like to join me there, so…”

Barry feels his eyebrow rise hearing that. “Y-you w-want m-me t-to j-join y-you th-there?”

“Yes,” James agrees but looks a bit uncertain now. “I thought, because you like art so much, that this would be something you would enjoy.”

A visit to an art gallery is definitely something Barry would like, but the offer is unexpected, especially because the tickets for the opening nights of a new exhibition at Gilbert’s aren’t exactly cheap. James must know that he wouldn’t be able to pay him the price of the ticket back.

“I w-would,” Barry agrees, shifting a bit awkwardly as he studies the other man with a slight frown. “B-but y-your s-sure y-you w-want m-me t-to c-come along? I m-mean, I’d l-love t-to b-but… y-you d-don’t w-want t-to ask one of y-your other f-friends?”

The slightly concerned expression on James’ face is replaced by one of understanding, and he looks at Barry with a familiar fondness. “I’m sure.” He smiles. “I’d enjoy having you there.”

A faint heat rises to Barry’s cheeks, and he is glad that the small room is only lit by the lights outside. He tells himself once again that he is being silly, that he misunderstands the other man’s words, but over the last couple of months he has started to pick up on how James looks at him at times, how his eyes last on him longer than is normal for friends, or how he goes out of his way to do something nice for him, like getting him small presents, offer him a ride home, pass by with a bento at work…
Barry tries not to think too much of it, he is probably being paranoid again, but despite telling himself that there is nothing to worry about, he can’t help but notice that James seems to be interested in him.

… and he isn’t sure what to think of or how to react to it.

The idea that another man could find him attractive is as off-putting as ever. Not because he thinks that there is something wrong with James’ possibly being gay, but because it would mean that Barry somehow gave off the signs that he…

Barry shivers involuntarily and adjusts the sling of his backpack nervously.

Why is he making men want him like that? He isn’t… not really…

Unwilling to let his mind wander off in that nasty direction, he stomps down on that thought hard, and forces himself to turn his attention back to James. His friend is now studying him with slight concern once again.

“You don’t have to accept,” James repeats, and while he tries to keep his tone light, Barry doesn’t miss either the disappointment nor the worry in his friend’s voice. “It’s just an offer, Barry, not something that could get you in trouble.”

“N-no, I’d l-like t-to,” he quickly objects. “I-I… it’s j-just th-that I w-won’t… I w-won’t b-be able t-to p-pay y-you b-back.”

Well, it is a half-truth, at least.

The notion that James would offer him a ticket for free that usually costs at least fifty bucks doesn’t sit well with him, but when the troubled frown lifts off his friend’s face, Barry can’t hold it against him. James is just a kind and generous person by nature.

“You don’t need to pay me back,” James reminds him but quickly goes on when Barry is about to protest. “But you can if you want to, and you know that you don’t have to right away. Just give me be money when you have it at hand.”

Barry feels his stomach drop at these words.

Everybody tells him to just pay them back whenever he has the money together, and even though nobody says so outright, he knows that not a single one of them, not James, not Len, not Max, not anybody who knows him, really expects him to ever be able to do so in the end. It is a daunting thought, and how the icy feeling of disgust starts to nestle into his chest. It is a familiar sensation, one that is directed towards himself and he has experienced many times before, and it makes it harder to breath.

“Alr-right,” he agrees, forcing himself to smile. “Th-thank y-you.”

James furrows his brows again, but before he can say something else, Barry gives him a curt nod. “I’ve t-to g-go if I w-want t-to e-catch m-my b-bus. H-have a g-good n-night.”

He turns around rather briskly and leaves the store in a manner he hopes isn’t too rude but can’t really bring himself to care too much just then.

It’s not James, it’s not anybody. It’s just him, and his messed up life, and how tired he is of being poor and such a failure.

Barry feels exhausted all of a sudden, and the bus can’t come soon enough tonight for him to finally
“Is something on your mind?” Mary asks and is watching him with warm, calm eyes as Barry looks over to her.

They are in her flat, watching *High Noon*, or Mary is, at least. Barry watched the screen as well but had zoned out some time ago.

“No,” Barry assures her, feeling bad for not paying attention to the western as he knows that it is one of his friend’s favorite movies. “Just t-tired.”

“Okay.” She gives him a small, kind smile. “If you’re sure.”

They turn back to the television, and Barry tries to concentrate on the movie. He can’t really bring himself to pay attention as his mind starts to wander off again, though.

He has been in a glum mood since his talk with James last night and still doesn’t understand why his friend’s words upset him so much. It isn’t as if James’s leniency regarding the money Barry is once again going to own him, causes his situation to suddenly change and gives him any more reason to feel down about the fact that he is living off other people once more.

“D-do y-you th-think I’m a f-freeloader?” Barry asks quietly, keeping his gaze fixed on the TV-screen. He can feel Mary’s eyes on him but can’t bring himself to meet them.

Mary shifts, probably reaching for the controller, and pauses the movie.

A brief moment of silence follows, and he lowers his gaze to the little couch table in front of them, not really looking at anything as he feels heat rise in his cheeks.

“No,” Mary answers. “I don’t, Barry.”

He swallows and shifts his gaze to briefly glance at her, noticing how she is studying him with a sad look he has grown custom to by now.

“I…” He averts his eyes again, rubbing his thighs nervously. “I n-never p-pay… y-you… e-everyb-body g-gives m-me th-things, f-food a-and s-such, a-and I… I c-can n-never p-pay f-for any of it.”

“The people who do that are your friends,” Mary reminds him kindly. “We don’t expect you to repay us, and you’ve never expect Eddy or me to repay you either when you make us dinner. Or when you give me those beautiful sketches of yours.”

Barry purses his lips and shifts uneasily, forcing himself to meet his friend’s gaze. “Th-that’s n-not th-the s-same, M-Mary. I’m n-not t-talking ab-bout… and y-you usually b-buy m-most of th-th-e f-food I’m p-preparing anyw-way. I j-just d-do th-the c-cooking.”

“Which in itself is already making up for the food,” she points out. “Your putting your effort into cooking for us, and we get great meals out of it, I think it is quite a fair exchange, wouldn’t you say?”

“I… It’s n-not j-just th-the f-food,” he insists unhappily. “Y-you g-give m-me b-books.”

He quickly proceeds when his friend seems about to object. “And I kn-know y-your b-borrowing th-them t-to me, b-but… I’ve had a c-couple of th-them f-for m-more th-than a y-year n-now, and y-you
n-never asked b-back f-for th-them.”

“Because you’re my friend, Barry,” Mary explains with a slight furrow of her brows. “And we practically live next to each other.”

“I kn-know, b-but th-they’re y-yours, and….” He bites his lower lip, not sure how he can express the reason for the ugly shame that is holding onto him. “It’s n-not only th-the b-books… I own L-Len and M-Max a l-lot of m-money, and it’s n-not f-for f-food, b-but I w-won’t b-be able t-to p-pay th-them b-back… th-they d-don’t exp-pect m-me t-to…” He grits his teeth for a moment and looks away as the heavy knot in his stomach tightens some more. “I-I… I c-can’t p-pay th-them b-back, I d-don’t… I d-don’t h-have th-the m-money, and th-they kn-know th-that… th-they s-say I c-can wh-when I’ve it t-together b-but… th-they kn-know th-that th-this w-won’t h-happen…”

Living off other people is something he has always hated. The humiliation and guilt that comes hand in hand with it had been a constant companion in his youth, and he can still remember all too well what it felt like when the people threw the inability to live on his own back into his face.

Barry’s fingers dig painfully in his knees, and a familiar desperation starts to rise in his chest, intense enough that it nearly causes him to choke.

“Barry.” Mary says softly, worried and sad. Barry flinches when she touches his lower arm lightly but doesn’t pull back. “Nobody of us thinks of you as a freeloader. I know that you would pay me the money back if I wanted you to and you could, and so do Eddie and the others. You’re just in a situation right now where you can’t afford a lot of things, but that isn’t the same as if you were living off of others. You don’t ask for anything from anybody, and when Eddy, me, or anybody else gives you something, it is because we want to. Not because we think you can’t provide for yourself, or because you somehow force us to, but because you are a dear friend to us, and we care about you.”

His eyes are itching, and Barry squeezes them shut, annoyed at himself for getting this worked up over something that has been part of his life once more for years by now.

“I w-would p-pay y-you b-back, if I c-could…”

“I know,” Mary assures him and gives his arm a tentative squeeze. “But even if you could, you wouldn’t have to. We are friends, Barry, we look out for and take care of each other, and I know what you would do the same thing if our roles were reversed.”

She is right, Barry knows that, he doesn’t need to ask himself whether he would do the same for Mary or any of his other friends. It eases the guilt somewhat, but he can’t help but still feel awful about his inability to live on his own.

No matter how hard he works, he will still be poor. This usually doesn’t really bother him that much as he grew up this way, but he can’t help but wonder what other people see when they look at him… How Jay, Max, Bart, and Joan see him.

He can’t even get Bart a really decent present for his birthday…

“I’m s-sorry,” he utters and wipes his eyes with his free hand. Mary makes a soothing sound and starts to rub his arm, and it is hard not to give into the pain and break down then and there.

Faintly, he picks up on the pain in his lower abdomen again, something that follows him around nearly constantly nowadays, like the ache in his joints, but his attention doesn’t linger on it. Instead, he focuses on his breathing, on calming himself down while keeping in mind that he isn’t as bad off as he feels at times.
“You’re a wonderful person,” Mary tells him, and he doesn’t protest when she pulls him into a hug so that his forehead is resting on her shoulder. “You’re someone a lot of people care about, Barry. You’re a kind and good man, and you make our lives richer by just being there, please don’t underestimate how valuable that is. It doesn’t matter whether you’ve money or not. Money can’t buy character, and having someone like you as a friend is worth much more than anything with a price tag on it.”

Mary rubs his back lightly, soothingly, as she speaks, and Barry is reminded how lucky he really is as he listens to her.

He swallows, eyes still shut tightly, and whispers. “Th-thank y-you.”

Chapter End Notes

Barry does appear pretty down in the last part of this chapter, and my beta pointed out to me that it could be hard to grasp why he has such troubles dealing with his dependency on his friends’ kindness at times. It isn’t exactly because Barry is an especially proud person – though he would prefer to be able to provide for himself – but due to his experiences during his childhood and youth.

The people who took care of him (if you can call it that) after his parents vanished were not the nicest folks, and they generally didn’t want him around and let him know so. He was told a lot that he is a burden and a freeloader, and that he has to be ashamed that he is living by ‘leaching off’ of them. He never forgot that, and it is something that still haunts him to this day, even though he is a grown up and really does know better. Knowing and believing don’t always come hand in hand, though.

I only wrote a couple of lines in this one regarding Barry’s and Len’s relationship, but I really enjoyed them. It is nice to see that they actually start to display their feelings towards each other in a more open way even if it is just by simple looks. This doesn’t mean that Len isn’t still carrying a chip on his shoulder around with himself, but they are getting there… slloooowly.

Jay’s invitation is something I alluded to some time ago, and we’re finally getting there with the next chapter. I won’t lie, I’ve been looking forward to this for a while now. It shows Barry interact with people he considered his friends and family once and maybe will start to do so again in future. We also get to meet Joan, and see Bart again (yay!), both characters I love dearly in the comics. :)

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, and as always thanks to all of you who were kind enough to leave me feedback so far. <3
Of Lingering Fears and Broken Trust

Chapter Summary

Barry joins Max and Bart for the preteen's birthday dinner at the Garricks’ home.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my wonderful friend Katzerover. Thank you sweetheart! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A knocking at the door cuts through the otherwise tense silence that fills the living room. It causes Barry to freeze momentarily.

For a second, Barry is certain that he is going to be sick; his hand tightens around the cup of tea he made a moment ago, as he looks over to the entrance of his apartment, not moving from his spot at the kitchen table.

Barry has been sitting there for about half an hour, since he finished getting ready for Bart’s birthday dinner, and the apprehension that followed him around for the last couple of days, suddenly intensifies tenfold.

His eyes turn to the clock above the entrance to his living room, which shows it is half past eleven and makes it pretty certain the person in front of his door has to be Max, who is exactly on time.

Something that is likewise surprising and not.

Barry knew Max would likely be punctual should he turn up, but he was uncertain whether this would really be the case or not.

It is still hard for Barry to comprehend he is invited to Bart’s birthday dinner in the first place, despite Max passing by at work a couple days ago to fix a time on which he would pass by his apartment to pick him up.

Barry rubs his clammy palms on his pants and gets up, but pauses a second when the sensation of light-headedness nearly becomes overwhelming.

Another knock follows.

“Grandpa?” Bart’s muffled voice reaches through the entrance door of Barry’s apartment, halting him once more in surprise. This feeling is accompanied with this strange but by now familiar notion of disbelief.

Bart being here should not catch him this off-guard, as he knew that the kid would likely join Max in the car to get here…
Even so, the notion that Max would let Bart follow along up here to fetch him is alarming, something that makes him feel nervous and uneasy at the same time...

Shaking the stupor off, Barry reaches for the bag with the present he got Bart and makes his way over to the door. All the while his legs feel like they would give out under him any second, and he tries to tell himself to stop being so damn apprehensive. If Max had really a problem with Barry being around Bart, he would certainly not have agreed to any of this in the first place.

Barry grabs his coat, and stops in front of the door, taking a deep breath to steady himself before he opens it.

Both Max and Bart are standing outside in the dingy floor, and the surreality of the whole situation hits Barry once more, making it difficult for him to say or react any other way to them.

Which doesn’t turn out to be necessary anyway, because Bart is suddenly on him, seemingly intend on squeezing the life out of him.

“Grandpa!” The young boy sounds utterly excited to see him, and Barry can just stand there petrified as the kid hugs him. Max is right there, and this could get him into so much trouble-

“Bart,” the other man chides Bart in an exasperated tone but meets Barry’s eyes with an amused look that quickly wanes and is replaced by a concerned one when he notices his expression.

“It’s so good to see you again,” Bart tells him, ignoring his guardian and utterly missing how tensed up Barry actually is. Thus, the boy keeps hugging him for another long moment and beams up at him when he pulls back. “And you’re coming to my birthday party! How neat is that!?”

Barry is able to get enough control over his face back that he is able to give the young boy a smile he hopes doesn’t look too forced.

“Y-y-yes,” he croaks but shoots Max a haunted look.

This shouldn’t scare him this much, Barry knows that. He didn’t do anything, he didn’t initiate the contact, but…

Barry swallows and averts his eyes, not able to meet Max’ now grim expression for longer than a couple of seconds.

“Is that for me!?” Bart asks delighted, and it takes Barry a second to realizes that he is talking about the bag with the present in his hand.

“Bart, no presents before the dinner,” Max reminds the kid sternly but doesn’t avert his eyes from Barry, a frown still in place. When he speaks, he doesn’t sound harsh or accusing, though. “Hello, Barry, it’s good to see you again.”

A strained smile appears on Barry’s face, and he can’t help but questions the honesty of this statement. Though, even if Max is only polite, he still can appreciate it. In the very least, it sets his nerves a bit at ease.

“Joan’s making burgers!” Bart blurts out, still oblivious to the awkward tension between both grown-ups, and starts to bob up and down on the balls of his feet, visibly excited. “And we’re going to have cake and ice-cream!”

Barry chuckles, both amused and endeared by the kid’s behavior.
“Th-that’s g-great,” he agrees, causing Bart to beam up at him once again. Then, the boys gaze seems to drift past him, and suddenly he is gone.

Barry’s heart lurches up his throat, both because he didn’t expect Bart to display his speed this openly in a public place, and because he already knows where he went to.

“Bart!” Max sounds angry now but gives Barry an apologetic look. Then, he tells the teen to come back at once.

The notion that Bart could see his crappy apartment ashamed Barry. This is what he wanted to avoid to begin with…

“I’m just looking around,” Bart protests from his living room with a confused and annoyed frown. “I’m not touching anything.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Max tells him sternly. “You can’t just invade another person’s home without asking.”

“But it’s grandpa’s-”

“You will come back out of there this instant,” Max cuts him off, and Bart’s face falls for a second before he crosses his arms sullenly but does as he is told.

“I’m was just looking…” Bart repeats morosely but turns to Barry with an uncertain look. “I really didn’t touch anything.”

“Bart.” Max sighs. He sounds more exasperated than really angry as he proceeds, though. “You cannot simply run off like this, we’ve talked about this. And you can’t just storm into someone’s home without asking for permission fist. Even if it’s your grandfather’s.”

It is still an odd experience to be called someone’s grandfather, especially by the other man. Barry has grown somewhat accustomed for Bart to do so by now, but hearing Max using this term for him is different.

Time travelling is something he’s never going to get used to…

“I was just curious,” Bart points out in a subdued tone and frowns down at the ground in front of his feet. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alr-right,” Barry tells him and meets his eyes with a small but fond smile. “B-but M-Max is r-right. Th-the n-next t-time y-you w-want t-to s-see s-someone’s h-home, y-you’ve t-to ask f-first, ok-kay?”

“Sure!” Bart agrees readily, clearly relieved that Barry isn’t angry at him.

They proceed down to Max’ car after Barry locked his apartment, and while the uneasy nervousness keeps sticking to him, it decreases a bit in its intensity when he realizes how honestly happy Bart seems about having him there.

The drive also turns out to be much less of an awkward situation than Barry feared it would be as Bart keeps telling him all about the presents he got for his birthday so far. He listens attentively, and the child seems to enjoy all the attention he gets from him which in turn is a really nice experience for him.

The traffic is moderate today, a bit busy for a late Sunday afternoon but not badly so, and the drive to
the Garrick’s home takes hardly more than twenty minutes, which turns out to be a good thing, as Bart seems to become stir-crazy towards the end and starts to fidget enough that Barry is certain it has to be physically painful for the kid to keep still any longer.

It is quite the opposite for him. If Barry could, he would have prolonged the drive. The notion of meeting Joan again is an odd mixture of hopeful and upsetting as he misses the older woman who was never anything but kind to him, and he was lucky enough to never experience her reaction to his alleged crimes. A part of him would prefer to keep it that way. He doesn’t want to see accusation or disgust in her eyes when they finally meet again, and while he tries to convince himself that Jay wouldn’t have invited him in the first place if Joan had been against it, the voice of doubt is still strong in his own mind.

Like Jay, Joan was someone he held very dear… still does, even with everything that happened, and it is outright upsetting to think that she could see him as someone who is able to commit these horrible crimes.

He still remembers how tense his last visit to the old couple was just a few days prior to Iris’ death… Jay seemed oddly distant, nearly harsh, and Joan just looked saddened…

Barry never asked Jay what this was about, whether the other man and the rest of the heroes had some suspicion about him back then already, or whether it was for another reason.

The months that lead up to Iris’ death and his imprisonment are a time he doesn’t like to think back to, and even when he does, it is oddly difficult for him to remember. There are mostly bits and pieces, moments of confrontations, of hostility towards him, of alienation, and remembering it only hurts.

“Barry?”

Barry jumps slightly, and he turns to Max, who is watching him once again with a concerned frown. Before the other man can open his mouth to proceed, Bart sticks his head between the front seats of the car and grins at Barry widely.

“We’re here!” the boy tells him excitedly, and Barry feels his stomach drop when he turns to the window and realizes that they’ve indeed arrived in front of the Garricks’ home.

A feeling of nostalgia overcomes him when he sees the familiar looking house again, and he notices that it has hardly changed since he visited the last time.

Barry can make out that it has a new paint job, that the rose bushes on the front lawn were replaced by tulips, and that the walkway leading up to the entrance has also been renewed some time ago, but even so it still looks pretty much the same to him.

The car door behind him is opened, and he hears Bart’s excited voice. “Come, grandpa! I’m sure Joan has the burgers already done by now!”

The boy runs up halfway to the entrance door, stops, and turns around to them to tells them again to hurry up.

Even despite the apprehension that settled over him, Barry can’t help but smile, as he watches Bart’s excited behavior.

“It means a lot to him that you’re coming.” Barry turns back to Max in surprise, who meets his look with a calm and earnest expression. “He keeps asking about you.”
A flash of panic runs through his body, and Barry freezes up in response to these words. The car suddenly seems much too small, stuffy, like a cage, and the other man’s presence becomes nearly oppressive, frighteningly so.

“I-I’m s-sorry,” he utters, not sure what else to offer. He knows that Bart seem to be fond of him, probably partly due to them being related in this other reality of his, and partly due to some wrongly placed hero worshipping, and he is also very much aware of how suspicious it has to look to the others-

“I’m not accusing you of anything.” Max’s voice cuts through the mess of fear and dread that is settling over him, and when Barry focuses back on the other man, he notices the concern in his eyes.

Concern and grimness.

“I just want to thank you for coming,” Max goes on. “Bart has been really looking forward to seeing you today.”

Barry shifts nervously and averts his gaze to his lap. He feels very vulnerable all of a sudden, and while he wants to get out of the car, he can’t bring himself to move.

A tense silence follows, and-

“Hey!” Barry flinches when Bart suddenly appears seemingly out of nowhere next to him, frowning at them through the side window of the car. “What is keeping you so long? We’re going to have burgers!” He says the last part with such emphasis that Barry burst out chuckling, despite how tense and slightly frightened he feels. It sounds too loud and nervous, causing his cheeks to grow hot, and he doesn’t glance back to Max as he finally undoes his belt or when he gets out of the car.

He just needs some fresh air, and more space around himself. can’t bring

“S-sorry f-for l-letting y-you w-wait,” he tells Bart, who is eying him now a bit worriedly as he seems to have picked up that something is awry. Barry doesn’t give Bart the opportunity to asks him about it, though, as he quickly proceeds. “Y-you th-think J-Joan m-made f-fries t-to th-the b-burgers?”

Bart’s face lightens up again at that, and he grins excitedly. “Of course, loads and loads of them! She knows I love her fries! And we also have onion rings! And Mozzarella sticks!”

“R-really?” Barry asks, feeling already a bit better, even though he still can’t look back to Max. “Y-you l-like M-Mozzarella s-sticks?”

“Uhu.” Bart nods in agreement and starts to usher Barry towards the door while going on about how Joan’s Mozzarella sticks are even better than her fries.

The apprehension that settles into the pit of his stomach the closer the come the door makes Barry want to balk, to turn around and just leave before he could get in trouble again.

This is a stupid idea, what is he doing?

They think he is a horrendous person, a murderer, a rapist, and even if this should start out alright, Barry knows himself, he knows his life, and he knows that this only would end up with him feeling miserable at best, or back in prison at worst.

The idea of having to go back to Iron Heights nearly makes him sick, and this time he does stop, but he realizes just a second later that they’ve already arrived in front of the entrance as it is.
Bart rings the bell and shoots him a grin that quickly dies away when the kid seems to pick up on his expression.

Barry forces a smile onto his lips, unwilling to worry Bart even though he feels trapped, like a mouse in a corner with the only way out blocked by a cat.

The door opens a moment later, and Jay appears in front of them. The warm expression on the older man’s face doesn’t wane, but he too seems to immediately pick up on Barry’s apprehension as he studies him for a second. Then, he turns to Bart and smiles. “You’re just on time, Joan just finished up.”

The boy’s expression briefly turns excited again, then he recalls that Barry doesn’t seem to feel alright as he looks back to him in concern. “Are you okay, grandpa?”

“Y-yes,” Barry lies, giving Bart a warm smile and hopes it doesn’t look too fake. “J-just a l-little b-bit h-hungry.”

That seems the right thing to say as the worry leaves Bart’s face again and is replaced by an understanding expression instead. “I know what you mean,” the kid tells him empathetically.

“Maybe you want to go inside and see whether Joan lets you have one of the Mozzarella sticks as a snack before the meal starts?” Max suggests as he joins them, and it is really no surprise to anybody when Bart looks quite excited by that suggestion and quickly proceeds to do just that.

Jay lets the boy pass with a fond expression that quickly morphs into a concerned one, once he turns back to Barry.

“Hello, Barry,” he greets him and steps back to let Max and him in.

“H-hello,” Barry replies, voice craggy and faint, making him flush when he realizes how silly and nervous he sounds. He turns his attention to his surrounding instead of meeting Jay’s gaze, and feels another pang in his chest when he notices once again how familiar everything around him looks.

There are changes of course, after a decade it is to be expected, but even so Barry feels nearly smothered by the nostalgia that overcomes him once more as he studies the entrance area around them.

He has been here so many times in the past, and he is flooded by memories of those visits, of being invited over to dinner with Iris and Wally, or just passing by on a whim for coffee and a chat…

It hits him out of nowhere how much he missed this, which is stupid, because it is just a house, but he knows that this isn’t really true. With Jay’s and Joan’s home he connects some of the nicest memories he has, of a time during which he was happy.

His fingers feel a bit numb as he undoes his coat, and he doesn’t dare to look back to the other men whose eyes he can still feel on himself.

“I’m glad you were able to make it.” Jay sounds sincerely as he says this.

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees, and shoots him a brief look, shifting nervously with his coat now in his hands. “Th-thanks f-for h-having m-me.”

It is probably one of the most awkward moments they’ve ever had between them, and Barry has no idea how he’ll be able to eat just a bite with how anxious he is right now.
Then, he hears someone appear at the doorway that leads from the entrance area to a small hallway, and his heart nearly leaps up his throat as he knows who it is without needing to look.

“Barry?” Joan asks, and Barry feels ridiculously apprehensive as he turns to the older woman who meets his eyes warmly. It catches him off-guard how honestly pleased she seems about seeing him, and he watches her with a dumbfounded and wary expression as she steps closer to him, stopping just an arm’s length away.

There, she seems suddenly uncertain how to proceed, and the warmth in her eyes is joined by concern, probably because of how tensed up and pale he looks.

“Hello, Barry,” she finally says again, and while she gives him another kind smile, a rather doleful expression settles over her face. “It is good to see you.”

His throat suddenly feels raw and too tight, and Barry just inclines his head in agreement as he tries to keep his emotions in check. Joan sounded like she really means it, and it eases some of the worry in his chest away, but replaces it with confusion at the same time.

She looks just like a decade ago, hardly any older than sixty, even though she is in her mid-eighties by now. Something she can thank the speed force for undoubtedly, as prolonged life is an additional bonus to any spouse of a speedster… but it is nearly uncanny right now. To Barry, it seems like no time has passed since the last time he saw her, certainly not like a decade lays between their last meeting and now.

Another pair of footsteps reaches them from the hallway, and Bart appears at the doorway a second later, munching away on a Mozzarella stick while two more are in his other hand.

“You guys are coming?” he asks a bit exasperated. “I’m starving.”

Barry smiles at that, both amused about the kid’s antics and relieved that the stifling uneasiness that settled over them seems to dissipate once again, making it easier for him to breathe.

“You certainly look like it,” Max replies drily, which causes Joan to chuckle even though she then assures Bart that they would eat soon. When she turns back to Barry, her eyes seem to brim with warmth one more even though some of the sadness still lingers in them.

“I hope you brought an appetite with you,” she tells him. “Bart was quite insisting in what he wanted to have for dinner, and you can imagine what the meal wish-list of a growing speedster looks like.”

“Y-yeah,” he agrees with a chuckle and tries not to show how confused he still is by her welcoming demeanor towards him.

Jay takes his coat, and Barry tenses up again. He doesn’t protest, though, and instead lets him as he chooses to follow Joan to the dining room.

The dining table is already set and clearly new, as are the set of chairs, but he notices that the rest of the room looks pretty much the same as before when he lets his gaze briefly move around.

“Take a seat, Barry, and feel free to grab whatever you want to drink,” Joan tells him kindly and turns to her husband. “Jay, could you help me with the food.”

“Of course, dear,” Jay agrees readily, and Joan and he are gone just a moment later, leaving Max, Barry, and Bart behind.

“Come,” Bart says and grabs his hand. Barry freezes again for another second while the boy tries to
get him to move along. “I’ll show you where to sit.”

Barry’s eyes dart over to where Max stands, and he suddenly feels like a deer in headlights.

To his relief, Max doesn’t seem alarmed or angry but explains calmly. “Bart insisted on you being sat next to him—”

“It’s my birthday dinner,” Bart cuts him off, frowning at his guardian but then turns to Barry with pleading eyes. “You want to sit next to me, right, grandpa?”

Barry swallows nervously, still very much aware of Bart’s hand holding his, and darts another brief, apprehensive look over to Max, trying to judge his reaction as he nods. “S-sure.”

“Ha!” The boy grins in triumph and turns back to Max, smirking. “You see, I told you he wants to sit next to me.”

That said, Bart proceeds to lead him to the table, showing him his seat, and takes his own next to him, beaming once again as if it was the greatest thing ever to have Barry around.

It is quite touching, and Barry returns the kid’s smile with one of his own, one that is much more honest and comes much easier to him this time.

“You want coke?” Bart asks him as he fills his glass with the soda he just grabbed.

“Y-yes.”

“What’s your favorite soda?” the kid asks curiously as he proceed to fill Barry’s glass next.

Barry smiles, being reminded of the time Bart passed by at his work which was also the first time they really had any possibility to get to know each other a little bit.

He considers the question for a second and replies. “R-root beer.”

“Really?” Bart seems surprised. Then he grins. “I like root beer too!” He looks to Max for validation.

“Right, Max?”

The older speedster nods, obviously amused by his charge’s behavior. “Indeed.”

“What about Mountain Dew?” Bart wants to know next, all his attention back on Barry.

“I-it’s a b-bit t-too s-sweet f-for m-my t-taste.”

“Really?” The kid eyes him like he just told him that the moon is made of cheese. “But it’s Mountain Dew…”

“I t-take it, y-you l-l-like it?” he inquires amused and isn’t in the least bit surprised when Bart agrees immediately. “Of course, it’s Mountain Dew.”

Well, it seems that Barry now knows his grandson’s favorite soda as well.

It doesn’t take long for Jay and Joan to return with the burgers and side dishes, and as the former returns to the kitchen once more to grab the rest, it suddenly occurs to Barry, that the older man could have used his speed force to do so. In all actuality, Jay could have gotten all the food out in the blink of an eye if he wanted to, it is something he always tended to do when Barry, Iris, and Wally were over for dinner. Joan cooked and Jay set the table and did the rest.
The older speedster never shied away from using his powers around them…

Barry is no longer a speedster, though. He is no longer family… or even just a friend.

It is not a realization, not something he didn’t already know, but it still hurts, and he can fault nobody but himself for it, because he should really know better by now.

… and maybe he is just thinking too much into it. Maybe Jay just preferred to help Joan without his speed today. The world is not rotating around him, after all.

Barry notices Joan’s look, then. The sombre expression that overcame her face as she watches him, and he is pretty sure that she probably picked up on his mood. She has always been really good at that. Jay found an incredibly strong and kind wife in her.

“Look at all that food!” Bart awed voice causes Barry to shift his attention to him, and he notices amused that the boy actually started to vibrate slightly, obviously excited by the prospect of being able to eat soon.

When he turns back to the table, he has to agree that the amount of food is quite impressive, but he still remembers all too well how much speedster can eat, especially growing ones. Still, the burgers turned out big enough that he is certain he won’t be able to eat even one, let alone together with any of the numerous side dishes that come along with them.

“It looks delicious, Joan,” Max says after Joan and Jay took their seat as well.

“Thank you,” she tells him with a pleased smile and gives her husband a fond look. “Jay did help me quite a lot, though, so half of your praise belongs to him.”

“I just peeled the potatoes and cut the onions,” Jay points out with a chuckle and reaches for his wife’s hand, giving it a brief squeeze. “You outdid yourself once again, my dear.”

“It is Bart’s birthday,” Joan points out and turns to the young boy in question with a warm look. “And you only get twelve once, isn’t that true, Bart?”

“Right,” the kid agrees readily, grinning from ear to ear. “And I’m also super sure that it will taste awesome!”

Barry watches them quietly, feeling a bit out of place, but is glad to see that Bart is clearly happy and enjoys to be here. He was a bit worried about the boy when Jay told him about the troubles he has with Wally, but it seems that he is doing okay all in all.

They start their meal, and, for once, Bart isn’t chided for eating to quickly as it is his birthday dinner. Even so, he begins to slow down after what must have been his fifth burger, and takes the time to tell Joan how great the food is.

Barry has to agree, it tastes wonderful, and he can’t believe that he really forgot how good Joan’s cooking is. He eats slowly, more nibbling than anything else because his stomach is still a bit queasy due to his nerves, but even so he can savor the flavor.

To his relief, they don’t seem to expect him to partake in the conversation after both Jay and Joan tried to talk to him a bit and it became obvious how rather ill at ease this makes him to feel. Thus, he ends up mostly listening to them, and against his worries, he is able to relax somewhat after a while.

He is currently nibbling on another fry when Bart, who just told Joan about what the console game is about he wants for his his birthday, glances towards his direction and shifts his whole attention to
“You don’t like the burger?” It isn’t lost on Barry how the boy eyes his still hardly touched plate critically. To him it probably looks like he doesn’t enjoy the food all that much.

“I do,” he assures him. “It’s really good.”

His words don’t seem to convince Bart as the boy keeps eying his plate with a frown. He then glances up to him again, looking uncertain before he turns with a help seeking look to Max, as if to ask for his guardian’s aid.

The others’ attentions are on him again, and Barry can feel their eyes on himself, triggering him to tense up in response.

“You can have something else if you don’t like it,” Joan tells him kindly, and he glances at her with an unhappy frown. He averts his gaze again, shaking his head. “No, it’s really not necessary.”

It probably isn’t lost on her that he lost quite some weight since the last time they’ve seen each other, and Barry can’t help it but feels rather self-conscious all of a sudden.

An uneasy silence settles between them, and, just like that, his appetite is utterly gone. It is frustrating, he didn’t eat anything for lunch today so he would be able to each more, because he knows he would stick out like a sour thumb next to the three speedsters, even with Joan around…

“It’s okay, grandpa,” Bart assures him out of the blue. Barry looks over to the child, who is studying him with a concerned look. “There are enough burgers that you can take some home with you, if you aren’t hungry now.” Bart assures him before he then turns to Joan. “Right?”

“Of course,” the older woman agrees with an affectionate smile. She turns to Barry, her expression gentle as she points out. “You don’t have to feel like you’ve to eat if you’re not hungry, Barry. I can get you a cup of tea instead if you want.”

“N-no,” he declines quickly and wonders whether he is looking as sick as he feels. He doesn’t want to cause Joan or anybody present any extra trouble because of his easily upset stomach. “I-I’m good.”

“Do you want paprika instead?” Bart asks and Barry is not the only one who gives the boy a surprised look at that.

“He likes paprika,” Bart explains and clearly tries not to make a disgusted face as he does so which amuses Barry despite the discomfort he is feeling right then.

“Really?” Joan asks, both amused and honestly curious.

“Yes,” Bart agrees gravely, as if this was a serious matter to discuss. “And carrots. He traded them against a bag of peanut butter cookies when I…” There the kid hesitates and suddenly looks a bit ill at ease, guilty nearly, as he glances to Max. “Uhhh… when I visited him.”

“He bought you a bag of peanut butter cookies?” Max aches an eyebrow at that, and Barry feels a familiar fear rise in him, suddenly worried that the older man could misunderstand it and think…

Max doesn’t look concerned, though, nor upset.

“Yes,” Bart agrees. “So that I’d eat the vegies-” At that the boy shudders visibly in a display of open
disgust. “You packed me.” The disgust is replaced by a reproachful look he aims at his guardian, as he seems to still not be any happier about the greens he got for lunch back then.

It surprises Barry a bit that Max didn’t know about this, but, then again, he doubts that the older man really asked about that kind of stuff after he returned home with the boy.

“So,” Joan starts, laughter in her eyes. “He got you cookies for eating your vegetables, but he was nice enough to still eat the paprika and carrots for you?”

“No,” Bart argues with a frown. “The carrots were his and…” A slightly guilty expression comes over the boy’s face as he briefly glances at Barry. “Well, he said he does like paprika…”

“That was very kind of him, wasn’t it?” Joan asks, shooting Barry an amused look.

“He’s *awesome*,” Bart agrees wholeheartedly, catching Barry off-guard by how heartfelt he sounds.

His surprise is quickly replaced by another bout of apprehension as he glances at the others. He doubts that anybody would like for the kid to see him in such a light, considering what they think he is.

“I shared the cookies with him, though,” Bart adds, clearly unaware of Barry’s worries as he shoots him a wide grin. “He likes peanut butter as well!”

“Yes,” Joan agrees, and it isn’t lost on Barry that her smile looks a bit somberly now.

“We should have gotten peanut butter cookies as well,” Bart laments and takes another bite of what is his seventh burger as he turns to Barry. “Maybe you’d like them better than the burgers?”

Barry gives him a small smile, feeling somewhat unsettled by the mood and how the hostility he expected is utterly lacking from this dinner. “C-cookies aren’t s-someth-thing y-you sh-should e-eat as a m-main d-dish,” he points out rather lamely, not really sure what else to say, and picks up one of his fries. “A-and I l-like th-the f-f-food.”

“Maybe we could make peanut butter cookie burgers the next time?” Bart suggests, and Barry chuckles, both amused and a bit disgusted by the idea. He gives Bart a fond look. “M-maybe.”

The conversation turns back to other topics, mostly related to some of Bart’s most favorite video games, and the boy proceeds to tell him all about them, for which Barry is grateful, as it turns the others’ attention away from him again. At least for the most part.

Barry is able to eat more than half of his burger and fries despite how queasy his stomach feels, and he is glad that nobody comments on it when they are finally done with the food and he is the only one who wasn’t able to finish his plate.

Max helps Jay and Joan to clean the table, while Barry’s offer to help is declined much to Bart’s delight as the kid uses the opportunity to tell him more about the latest racer game he seems to be in love with judging by how he is gushing over it.

It makes Barry nervous when he notices that the others briefly leave him alone with Bart, and he feels the urge to get up and get some additional distance between himself and the boy when he realizes how close they actually are sitting.

Jay, who is the first to return with a plate of cupcakes, doesn’t seem worried, though, and doesn’t comment on how anxious and guilty Barry has to be looking right then.
Thankfully, Bart is oblivious to any of this, and instead focuses his attention on the sweets, even though he isn’t allowed to grab one just yet.

“You want coffee?” Jay asks Barry, sounding calm and friendly. “Or tea?”

“T-t-tea,” Barry stammers, sliding a bit away from Bart, unable to meet the other man’s eyes.

To his relief, Max returns to the dining room before Jay leaves it once more, a plate with a number of nicely decorated iced cookies and something that looks like marshmallow squares with little green, squared faces on them in hand. At the sight of the last, funny looking treat, Bart actually begins cheer in delight.

Jay and Joan rejoin them just a minute later again, she’s holding a tray with drinks and him one with a really delicious looking layered chocolate cake with white frosting on top.

Bart is fidgeting next to Barry, clearly excited about the prospect of eating all these sweets, and gives him a huge grin when he notices his look. “This is going to taste awesome!”

Barry smiles and agrees, not doubting the truth of that statement.

“First, though,” the kid says nearly reverently when the cake and drinks are put down. “Presents.”

“Who said anything about anymore presents?” Max asks with a fake frown. “Isn’t all that food enough for you?”

“Indeed,” Jay agrees, hardly able keep his face straight as Bart shoots them an alarmed look. “I think the lovely meal is present enough—”

“Nooo!” Bart seems honestly indignant for a second and turns to Joan with a pleading look. “Tell them that that’s not true! You have to get food and presents on your birthday! That’s a rule! Tim and the others told me so!”

“Really?” Max studies the young speedster with feign thoughtfulness. “I’ve never heard of that rule.”

Bart eyes him suspiciously and looks over to Jay to do the same. Then, he turns to Barry with a frown and sullenly crosses his arms in front of his chest as he grumbles. “They always make fun of me.”

Both Max and Jay laugh at that while Joan chuckles, and also Barry can’t stop an amused smile from spreading over his lips.

“You two are supposed to be a role model for Bart,” Joan chides Jay and Max good-naturedly.

“Yes,” Bart agrees quickly, glaring daggers at the two older speedster. “You’re not supposed to be mean to me, especially when it’s my birthday party.”

“Now, now, Bart,” Jay chuckles. “We didn’t mean to be mean.”

“And I think you’ll forgive us after you’ve gotten your presents,” Max adds, and, as if on a cue, Bart starts to fidget in excitement once again.

“Presents!” the boy cheers, and grins widely at as he begins to bob on the chair in anticipation.

It is amusing to see such a small bundle of energy, and Barry is briefly reminded of Wally and how similar the otherwise shy boy behaved when it was his birthday…
The memory is pushed back into the depth of his mind, and Barry forces himself to keep his attention on Bart instead. He tries not to notice how a slight pain blooms in his chest when he watches the kid now, or how a familiar guilt nestles back into his guts.

They sing Bart *Happy Birthday*, the candles on the cake lit up and waiting for the boy to blow them out, before he gets his presents, and Barry doesn’t miss how honestly awed and elated the boy seems about this, enough so that he wonders whether they ever celebrated his birthday in the time he came from.

It is not the first time that Barry wondered about Bart’s upbringing as it is hard for him to understand how anybody could let their child travel back in time alone. He doesn’t really know anything about the kid’s past and the circumstances under which he came here, and he never asked as his intention for it could easily be misunderstood.

Singing, contrary to talking, decreases his stammer quite a lot, but even so Barry keeps his voice down, and tries to concentrate on Bart’s excitement as the kid waits to be allowed to blow out the candles so that he could finally receive his gifts.

Barry’s present for Bart, along with the other ones, is resting at the end of the table next to him and Max who is sitting across from him. There are two big boxes that are neatly wrapped in colorful birthday paper, along with three smaller ones, of which one is from him.

Bart beams as he gets an applause for blowing out all the candles at once and happily accepts the first present that is handed to him by Max.

It is one of the big ones, and Bart hardly got a grip on it when the paper is already gone and he makes an excited noise as he holds a box in his hands that show one of these steering wheels that are used for driving games.

“Thank you, Max!” Bart is clearly delighted over the present, and Max seems quite pleased with the reaction.

The next one is from Jay and Joan, the second big present, and Bart seems just as excited about this one as he was with Max’.

It is a chemistry set for kids, and Barry feels immensely relieved when the boy seems just a taken by it as he was by the racing wheel. Barry got him something similar in kind, and his worry that Bart could not like it ceases a bit, even though his present was much cheaper than the chemistry set.

The next two smaller presents contain a racing game from Max that nicely goes along with the steering wheel he got, and an animated adventure movie Jay and Joan got him, which once again is met with much appreciation by the preteen.

Then, it is Barry’s turn, he feels a familiar mix of nervousness and embarrassment rise in him as he picks up the present he got for Bart.

“I-it’s r-really n-not m-much,” he tells the kid and hopes he wouldn’t be disappointed by the gift or, at least, not too disappointed.

Bart accepts the wrapped gift with shining eyes, clearly excited about it without even having unwrapped it yet, and Barry’s fondness for the kid only grow as he watches in surprise how he unwraps the gift with much more care than he did with the other ones.

Again, guilt over not having been able to get him anything better hits Barry, and he regrets not having asked Len or Eddy for money so that he could have gotten the kid something really nice
instead of the chemistry book for children he finally settled on.

“I-I c-can g-get y-you s-someth-thing e-els-se i-if y-you d-don’t l-like it,” he offers quickly, but to his surprise, Bart grins like crazy when he finally finished unwrapping his gift.

“How cool! Thanks grandpa!” The boy exclaims before he is suddenly hugging Barry with enough vigor that he seems hellbent on breaking his ribs. “I love it!”

The relief that his present is well-received is mostly drowned by the panic about his current position, and Barry shoots Jay and Max a slightly horrified look. He knows they’ve seen that he didn’t initiate the contact, but he knows that it doesn’t matter if his parole officer should learn of it.

Thankfully, Bart pulls back just a moment later, still visibly excited. “I love chemistry! I’m going to be a criminal investigator like you one day!”

This piece of information catches Barry quite off-guard, and he isn’t sure how to respond. He doubts it would be good for the kid to try and be anything like him, and it doesn’t sit well with him that he would want to do so in the first place.

“Jay promised me to do some experiments with me,” Bart goes on happily and turns to the man in question, showing him the book he just got. “Now we can do even more!”

“That’s great,” Jay agrees, but Barry doesn’t miss how tight his expression seems. His stomach sinks in response as he worries that the older man is upset with him for letting Bart this close to him.

“What if Barry join us?” Bart inquires and gives Jay a pleading look. “I’m sure he’d like it, he is super smart as well, and he could help us.”

“B-Bart,” Barry starts, feeling increasingly alarmed but unsure how to tell the boy that he can’t do so, and that Jay would certainly be less than thrilled to have him around to do some chemistry experiments.

“Bart,” Joan speaks up, her tone gentle. “We can talk about this later, okay, dear?”

Bart falls quiet then, and for a second he seems upset, like he is about to protest, but instead he turns his look to the book he is still holding in his hands and nods with an unhappy and sullen expression. Barry is pretty sure he is missing something there, and when he glances over to the other grownups, he notices that neither of them look particularly happy either.

It occurs to him then, judging by how highly the young boy seems to think of him, that this was probably not the first time that he asked about Barry to join them for some activity.

The notion is unexpectedly warming but also painful at the same time, and he doesn’t feel like cake anymore, or like being here in the first place.

He is an intruder, no matter how welcoming Jay and the others try to be, he will always be just that. He has no place here anymore. He didn’t have for nearly a decade now…

“I think it’s time for the cake,” Joan says, and Barry is surprised when Bart only mumbles his agreement, a stark contrast to his earlier excitement.

“Y-you l-like ch-chocol-late c-cake?” he asks, hoping to coax Bart’s good mood back out.

Bart nods somewhat reluctantly, eyes still on the book Barry got him and he hasn’t put away so far.
“M-me t-too.” He smiles when Bart glances at him. “B-but c-can y-you g-guess wh-what m-my f-
favorite c-cake is?”

Bart seems to consider this for a moment before his expression lightens, and he grins. “Paprika cake?”

Barry snorts and makes a face. “R-really? Y-you b-blow m-my l-like l-for p-paprika w-way out of p-
prop-portions.”

The boy snickers. “You said you like paprika.”

“Y-yes, b-but n-not on m-my c-cake,” Barry replies drily which causes Bart to laugh outright. “Or m-maybe I sh-should ask J-Joan t-to m-make y-you a p-paprik-ka c-cake f-for y-your n-next b-
birthday, it s-sounds h-healthy-”

“No way!” the boy protests loudly but is still grinning and turns to Joan. “Don’t listen to him ever
about my birthday cakes, okay?”

“I would never,” Joan agrees, laughter in her eyes, and she shoots Barry a grateful look that catches
him by surprise.

“There are vegetable cakes,” Max joins in thoughtfully. “I’ve seen some on Pinterest. I think the
broccoli one was the nicest-”

“No! No vegetable cakes! That’s just…” Bart makes a face as if he was tasting something
particularly nasty and shudders. “Just no.”

“You started it,” Jay points out, audibly amused, and smiles when Bart huffs in frustration in
response.

“There will never be a vegetable cake on my birthday,” the boy declares firmly, glaring at all of them
menacingly. “Never.”

“Right,” Max agrees easily. “Now that the ban of any vegetable cakes is established, what do you
think of having some of Joan’s chocolate cake instead?”

Bart likes this suggestion, and no five minutes later, they all have a piece of chocolate cake with
white frosting on their plates that turns out just as good as it looks.

Barry, who has thankfully been handed a smaller piece than the rest by Jay, is able to eat all of it
even though he feels uncomfortably stuffed after it and declines a second helping when Bart asks
him about it.

The mood turns much more relaxed again, and Barry even ends up taking part in the conversation for
a while when Jay and Bart start to talk about how chemistry can also be found in anything, even
something as mundane as cake.

It is after most of the desserts on the table vanished, which was a task that was mostly accomplished
by Bart alone, that Barry begins to get rather drowsy.

“Would you like to lay down for a bit in the guest room, Barry?” Joan asks out of the blue, startling
Barry slightly as he turns to her in surprise. It takes him a moment to really grasp what she is talking
about, and when he does a familiar unease replaces the comfortable drowsiness that settled over him.

“No, th-thanks,” he declines and gives a rather forced smile. “I’m g-good.”
Falling asleep anywhere else but inside his own four walls is something that is generally not really appealing to him, and the Rogues’ hideouts are about the only exception, and then really just when Len is around.

“I think it’s about time to leave, anyway,” Max speaks up, and meets his worried gaze with a smile as he inclines his head towards Bart. It is then that Barry noticed that Bart looks close to nodding off as well, probably due to all the food he just ingested.

Barry tries to offer to help Joan with clearing the table, wishing to repay her somehow for the good food and general kind attitude towards him, but she declines amused. “You don’t need to worry, Barry, with Jay around it won’t be any trouble at all for me.”

She has a point there, and feels a bit stupid then for bothering to offer in the first place, but she thanks him nonetheless.

Bart is as good as asleep on his feet when they finally leave the Garricks’ home, and only murmurs his goodbyes to the nice older couple before Max stirs him back towards the car. Barry stays behind a moment longer.

“Th-thank y-you,” he says to both Joan and Jay, and while he really means it, as it has been a nice afternoon and evening despite his initial worries, he still feels somewhat nervous. He has troubles meeting their eyes as he proceeds. “It w-was a l-lovely d-dinner.”

“Thank you for coming, Barry,” Joan replies, voice gentle and sad, and Barry suddenly feels the urge to just turn around and leave.

He hates the notion how much he hurt the people that were once a part of his life, no matter whether he did actually commit the crimes or not. In the end he is still be the reason for their pain.

“It was really nice to have you over again,” Joan goes on, and Barry presses his lips together tightly, eyes itching all of a sudden, as he nods.

This had been part of his everyday life once…

It hurts to realize all over again what he really lost back then. He utters another broken thanks and goodbye and turns around to swiftly makes his way over to where Max and Bart are already waiting for him.

The air inside the car is hardly warmer than outside in the early October night, and he shudders as he pulls the door close after himself.

Max studies him briefly after Barry put his belt on. Thankfully, he doesn’t say anything but starts the car instead, allowing Barry to keep his attention on the street in front of them.

The drive to his apartment passes by in silence other than for the faint radio music in the background as Bart dozes off shortly after they left.

Barry watches the streets of Keystone pass by, feeling mostly just tired, and he is grateful that Max leaves him be even though he can feel the other man’s gaze on him every once in a while.

The drive back to his apartment takes less time than before as the traffic is rather sparse at this hour on a Sunday, but Barry still feels bone tired when they finally arrive in front of his apartment building.

The interior lights turn on when Max turns off the car, and Barry gives him a faint, weary smile. “Th-
thanks f-for p-picking m-me up a-and…” He shrugs, not really sure what he wants to say. He mostly just wants to get inside and go to bed, and preferably sleep for the next month or so.

“Of course,” Max tells him, and there is this slight concern back to the way he watches him now that makes Barry feel somewhat uneasy again. “And thank you for agreeing to come by. It really meant a lot for Bart that you did.”

Barry’s eyes travel to the backseat where the boy is currently sleeping. “Y-yes… I… I’m g-glad I c-could sh-share t-today w-with h-him.” He turns to Max then and meets his gaze with an earnestly look. “Th-thank y-you f-for t-taking c-care of h-him.”

Max nods. “He is a good kid, and I’m glad to have him around.”

Barry smiles slightly, not doubting that Bart could be quite an enrichment to one’s life. He looks back to where the young boy hasn’t moved at all, which is nearly a bit uncanny, considering how he usually never seems able to really hold still. The fondness he feels for Bart is strong, warming, and he really wishes he could offer the kid more than just a visit every couple of months.

“C-can y-you t-tell h-him th-that I r-really enj-joyed t-talking t-to h-him t-today?” he asks quietly and turns back to Max.

“Of course,” Max agrees, and Barry thanks him in return with a small smile as he unbuckles and proceeds to get out of the car.

“Barry?”

Barry stops, and looks back to the other man. Max seems hesitant, indecisive about whether he should go on or not, but eventually he settles on a smile that is not much more convincing that Barry’s was before.

“Thanks again, and have a good night.”

Somewhat worried now, Barry only utters a quick response and proceeds in getting out of the car. He walks up the stairs to the entrance door of the building where he pauses again and turns around to watch how Max pulls back out and drives off.

He looks after the car for a while longer, till its taillights vanish around a corner far down the street, and even then he keeps standing there in the cool night air, watching nothing in particular.

He is left feeling tired and lost, but even so he doesn’t miss how the memory of the birthday party he was allowed to attend is like a warm, comforting blanket.

Barry closes his eyes for a brief moment and turns around to finally enter the building.

Chapter End Notes

Barry survived his visit at the Garricks’ home, and he didn’t end up worse off for it! Yay!

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, it was a blast to write, though I’m sure that, emotionally, it probably was a very mixed bag for Barry himself.
I’ve been really looking forward for a while now to introduce Joan in this story as she is Jay’s better half and also a very important person to Barry. I always loved the Garricks and their relationship in the comics, and what good people they are.

Bart is twelve now, nearly a teen, though, like in the comics, his age is a rather odd story. Barry’s observation about how Bart doesn’t seem very familiar to birthday parties has been a sharp one, and he was right. If you guys know about Bart’s initial story in the comics, you probably understand what it means. For you, who don’t know a lot about the character and his origins, he was born in the future, and suffered under hyper-accelerated metabolism, which led to him aging much more rapidly than a normal person. In all actuality, he is a little bit over four right now, but due to his rapid aging, he is closer to twelve. There is a difference in how things turned out here and in the comics in regard of when Bart was sent back and how he got rid of his metabolism problem (in the comics it was with Wally’s help), which we will discover later on. I though it’s maybe interesting to know, that the boy is quite younger than his peers, despite his looks, and that this is also the cause why he sometime doesn’t behave like other boys his apparent age.

... also, Bart loves Minecraft.

This dinner left Barry with a bunch of mixed feelings, and I really wanted to show how much the last ten years scarred him. He is in a constant state of paranoia around the people who were once his friends/family, and he wants to relax and enjoy the evening with them, but the fear of what could happen if he makes one wrong step is just omnipresent in his mind. It will take a long while for him to recover from this and be able to regain his trust for them, and while Jay and the others were aware of that before, it probably was still like a slap for them to see Barry act that wary and, at times, outright afraid around them.

The next chapter will have us visit another gallery! :D

Initially, the next two chapter were one but it got way, way too long, so I split it. I’m kind of annoyed about it, but I hope its flow doesn’t suffer for it. We also get a super-special special guest in the next one, and I’m silly excited about it. XD

Thanks again for all the lovely feedback you left me, I absolutely love to read your comments, they make my day so much brighter! <3

I’ll see you in two weeks!
At Gilbert’s Part I

Chapter Summary

Barry accompanies James to the opening of a new exhibition at Gilbert’s, one of the Twin’s classiest art gallery.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my wonderful friend Katzerover! :) Thank you for your great work, sweetie! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It sure is busy tonight,” James remarks. His words are a sudden interruption of the mellow song that is currently playing on the radio in the background and startle Barry slightly.

Their eyes meet when James glances over to him, and even though his tone was light, the concern with which his friend is studying him briefly before he turns his attention back to the street isn’t lost on him.

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees, shifting in his seat as he looks through his window, where they currently pass the very crowded looking Gilbert’s art gallery on their search for a parking spot.

It is late evening on the first Friday in October, and Barry wouldn’t initially have assumed that this many people would show up for the opening of a new exhibition, even in a prestigious gallery as Gilbert’s.

And although now he is aware of why this is the case, there are still more people crowding the area in front of the gallery than he has expected.

“I d-didn’t th-think th-that th-this m-many w-would c-come, es-specially w-with h-how b-bad th-the w-weather is,” Barry murmurs, more to himself than to James.

Seeing how busy it is just outside the building makes him uneasy, as he watches some people who are currently trying to get past the crowd and inside the gallery.

James looks at Barry with sympathy. “I think it is because of the rumor that Lex Luthor and Bruce Wayne would pass by tonight.”

A sharp pain flashes through Barry’s fingers as he clenches his fists unconsciously in response to what his friend just said.

The rumor that one of the current presidential candidates could turn up at Gilbert’s tonight has been making its rounds for a while now and had Barry nearly cancel tonight if it weren’t for James. The other man told him that he knows for sure that Luthor would in fact not turn up as he was already on his way to Gotham because of a business meeting with Wayne Enterprises. Apparently, one of
James’ co-workers actually knows someone on Luthor’s payroll who works close enough with the man to know his schedule, and he debunked this rumor already a couple of weeks ago.

Luthor spent the last two days in the Gems as part of his election program. Bruce and a couple of other business men from all over the country joined him that day for lunch at the CCST. It had set Barry’s teeth on edge even though neither of them did come anywhere near the Keys.

Slowly, Barry takes a deep breath and forces himself to relax and uncurl his hands again. He tries not to show how unsettled he feels.

“I hope you don’t mind if we’ve to walk a little,” James asks and gets him out of his own mind.

Looking back out the window, Barry realizes that James spotted a place to park in one of the side streets close to the museum and is currently pulling in.

“N-no, th-that’s fine,” Barry says and tries to ignore the dread that settled into the pit of his stomach.

The air is cold when they get out of the car, a moment later. The smell of rain surrounds them, a leftover of the storm that went on earlier today, and Barry wraps his coat tighter around himself, shivering slightly.

“What a lovely weather,” James remarks drily as he shuts his car door, glancing up the dark sky that still is covered by a column of thick clouds. He grimaces. “Let’s hope it won’t rain, I was clever enough to forget my umbrella, and I don’t wanna have to walk back to the car in a downpour later on.”

“I’ve brought mine,” Barry points out, nodding to the backpack he has slung over his shoulder, and smiles. “W-we c-can sh-share.”

James chuckles. “You’re my knight in shining amour, then.” He glances up towards the clouds once more. “Still would hate for the storm to come back. This weather really sucks.” He sighs and joins Barry at the sidewalk, shooting him a morose look that is obviously not real. “I hate October.”

“Y-you d-don’t,” Barry disagrees as they start to make their way to the gallery, and even though the reluctance he feels at the thought of visiting such a crowded space isn’t exactly easing off, he still feels amused by his friend’s words. “It’s th-th-the m-month of H-Hallow-ween, and y-you’re w-worse th-than Axel w-when it c-come t-to t-trick or t-treating.”

“I’m not,” James denies, grinning. “I’m a serious grown-up man who left his time of these childish antics behind himself a long time ago.”

“Y-you asked m-me w-whether I’d l-like t-to g-go t-trick and t-treating w-with you,” Barry reminds him, glancing at his friend in amusement.

“No.” James sniffs at that, and gives Barry a clearly fake-insulted look. “I didn’t. I was just suggesting that we could join Axel when he’s going to trick or treat so that nothing happens to him.”

“R-really?” Barry arches an eyebrow. “Are y-you s-sure we’re t-talking ab-bout th-the s-same b-boy h-here?”

James actually ducks his head and cracks an embarrassed smile.

“Halloween night isn’t like it was when we were still at the age at which we could wander around in costumes without getting odd looks for it,” James says but admits. “Though Axel is probably better in staying out of that kind of trouble than I’d have been his age.”
Barry nods in agreement, knowing that James is likely right, which isn’t exactly something he is happy about. The idea that Axel still has nowhere really steady to live and nobody who really looks after him, has him very much worried, even though he knows that the boy is good at staying out of trouble for the most part.

The crowd in front of the gallery doesn’t seem to have gotten any smaller when they finally arrive at Gilbert’s, and Barry unconsciously steps closer to James as he tries not to show how uncomfortable this situation really makes him feel.

It is a bit of a relief when he picks up on the fact that most of these people are actually not going to be inside the museum, as the majority of them seems to consist of onlookers that are waiting to see whether Luthor would actually show up or not.

The thought that Luthor could be this popular with people for them to actually spend their Friday night waiting in the cold in front of an art gallery just to get a glimpse of him is quite disconcerting, especially when Barry spots a number of “Luthor for President” and “In Luthor we believe” buttons.

He tries not to think too much about it, though, not while he is in a small sea of strangers and has no real way to avoid physical contact as they make their way past them. Instead focuses on James as he follows him to the entrance, and having his friend walk in front of him, acting like a shield, helps to take some of the edge off his fear.

And Barry knows that it’s irrational, but big crowds of people are upsetting to him nonetheless. They make him feel helpless and like he expects some kind of an attack in any given second. That he keeps bumping into complete stranger as James and he make their way towards the entrance only makes it worse.

As soon as they are past the security check and inside the actual gallery, people begin to scatter, and the panic that started to take a hold of Barry beings to back off which lets breathing become easier for him.

He hardly notices it when James ushers him towards a more private spot. It is just when the other man actually touches his shoulder, that Barry really snaps out of his own mind and focuses back on him.

“Is everything alright?” James searches his face with a concerned expression, and it is obvious that he knows that something is off.

“Y-yeah.” Barry nods and is grateful when James pulls his hand back again. He meets his friend’s eyes and tries to give him a reassuring look, chuckling awkward when he goes on. “J-just… I’m n-not s-so g-good w-with c-crowds.” He fights the sudden urge to shudder, and feels his cheeks heat up in embarrassment over how badly he reacted to such a non-threatening situation.

“We can leave if this is too much for you,” James tells him earnestly, seemingly more worried about him than disappointed about the prospect of missing out on the exhibition after all.

“N-no,” Barry assures him. “I’m ok-kay.”

He really is. Or he would be in a moment or so. Situations like this are just a little overwhelming to him, and he should have told James so beforehand.

“Barry.” James studies him, unconvinced. “You can tell me when you want to leave. It’s no problem, this evening is supposed to be fun for us both, and I don’t want you to force yourself in an uncomfortable situation because you feel like you’d ruin something for me if you didn’t.”
“I’m r-really ok-kay.” Barry gives his friend a small but honest smile. “B-but I’ll t-tell y-you if it s-should ch-change.”

“Good.” James relaxes with a smile of his own. He nods towards the general direction of the gallery. “In that’s the case we’ve a night of exploration ahead of us.”


“Still more than enough time to enjoy what this place has to offer.” James grins, and Barry, feeling better again, is not about to disagree with him there.

They make their way further inside, after James got them a plan of the gallery which shows its different sections, and they decided that they’d start their tour with the exhibition on their left side that offers quite a couple of pieces from the Romantic era.

Barry’s initial unease quickly wanes off when they get to the first paintings, and he is quite excited to see that one of the Romantic pieces is Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the sea of fog*, a piece he really likes, and whom Gilbert’s gallery has temporary borrowed from the Kunsthalle Hamburg from Germany.

The urge to draw grabs him as he stands in front of the canvas, and he regrets that he didn’t bring something with him he could use to sketch, even though it is a silly idea, seeing that James didn’t bring him here to spend the next couple of hours in this spot.

“You like it?” James asks, looking both curious and pleased.

“Y-yes.” Barry smiles. “I’ve alw-ways l-liked th-his one, e-even b-before a-aart b-became a h-hobby of m-mine.”

“Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer,” James reads the original title from the small plate next to the art piece, and he sounds like he actually understands what he is saying which causes Barry to give him a surprised look.

Before he can ask, though, the other man already shakes his head in bemusement. “I can’t speak German, but I’ve been here a couple of times in the past, and I know one of the art historians that work for the gallery. She loves this piece and taught me how to pronounce its title correctly.” He seems to consider Barry for a moment and adds. “I really have to introduce you to her, you two would get along splendidly, and she can go on about the different artists and their works here for hours if you let her, especially this one.”

“Th-there’s p-probably a l-lot t-to s-say ab-bout th-this p-piece,” Barry points out and turns back to the popular piece of art. He lets his gaze wander over it once more. “It h-has s-someth-thing v-very s-serene t-to it.”

“It does,” James agrees.

Over the next twenty minutes they move on from painting to painting this part of the exhibition has to offer. Barry is pleasantly surprised when James seems honestly interested in what he knows about the artworks and the painters. In return, James starts to tell him more about the historical era depicted in many of the painted scenes, and Barry is surprised to learn that the other man actually minored in history.

“I’ve always been interested in the past,” James tells him as he studies one of the pieces with a fond expression. “It is where we’re all coming from and upon what we’re building our lives today.”
James turns to him, eyes warm, and Barry thinks he can understand where the man is coming from.

They move on to the part with the Neoclassicism, where they spent about as much time as they did with the one about Romanticism, and when Barry proceeds to the section that displays a mixed collection of Baroque and Rocco pieces, James departs momentarily as he got a call from work and needed to duck out for a minute.

Barry, on his own now, decides to keep close to the entrance of the big room even though James told him that he doesn’t need to slow down for him.

Judging by what his friend said before, he probably has seen the gallery as a whole a couple of times, and probably wouldn’t miss much, but Barry doesn’t like the idea of moving around amid the other visitors too much on his own, and sticks to one of Boucher’s paintings, busying himself with studying the detail of the artist’s brushwork as he keeps waiting for James to return.

He notices when someone steps up next to him a couple of minutes later, briefly thinking that it is James, but when he looks over to his side, he realizes that this isn’t the case.

The stranger, who is studying the painting with seemingly keen interest, is a bit taller than Barry, with short brown hair, and is smartly dressed in dark grey suit combined with a light blue dress shirt. The tie is missing, and he has the first two buttons of his shirt undone, giving him a sophisticated but relaxed look.

“You’ve quite a good taste.” Barry snaps out of studying the stranger, when the man suddenly addresses him, and he feels quite mortified when he realizes that he must have been staring. The stranger seems to have picked up on it as well, as he meets his eyes with a clearly bemused look. Barry’s cheeks to burn, making him probably rival a tomato in how crimson he is just then.

“S-sorry,” Barry utters and averts his eyes back to the depiction, stepping away from the other man who stopped rather close next to him. Too close for Barry’s comfort, in any case.

“No need to,” the stranger says, his voice low and warm. “And what I meant is that you’ve a good taste regarding art.” He chuckles, and it sounds like the man himself is now a little embarrassed now instead of him being amused on Barry’s costs. “I didn’t intend for it to come out like I’m full of myself.”

Barry looks at the other visitor, noticing with some relief that the stranger kept his distance. The man turns his attention back to the piece of art after he meets his wary eyes with a friendly smile.

“I’m very fond of Boucher myself,” he goes on, his eyes moving over the artwork as he studies it. “His hand for color and shading is magnificent, and he is a genius in catching very serene looking moments.”

Barry looks back to the composition as well and hums in agreement as he has a very similar opinion of the artist.

“He was v-very d-diverse art-tist,” Barry agrees quietly, lowering his voice even though he knows that this won’t make his stammer any less audible. “He inf-fluenced th-the R-Rococo s-style in n-nearly any m-medium.”

“He did,” the stranger agrees, and Barry feels his gaze upon himself but keeps his own eyes on the canvas. “I’m very impressed by people like him who are able to wield this much influence over history even though they aren’t born into power.”

Again, Barry hums, unsure how to reply to this otherwise and goes back to study Boucher’s work,
feeling more at ease now that he exchanged a couple of words with the man who doesn’t seem to mean him any harm.

“You’re an artist yourself?” the stranger asks curios, and Barry turns back him, surprised as he thought their brief conversation had come to an end.

“No,” Barry shakes his head. “I like to sketch but…” He flushes and shrugs. “I’m not really that good. It’s just a hobby.”

The other man is watching him, clearly paying mind to what he is saying, but even despite how focused he seems on him, Barry doesn’t feel exactly threatened, which is very unexpected. Just being here has him far outside his comfort zone, and having another man he doesn’t know at all paying attention to him usually causes the alarm bells in his head to go off.

The man’s body language signifies him how calm and relaxed he is, though, and Barry has always been good at reading others in that way, something he learned early on as it gave him an advantage in not getting himself beaten up.

It is still hard for Barry to understand why someone here would want to start up a conversation with him, though. He is wearing his working clothes, and while he put his best pants and button down shirt on today, he knows he is probably quite a contrast compared to most of the other visitors in the opening of the new exhibition tonight.

“It’s a good hobby to pick,” the other man remarks kindly. “Very relaxing.” He looks back to the painting as he proceeds. “I tried it out as well for a short time, but I’m more of a sculpturing type of person myself.”

This catches Barry’s interest, and he turns curiously towards his temporary companion. “You sculpt?”

Barry became fond of sculpturing at a young age on a visit to the Central City’s History Museum with his class during Junior High. He is not really any good at it, though, and getting all the materials you need, are generally too expensive for it to be something he could keep up as a hobby. This still doesn’t minder his fascination with the craftsmanship.

“I try to.” The other man chuckles and actually looks a little embarrassed again. “It is quite a tricky medium to pick up.” His eyes seem to glow with excitement as he goes on. “I’m currently working on a few projects for a friend of mine. Something to help him focus, but it will probably a while till I’m done with them.” He chuckles and shrugs. “I think I’ll consider myself a man of this craft when they’re finally finished.”

For the first time, as Barry watches a very pleased expression over the other man’s face, he wonders how old the person next to him actually is. At first he thought he is about his own age, but there is something to the stranger that makes him reconsider.

“Have you ever tried sculpturing?” the man inquires, watching him attentively once more.

Barry smiles a bit uncertain. “Yes, but I think sketching is more along my forte.”

“Every person is unique when it comes to art.” His companion shrugs. “In the end it only matters that it is just another opportunity for us to express ourselves in a way we can’t do with words.” His expression becomes both softer and bemused as he proceeds. “And it also offers an outlet for our need to create and give our yearnings an actual form.”

This is quite true, even though Barry himself never looked at art from this perspective before.
Nonetheless, he can appreciate how the other man put it, expressing it in a way that feels very right to him.

“Th-this w-world is b-but a c-canvas t-to our im-magination,” Barry says quietly and feels a bit silly for quoting a poet, though it just seems fitting.

The man next to him aches an eyebrow in return but seems quite pleased by his words. “Indeed, and I completely agree with Thoreau there. We’re the painters of our own life.”

Barry feels his mood dim at these words and swallows. He turns back to Boucher’s work.

A brief silence passes between them, and he listens to the people around them move, talk about the different pieces that this section has to offer, filling the air with a buzz of enjoyment and excitement.

If it was true that every person holds the brush to draw their lives in their own hands, he has to be one of the most miserable artists there are…

The idea is both unsettling and painful-

“I’m sorry if my remark struck a nerve.” The other man sounds honest and meets Barry’s eyes with a frown. “It’s like with everything else, you shouldn’t generalize when it comes to quotes of long gone authors. Things that hold true for you doesn’t necessary have to hold true for others.”

“N-no, it’s f-fine,” Barry objects and smiles tightly. He finds himself agreeing with the stranger like before. “Y-you d-didn’t s-say anyth-thing w-wrong.”

His companion nods. “Good, because it really wasn’t my intent.” He studies Barry then for a moment, and an odd expression crosses his face, a mixture of what seems to be pity and indecisiveness as he opens his mouth-

“Hey.” James’ voice cuts the other man off as he joins them, and Barry, who is glad to see his friend again, doesn’t miss the slightly wary look he gives the stranger. He then turns to Barry. “Everything alright?”

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees. “I j-just h-had a c-convers-sation w-with…” He turns to the other man, giving him a curious look.

The stranger chuckles and provides. “Hunter Zolomon.”

Barry smiles. “N-nice t-to m-meet y-you, M-Mr. Z-Zolomon. I’m B-Barry Allen, and th-this is m-my f-friend, J-James L-Lai.”

“Nice to meet you,” James agrees, more relaxed.

“Likewise.” Hunter returns. He looks down at a rather expensive looking watch on his wrist and frowns slightly. Sighing softly, he shoots Barry an apologetic look. “It seems I’ve to bid my farewell already, Mr. Allen. I’m not really supposed to be here, you know, I actually need to catch up with an acquaintance of mine, and the man is really hard to get a hold of if you mess your timing up.”

“Of c-cOURSE.” Barry nods in understanding, though he finds the way the other man formulated the last part a bit funny. “It w-was n-nice t-to t-talk t-to you.”

“The pleasure was all mine. I hope you’ve an enjoyable evening.” Hunter smiles and turns to James. “Mr. Lai.”
“Mr. Zolomon,” James replies unusually curtly, surprising Barry.

Hunter leaves then, heading straight for the exit of this section, and Barry, who watched him for a moment, turns back to James with a slight frown.

“Is everyth-thing alright?” Barry asks somewhat concerned, not sure what to make of his friend’s change in mood.

To his relief, James looks more at ease again when he meets his eyes, and smiles a little sheepishly. “Sure, I just…” He purses his lips and turns back to where Hunter has vanished by now. “I don’t know. That guy…” He looks at Barry, uncertain. “Didn’t he seem a bit off to you?”

Barry frowns and also turns towards where the other man went. He can’t say he got that vibe off the man, not at all.

There was something oddly familiar to him in a way, maybe even something reassuring…

It is strange, Barry shifts uneasily as he realizes that he felt comfortable around the man even though he knows next to nothing about him, and if James hadn’t pointed that out to him, he probably wouldn’t have picked up on it at all.

“Well,” James says, tone light once more, and he meets Barry’s concerned eyes with a reassuring look, stepping closer to him. “I’m probably being paranoid and make an ass out of myself, so don’t mind me. We’ve more important things to concentrate on now anyway.” He signs towards the painting next to them, the one Barry and Hunter studied earlier. “You explaining to me how this artist was able to infuse this much atmosphere into his work, for example.”

His friend smiles at him and Barry returns it, even though the sense of worry persists in the back of his mind.

They spend about the next two hours roaming around the gallery, visiting the different stations in the history of art, and Barry is able to relax and take his mind off that odd meeting.

After finishing about half of the section, James invites him to a late dinner in the museum’s cafeteria.

“All that walking and study the work of all these masters made me quite hungry,” James explains. “And the cafeteria here is really good, they actually are having a buffet there for the visitors tonight.”

“I’m n-not h-hungry,” Barry declines, not wanting for his friend to spend any more money on him after paying already for the tickets. He has no problem to join him while he is getting himself something to eat, though.

“You don’t have to pay anything extra for it,” James explains, obviously already aware of Barry’s line of thoughts and stirs them towards the direction of the cafeteria. “It’s included in the ticket price.”

There are additional standing tables put in the area for the visitors to eat. They’re all covered by white table clothes as well as small vases with flowers and small decoration glass bowls that hold burning candle. There are actual waiters wandering around, offering glasses of champagne to people, and classical music is playing quietly in the background.

Everything seems a little posh, and going along nicely with most of the visitors who are wearing expensive looking suits or dresses, and Barry tries not to think about how badly he must be sticking out from the rest of them. James doesn’t appear bothered by his clothes, though, and is clearly not worried about being seen with him, as he keeps close to Barry when they make their way over to one
of the long buffet tables that offer a variation of delicacies.

James chooses some of the steak, mashed potatoes, green beans wrapped in bacon, and a simple green salad. Barry, on the other hand, takes some of the salmon, a fish he loves and hasn’t eaten in forever, boiled potatoes, some steamed veggies, and a small mixed salad.

Even though the cafeteria is very crowded, they don’t have any trouble to get a place, picking one of tables they can sit at.

James waves one of the waiters over as soon as they are in their seats and picks two glasses of sect for them, thanking the man, before he hands Barry one.

“I’m sure you’ll love the food, I know the company who does tonight’s catering, and their cooks are amazing,” James informs him.

“It looks delicious,” Barry agrees and tries the salmon. He nearly purrs in appreciation, closing his eyes briefly as he enjoys the wonderful taste of the fish, how it nearly seems to melt on his tongue, and decides that he has probably never eaten a better salmon filet so far in his life.

His friend chuckles and meets his eyes with a pleased expression. “I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s amazing,” he replies honestly and tries one of the potatoes that turns out to be just as perfectly done and seasoned.

As they eat, they talk about a few of James’ business trips, and his last visit to New York during which he and some of his business colleagues had quite some amusing adventures.

Barry listens attentively, enjoying his friend’s recollection of his time in the metropolis.

James is a good storyteller, knowing how to keep his tale interesting and peppering it up with a good amount of humor. He tells Barry about especially funny incident during a sightseeing tour he did with a couple of his colleagues and friends during their last night there, that ended in a dare between two of them.

“Rene is a great guy, someone completely levelheaded under normal circumstances, maybe even someone you’d call a stick in the mud at times,” James tells him, chuckling in bemusement as he seems to remember that night. “But he can’t hold his liquor at all, and John and I ended up trying to keep him from opening one of the sewer covers to get down there just so he could prove to Steve that the whole things about crocodiles in the sewage is just some urban legend.”

“You didn’t get in trouble, did you?” Barry asks after swallowing another bite, enjoying both the taste of the warm food and the other man’s story.

“No.” James shakes his head, and he seems to try not to grin as he proceeds. “But Rene was able to dislocate his right index after he sneaked off on our way back to the hotel and attempted to finally lift one of the covers. He screamed up quite the ruckus afterwards and kept cursing Steve and his damn crocodiles. The people in the hospital took it in stride, though. It seems they’ve to deal with this kind of stuff on a rather regular basis.”

Barry laughs outright at that, and immediately feels somewhat bad for it because getting anything dislocated is no fun. The notion of someone hurting himself on an endeavor to prove that there is nothing to sewage crocodiles while intoxicated is just funny in its own bizarre right, though.

They topic changes to the art book James brought back for him, and they somehow end up talking about what generally inspires Barry to sketch.
“Has drawing always been a hobby of yours?” James inquires and takes a sip of his coke.

“No.” Barry shoves some of the curry that is still left around with his spoon, eyes on the plate. “I picked it up after…” He shrugs and huffs an unhappy chuckle, his eyes fixed on the plate in front of him.

“It’s sort of something I… it’s just something that helps me relax…” Barry lifts a spoonful of curry but halts an inch from his mouth and lowers it again, shifting uneasily in his spot. “I-I liked to draw as a kid, but I stopped when I was twelve.”

His throat feels dry as he swallows, and he hates the awkward silence that settles between them.

He shouldn’t get this upset over such a simple question; he knows that he is behaving ridiculous. Nervously, Barry licks his lips and shoots James a guilty look. “Sorry, I’m…”

“There’s no reason for you to apologize.” James watches him, a slight frown on his face, but he doesn’t look annoyed or frustrated. “I didn’t realize that this could be a topic that upsets you. I’m sorry I made you feel uncomfortable.”

“No.” Barry shakes his head, the corner of his mouth dropping a bit. “It’s not your fault, I’m just…” He breaks off with a frustrated huff and unhappily glares at his plate.

“It’s okay,” James assures him and lowers his voice as he goes on. “This really isn’t the place to talk about this, and you really don’t need to worry about reacting badly to this question. I can try but I know that I’m not able to put myself into your shoes, Barry, but even so I get that this part of your life has been hard on you, and I’m not going to hold it against you if you react badly to something I say.”

Barry swallows and closes his eyes for a moment. James’ words are unexpected in their kindness, even though he knows that they really shouldn’t be as the other man is nothing but kind to him and people in general. It is still odd to him how understanding he is of all the baggage he is carrying at times, of his situation in general… of his friendship with the Rogues.

There is nothing Barry can really offer James in return for it, and it worries him at times. The gratitude he feels for his friend just then causes him to gaze back to him. “You’re a really good friend, you know that?”

James chuckles and gives him a warm smile. “So are you.”

“A-am I?” The question is over his lips before Barry can stop himself, and at James surprised expression, he elaborates. “I mean, there’s nothing I can…” He lowers his gaze. “I can’t offer you nothing in return.” He frowns unhappily and puts his spoon down, pulling his hands back so that they can rest on his thighs.

“You…” Barry licks his lips nervously and keeps his eyes on the table. “I can’t… I…” He huffs in frustration over his inability to say what he means and lowers his head enough for his chin to rest on his collarbone. “Maybe I’m not wrong but I-I… I-I… you seem to…” th-the w-way y-you l-look a-at m-me-

“Barry.” James’ voice is calm, low, and Barry stops immediately.

Another silence settles between them, and Barry can hardly hear the people around them through the throbbing of his own pulse in his ears.
“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” James finally says quietly. “I didn’t mean to.”

Barry frowns unhappily and hunches over some more, feeling very vulnerable all of a sudden. “I-I’m n-not a-angle-gry… I-I j-just c-c-can’t…”

“I know, Barry,” James agrees. “And I don’t expect you to. I don’t want to spend time with you so I can force you into some kind of relationship you won’t be comfortable with. I consider you my friend because you’re one of the kindest people I’ve ever met, someone who cares for others, even if they aren’t his responsibility, and someone I can talk to and who takes time to really listen to what I say.”

James shifts a little and leans closer to him. “I don’t know what exactly happened that lead you to be put into jail, but I know that you’re a good man, Barry, someone I can trust to look after my grandmother and her store when I’m not around. I haven’t looked your past up, and I’m not going to, this is not my place, but I’m here if you want to talk about it.”

The lump in Barry’s throat is hurting as he swallows, and he tries to concentrate on breathing, on anything but the awful pain in his chest. He thought that James knew about his past and the crimes he is supposed to have done…

“Wh-what… wh-what if I-I d-did s-someth-thing r-really h-horrible?” Barry croaks.

There is a long pause, one that weighs heavily on Barry, like a block of lead pushing down on him, before James finally responses. “I would still be here.”

The answer catches him off-guard, and he lifts his gaze to fix his friend with an incredulous but also hopeful look.

“I would have trouble to believe it,” James goes on as he meets his eyes calmly. “But people change, and if you really committed some horrible crime, you’ve clearly changed since them. I think both my grandmother and I have a good sense when it comes to people, and I doubt that we both could have been deceived by anybody for so long.”

“I-I d-didn’t…” Barry breaks off after briefly giving in to the urge to try and convince his friend of his innocence. Here really isn’t the place nor the time for it.

Not that he really wasn’t to talk about this at all.

James clearly shares this opinion, as he proceeds. “I think we should postpone this conversation till after this visit is over.” He hesitates but adds. “Except you want to leave now.”

“N-no,” Barry shakes his head and lifts a hand to brush the tears away from his eyes. “I-I’m f-fine.”

There is a brief pause in which James is probably thinking about whether it is really a good idea to stay or not, but he settles on trusting him on his word in the end.

“Oh-Okay,” James agrees quietly and adds a bit hesitantly. “I’m glad I’ve met you, Barry, and that we’ve become friends. I’m really sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable, I know you aren’t interested in anything along that line, and I will respect that. Nothing has to change if we don’t want it to. We’re both grown-ups, and we can deal with this accordingly.”

It is incredibly reassuring to hear James say so, and some of the gnawing worry starts to ease off Barry, making it easier to breath and relax.

“Th-thank y-you,” Barry utters quietly.
“Of course,” James replies warmly, but Barry doesn’t miss the sadness that resonates with the words.

They fall quiet once more, though this time it feels more comfortable, as they go back to finish their meals.

Chapter End Notes

I’m pretty sure most of you are now wondering whether Hunter is somehow connected to what is happening to Barry. Before you start to come up with theories, I can tell you that this is not the case. This Hunter comes from another earth in another universe, and the reason why he is here, is because there is a problem with the barriers of time and space, which is connected to the current state of the speed force. This is something that will come up later on again, but for now it’s not urgent enough for the JL or anybody else to have picked up on.

Hunter didn’t strand by accident on this earth, though. As he said, he needs to catch up with someone. He isn’t at the art gallery purely by accident, either, though. He did come there with the intent to meet Barry, just so he could satisfy his curiosity.

And about his ominous words regarding sculpting, he is talking about the Wally of his world as he is a Hunter from an universe that is very similar to the one in the comics.

James’ feelings for Barry finally came up as well, and I’m really happy we did eventually have the opportunity to touch upon it. Barry is definitely relieved that James is not intending on trying to woo him. ;)

Friedrich’s Wanderer above the sea of fog is a painting I really like, and I saw in real once, so I thought it would be fun to give Barry and James the same opportunity. It was a tie between this or Munch’s Self Portrait with A Cigarette, which I really adore, but I just felt that the first one fit better in this instant. Well, enough of my art babbling.

The next chapter will let things take an unexpected turn, and the Flash decides to pass by… which probably won’t bode well.

I’m finally on holiday, and I can still hardly believe it! XD I had a big work related meeting last Thursday, thus a crazy last two weeks to make sure that everything would get finished till then, and now it’s over and I can rejoice with having time to do stuff again (and to sleep!!)!)

Summer is awesome! I hope you all have a great time as well! <3
Chapter Summary

Barry meets an old acquaintance of his, there is a ruckus in the gallery, and the Flash’s timing is both amazing and outright horrible at the same time.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my dear friend Katzerover, who is doing an amazing job by helping me to turn this story into a much more pleasant! <3

Chapter warning: Physical violence

The restroom of Gilbert’s gallery is very clean and tasteful looking. It really fits the noble appearance of the rest of the establishment very well. Barry only notices this in passing, though, as he is more focused on the couple of other visitors that are already in there. Their presence causes his heart rate to rise in a bout of anxiety despite him knowing that they mean no harm to him.

The two men who are washing their hands are talking in what sounds like Swedish to him, and don’t pay him any mind. Another guy is leaving one of the stalls, eyes fixed on the screen of his rather expensive looking smart phone, and probably not even noticing Barry either.

Barry swiftly makes his way into one of the four stalls that are now unoccupied. There are urinals available as well, but using them somewhere with other men around isn’t an option for him. The uneasiness that usually takes hold of him whenever he has to use a public bathroom, dims a little the instant the last of the three men is gone, and a welcome silence is left behind, which is only interrupted by the faint classical music playing in the background.

The next minute passes by in peace, Barry is just exiting the stall when the door to the bathroom is opened once more, allowing the busy noise from the outside, that was nothing more than a faint murmur so far, to re-enter as well.

Absentmindedly, Barry glances over to the entrance as he is on his way to the sinks, feeling tired after spending the last couple of hours wandering the gallery with James. He freezes instantly when his eyes fall upon the familiar face of a man he met nearly a year ago.

Dr. Elias also looks honestly surprised to see him and halts for a second after entering the room. The door swinging shut behind him, engulfing them in near silence, making it appear like they are cut off from the rest of the crowd outside.

Goosebumps spread over Barry’s body in response to seeing this man again, and his heart beats nearly painfully hard against his chest.

The thought of what this unexpected meeting could mean for him, is nearly sickening, and he can’t
help but wonder whether Cameron or someone else from the Blue Velvet is around as well…

A tense moment passes between them, both staring at each other, before the doctor relaxes and gives him a small but friendly smile.

“Mr. Allen,” Dr. Elias says, sounding oddly amused. “I wouldn’t have thought that I’d meet you here tonight.”

Barry, still feeling like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming car, stays quiet, which doesn’t seem to surprise his current companion.

Dr. Elias makes a face and shoots him a sympathetic look. Then, he makes another two steps into the room but appears mindful of not coming too close to Barry.

“You don’t need to worry about me meaning any trouble for you,” the doctor goes on. “I’m here solely because an acquaintance of mine is quite fond of art.” At the alarmed expression that crosses Barry’s face, he quickly adds. “Nobody you know, and nobody you’d need to worry about.”

This words don’t exactly ease Barry’s worries, and he shifts slightly, nervously, as he looks at the door behind the other man, wanting nothing more than to leave. It is not lost on his current companion, who frowns slightly in return. He doesn’t seem to be annoyed or angry, though.

“I mean no danger to you, Mr. Allen,” Dr. Elias repeats quietly, firmly, and Barry is reminded of Eddy’s words, of how his friend tried to get him to meet up with this man so that he could help him with his rheumatism. Or what Eddy thought is rheumatism. Apparently, Dr. Elias told the speedster that he could take a look at it.

The notion that this doctor could be interested in him is unsettling. The knowledge that he probably still got a blood sample of him is even more so.

Barry knows how dangerous this can be and what this can mean for him.

He didn’t report the doctor to the police, and he still isn’t sure whether this was the right thing to do or not. Eddy likes this man, and it isn’t lost on Barry that his friend trusts him, but he knows from personal experience how dangerous scientists like Dr. Darwin Elias can be when they lack a conscious to prevent them to work with people like the Blue Velvet or Blacksmith.

“How are you doing?” the doctor asks, causing Barry to tense up. The other man’s frown deepens, and he lifts his hands in a placating manner, as if to show him that he means no harm.

“I’m mean you really no harm.” Dr. Elias watches him carefully and briefly hesitate before he proceeds. “Edward told me that your rheumatism is getting worse. I’m sure he let you know already, but I could take a look at it if you want me to.”

Barry shivers involuntarily, his throat is tight enough that he can hardly swallows, and he tries to urge himself to move, to just pass the man, to leave the restroom, but it is as if he is frozen to the spot.

“Maybe we could also take a look at your other problem,” Dr. Elias goes on, and while there is nothing threatening to how he is observing him now, there is an intensity to it, that makes it clear that he knows there is more going on that Barry would like him to know. “Your bloodwork did show-”

The restroom door is pushed open, and an elderly man enters, glancing only briefly at both Barry and Dr. Elias as he makes his way over to one of the urinals.

Barry’s stupor is broken, and he quickly makes his way past the doctor, keeping his eyes straight at
His heart is beating in his chest like crazy as he breaks out in a cold sweat, feeling utterly terrified, and it is both a surprise and an incredibly relief when the doctor let him pass without another word.

Barry’s hands are clammy, and he hardly notices the people around him as he walks, the throbbing of his pulse is just too loud in his ears, nearly deafening. It is only as he steps out into the night, when the cool air hits him on his face, that he snaps out of his panic, and realizes that he actually walked out of the gallery.

Shivering, he turns around, and notices that he is at the foot of the stone steps that lead up to the entrance. The place in front of the gallery is nearly empty, all the onlookers from earlier, who waited to see Luthor, have left by now, and only a couple of gallery visitors are around, probably to get some fresh air or to have a smoke.

Barry bites his lower lip, and the urge to just walk on, to get himself away from here is nearly oppressive, but James is still in there, and he would be worried when he notices that Barry seemingly just vanished.

His feet feel as if they are made of lead as he reluctantly makes his way back up the stairs towards the entrance, and he hopes James wouldn’t be too disappointed if he asked him whether they could leave. It is already late, nearly midnight, but the still have to actually see the new exhibition that would have been the next and last section on their visit, and Barry knows his friend is looking forward to it.

Walking amid the visitors whose number has thinned out by now but is still more than one would expect to meet this late at night, is taxing on him. Much more so than it has been previously, and he is relieved when he finally reaches the center room of the gallery, where the newest exposition is taking place.

It is a show dedicated to a modern jeweler artist from China whose creations are a blend of traditional jewels design and exotic, animalistic looking elements. Barry actually saw quite a few posters advertising this guy’s work on the bus and as ads in magazines.

The works are beautiful, and Barry did look forward to study the fascinating and exotic designs the jewels are worked into, but right now he really couldn’t care less about it. The only thing he wants to do is leave, and he is relieved when he spots James next to one of the showcases not too far away from to the entrance of the big room.

His friend is talking to another visitor, possibly a friend or acquaintance of his, but quickly notices Barry as he comes closer.

The bright smile James gives him slips from his lips when their eyes meet. He quickly excuses him from the other man and makes his way over to him, meeting him halfway.

“Is everything alright?” There is audible worry in James’ voice, and Barry swallows with some difficulty as he tries to smile. “C-can w-w-we l-leave?”

James is clearly concerned now, and he is likely thinking about asking what happened, but eventually decides against it and nods instead. “Of course.”

Barry gives him a grateful smile that feels less forced this time-

It is then that a commotion starts up in the other rooms around them, causing both James and him to turn to the entrance in surprise.
Then, suddenly, the lights go out and plunges everything in darkness. A couple of visitors gasps in shock and fear, and Barry grows nearly painfully tense in response.

This only lasts for a second, though, as the emergency lightening quickly kicks in and allows them to see their surroundings again.

There is a sharp, rattling noise, and Barry’s heart lurches up his throat as he watches the safety bars sliding down at the three entries to the room they are currently in. This is followed by the sound of rather heavy looking safety doors closing, cutting them effectively off from the rest of the gallery.

There is no alarm, and for a moment everything is deathly quiet.

Then a murmur rises around them as the people that are trapped in with them are getting anxious, asking about what is happening, whether they are in danger or if this is just a mistake, a malfunction of the security system. Some speak in hushed tones while others grow outright frantic, and it hardly takes any time at all till the first person tries to find a way to open one of the doors manually.

Barry startles when he suddenly feels someone grab his arm, but he relaxes somewhat when he notices that it is only James, who is pulling him a bit closer as he looks around, trying to assess the situation they are in now.

The commotion around them comes to a sudden stop when a booming voice cuts through the big room.

“There is no need to get distressed over this little intermission, ladies and gents.”

Barry’s stomach drops as dread settles around him like arms that hold him too tight. He turns to the center of the room, where a small plateau has been established to show off an about 12 feet tall female statue that is decorated with some lovely and very expensive looking ornaments. It is circles by a number of roughly seven feet tall, polished plates, probably made out of aluminum, that are reflective enough to pass as big, somewhat deformed mirrors.

A soft groan passes his lips as he spots Len standing there. Or Captain Cold is more like it as his friend is wearing the get-up of his criminal alter ego, with parka and glasses in place, and his infamous Cold gun clearly visible in his right hand.

Lisa, Roscoe, Mick and Hartley are also there, standing around Len, and Barry is suddenly hit by the strongest sensation of déjà vu that makes his knee nearly go weak.

It has been over a decade since he was last present when his friends pulled a heist, and unexpectedly being pushed into such a situation again leaves him shaken and unsure what to do.

The regret of not telling Len about his plans with James hit is like a slap, then, but at the same time he can’t believe his rotten luck, or how stupid he is. He knew his friends planned something, Len told him that they were going to do another heist this weekend, but, as usual, they didn’t really talk about anything specific, as it still made him feel uneasy and guilty.

This is now coming back to bite him badly because Len is going to be furious…

Barry feels nauseated as he lets his gaze briefly wander to the others, noticing how Mick has his heat gun drawn as well, while Hartley has his trademark flute hovering near his lips. Lisa holds a mean looking automatic pistol while Roscoe hasn’t even bothered to bring any weapon with him at all.

They look threatening, dangerous, and Barry isn’t surprised when he glances around and notices scared and even slightly terrified expressions on the other visitor’s faces.
“Get down onto the floor,” Len goes on, voice deeper than usual, a commanding and slightly threatening quality to it that makes Barry shiver. “I can promise you good people that nothing will happen to you, and you can leave tonight safe and healthy to tell of this little adventure if every one of you keeps a levelled head and stays calm. If you play along, this won’t take longer than maybe ten minutes. If not…” Len let the threat stay unspoken but everybody gets the gist of it, and every single one of the visitors complies with the order to get down after only a short pause of uncertain hesitation.

Barry does so too, of course, gritting his teeth when his knees and hips cry up in protest as he moves too quickly and without enough caution. James next to him does the same.

As he is on the ground, he lifts his gaze once more, noticing how the other rogues let their eyes wander around the room, trying to get an overview of everything.

While both Mick and Roscoe are on the lookout for the positions of the most lucrative showcases, Lisa and Hartley are swiftly outlining how many people are present and probably whether they can detect some potential troublemakers in the mass of visitors.

Hartley stops momentarily when his eyes fall upon Barry. He purses his lips, and while Barry cannot see the other man’s eyes through his shaded glasses, he knows that his friend is staring at him.

The Pied Piper hesitates and frowns at Len, while the other man finally a sign to fan out. While Roscoe and Mick make their way off the platform and Lisa stays behind next to her brother to keep an eye on the crowd, Hartley calmly makes his way over to Len.

Barry watches from his position at the ground how the later grows utterly still for a second after Hartley whispered something to him. The criminal’s expression grows cold, emotionless, even though the way he clenches his fists betrays the anger he feels. Barry shudders at the sight as dread tightens around him.

He can’t make out what Len says in return, but it quickly becomes clear that he wants Hartley to proceed as planned when the younger criminal makes his way to the frightened crowd to join Roscoe and Mick.

“Keep your heads down,” Len orders, voice low and grim. Barry is pretty sure he is not the only one who can hear the anger beneath the apparent calm. “There is no reason for anybody to worry, as long as you do as I say, the only thing you’ll take away from tonight’s event is a small scare. Should you try to play the hero, I can assure you that this will end up to be your last night, instead.”

Captain cold remains at the plateau like his sister, keeping track of everything while the other Rogues are busy with grabbing valuables.

Barry follows his order, his head is down and his eyes are closed as he hopes that this will be over soon and nobody will do something that would get them hurt. He listens to the glass of the showcases getting smashed, to his friends move around them to collect their loot, and tries to focus on his breathing, on staying calm.

“It’s okay, Barry,” James tells him quietly from next to him, sounding more concerned than scared as he must have picked up on his nervousness. “You’ll be fine.”

The words cause a pang in Barry’s chest as he thinks that it is partly his fault that his friend is here right now. He meets James’ worried eyes and gives him what he hopes is an at least somewhat reassuring smile.
In the end, it hardly takes the Rogues more than five minutes to get everything, and Barry probably should have expected this, as they are clearly seasoned in this business.

It is just when Barry starts to hope that everything would pass over quickly now, that Mirror Master appears in one of the quasi mirrors, with a split lip and a visibly pissed-off look on his face.

“We’ve company, Cold,” Sam informs Len. “Get your asses moving, the others won’t be able to keep the jackass off your backs for much longer.”

As if on a cue, the Flash vibrating through one of the security doors, a grim look on his face, the speed force cracking around him, and it is only due to Hartley’s quick thinking that the Rogues get any time at all to react to the speedster’s arrival, as the Piper starts to play a melody the very instant the hero entered the room, paralyzing him temporarily.

Barry watches how Mick and Roscoe, who were already on their way back to the mirrors as it is, hurry up to get out of here.

Roscoe is the quicker of the two and enters the mirror verse alongside Lisa just as the Flash succeeds in shaking the hypnotization off, which leaves Hartley, Mick, and Len with being confronted by a very angry speedster. The Flash immediately zooms in on Hartley, punching him with enough force that it sends him flying back a few feet, where he crashes into one of the already broken showcases. It is painful to watch, and Barry bites his lower lip hard to prevent from making any sound by accident

Len and Mick, who were already close to one of the makeshift mirrors, are able to keep the speedster at distance with their guns long enough to make their escape. Both look pissed, clearly neither liking the turn their heist has taken towards its end. Len vanishes into the mirror verse with only a scowl, Mick audible cursing the hero.

Afterwards, the whole room is utterly quiet, other than for Hartley’s pained groan, and, for another moment, the tension in the air is thick enough that it could have been cut by a knife. Then, the people on the ground start to get up and cheer, visible relieved for the whole thing to be over.

Some call out for the Flash, wanting to congratulate him, while the place fills with an increasingly excited chatter.

“Are you alright?” James asks. Barry focuses back on him, and he sees his friend is now kneeing next to him, looking worried.

“Y-yes,” he utters, but flinches when the other man touches his arm. James pulls his hand back, the concern in his eyes intensifies as he says. “We’ll leave as soon as-”

The world around Barry seems to distort before he is pushed up against a wall, and his vision grows blurry due to force with which his head hits the hard surface, causing him to get completely disorientated which quickly mingles with terror, as he has no idea what is going on.

It happens so fast that his mind needs a second to catch up, and as his vision clears, and he is able to focus on the man in front of him, a bone chilling fear overcomes him.

The Flash angry gaze meets his eyes, and he looks utterly livid, teeth grit and bared, like a snarl. Barry has hardly time to protest as the other man changes his grip from his shoulder to his throat, keeping him in place with a painfully tight grip.

“What are you doing here?” Wally demands, his voice slightly distorted due to the intensity of the emotions he must be experiencing right now. His eyes are glowing, the speed force is cracking
around him, a display of raw energy, and even if Barry would have been able to get a word out around the hand on his throat, he is much too caught off-guard and scared by the sudden confrontation to even try.

Wally’s grip tightens in response to his lack of an answer, and Barry reaches up, taking hold of his nephew’s wrist and pulls at it in a vain attempt to get him to let go.

There is so much anger in the younger man’s eyes, so much hate...

Seeing these emotions directed at him hurts, and Barry just want to be back home, back in his bed where he can shut the rest of the world out.

“What are you doing!?” James is suddenly at their side, sounding aghast. “Let go of him! Are you mad?! He is just another visitor! You’re hurting him!”

Wally ignores the other man, and Barry briefly wonders whether his nephew can even hear him.

Spots start to dance in front of his eyes, and the realization that this could be where he is going to die, by Wally’s hands, is nearly sickening.

“You think you can make a fool of me? Of all of us?! ” Wally hisses, his voice hardly recognizable anymore. “Is this a game to you?! Do you really think I don’t know what’s going on?!”

Wally lifts him off the ground with a surprising display of strength, enough so that Barry is no longer able to support his own weight, making him to grow lightheaded.

“I know what you’re up to,” Wally goes on, more quiet now, but no less angry. “You think I don’t see what you’re doing with Jay or Max?”

Barry opens his mouth, tries to speak but is unable to get even just a tone out. His hand on the Flash’s wrist starts to loosen up, and he hardly picks up on the muffled noises of the horrified crowned around them, or on James who turns more and more frantic by the minute.

He should not have come here… He didn’t mean for any of this to happen, he doesn’t want James to be here when-

Then, the grip is suddenly gone from his throat, and Barry slumps to the ground, coughing, gasping for air, and feeling horrible dizzy.

“Barry!” James is next to him nearly immediately, sounding worried and upset. “Are you alright?”

Barry nods automatically, still unable to get enough air in his lungs, and tries to understand what just happened.

When he lifts his gaze, he is taken aback by finding the Flash kneeling at the ground a few feet away from them, holding his head in pain with gritted teeth.

It is then that Barry picks up on a very light tune that is filling the room, and when he moves his gaze to see over the Flash’s shoulder, he spots Hartley playing his flute once more, looking the worse for wear.

He meets his friend’s eye, both surprised and deeply grateful by the unexpected help. Hartley gives him a weak smile-

The tune stops as the Piper is knocked out by a punch from Jay who arrived just then.
The older speedster is at Wally’s side in the blink of an eye, but before he is able to ask if everything is alright with his friend, the younger man already moves.

Barry’s yelp is cut off when a hand closes back around his throat, and it quickly becomes apparent that Wally is not playing around this time, as he is really cutting his air supply entirely off, effectively suffocating him.

The hands are just as quickly gone again this time around as they appeared, and Barry slumps back to the ground, wheezing and coughing, feeling weak and dizzy.

“Back off, Flash.” Jay’s commanding voice sounds faint to him, and Barry isn’t surprised that it was the older speedster who came to his aid this time and got Wally off him.

James is at his side again, but Barry doesn’t pay him any mind as he watches the speedsters in front of him, how both have a seemingly short but angry confrontation to the eye of the surrounding crowd, talking way too fast for anybody to understand anything that is said.

Eventually, the Flash relents and backs off, though his clenched hands are shaking with suppressed rage as he meets Barry’s gaze briefly, eyes cold and sharp. The look only last for a heartbeat, then Wally turns around to grab the still unconscious Piper with whom he vanishes back out through the closed security door a second later.

The loathing Barry was able to make out in his nephew’s eyes is both painful and frightening, and leaves him feel shaken and upset.

He hardly notices it that James is talking to him, or how Jay tells the clearly confused and upset crowd than everything is fine, and that they would be able to get out of here in just a few minutes.

Afterwards, Jay joins James and him. The older speedster has a fleeting exchange with Barry’s friend which goes over his head once more as he isn’t really able to focus on anything that is said.

He feels sick and exhausted, and he just wants to get home.

“‘It’s okay,’” James reassures him as he takes hold of elbow and carefully helps him to get up. Barry hates the contact, whimpers softly in response, and tries to pulls away but quickly stops when he realizes how unsteady he is on his feet.

“There’re paramedics waiting outside,” Jay tells him, and Barry nods, not really grasping what his friend is saying, but not sure what else to do.

He feels so cold, and he can’t stop shaking.

Afterwards, Barry has no idea how he got to the paramedic that ended up making sure that he is alright, but after he got something to help to settle his nerves and stabilize his circularization, he vehemently refuses to go to the hospital.

Thankfully, Jay is no longer around, and James relents to his wish rather quickly and instead suggesting to drive Barry home.

“O-ok-kay,” Barry agrees tiredly, and reluctantly let James assist him on their way back to his friend’s car.

“You could stay at my apartment tonight, if you-” James offers after they pulled out of their parking spot, but Barry quickly cuts him off before he can finish. “N-no, I-I j-just w-want t-to g-g-get h-home.” His throat is still raw and his voice sounds raspy, like he is fighting off a cold.
It is obvious that James doesn’t like the idea of him being alone now, but he understands that he would upset Barry only more by trying on changing his mind on this.

The rest of the ride goes by in silence, and Barry is so exhausted that he actually falls asleep despite how tensed up and shaken he still feels.

James wakes him, touching his shoulder lightly and only for a moment, which is still enough to startle Barry.

“We’re here,” his friend explains, and Barry realizes that they’re parking next to his apartment building.

The concern is still plain on James’ face, and Barry wishes he could tell him something to calm his nerves, but his own mind feels thick and slow, and he only ends up nodding.

“I’ll pass by tomorrow.” James’ words cause Barry to halt again after he opened the door. He turns back to the other man who meets his eyes firmly, determined, and adds quickly to not give him any opportunity to protest. “Just briefly. Just to check up on you.”

“I-I’m f-f-fine,” Barry insists, and it is quite upsetting to him that he himself is aware of what a lie that actually is.

“Even so,” James insists quietly.

Too tired to put up any more of a fight, Barry finally relents and accepts wearily.

James stays parked till Barry reach the entrance of the building before he starts his car and pulls out. Barry watches his friend drive off, and it is just when the backlights vanish around a corner further down the street that he turns to makes his way inside and upstairs to his floor.

His legs feel close to giving out under him when he finally reaches his apartment minutes later. He doesn’t bother to turn on the lights, he only locks his door and goes straight to bed.

Barry lays down without taking his shoes or coat off, he doesn’t even think about it, and his head has hardly touched his pillow when he out like a light.

Later, he doesn’t know how long, something wakes him. It takes him a second to comprehend that it was the movement of the mattress, that it dipped slightly under the weight of another person. The realization startles Barry’s exhausted mind back awake like a splash of cold water.

“It’s alright.” Len’s voice is low and soothing, it quenches the terror in him, giving him no opportunity to act on it, and the relief to have his friend here with him is nearly painful in its intensity.

“L-Lenny.” Barry whimpers, who lays on his stomach and feels too tired to move. It is just then that he picks up on how his throat and head hurt, enough so that he wishes he hadn’t been woken up. He squeezes his eyes shut and snifflles when the other man cups his neck lightly, reassuringly.

“I’m here,” Len assures him quietly, and Barry thinks he sounds a bit odd, but he is too tired to be able to really make out what it is.

Instead, he reaches for the other man, takes hold of the parka he is wearing, and it is then when he notices Len is still in his Captain Cold get-up.

“L-Len-ny,” Barry repeats, tired and hurting, and he clenches his eyes shut when Len moves the hand that has been cupping his neck and starts to rub his back soothingly.
“I’m here, Barry,” Len repeats, and it sounds like a promise, like he is saying something else that Barry isn’t able to grasp right now.

Then, he remembers what happened earlier, the gallery, the heist… Wally…

“I-I’m s-sorry…” Barry utters brokenly while hot tears wet his pillow and his throat feels raw and painful, like sandpaper. “I-I-”

“It’s okay,” Len cuts him off, calmly but firmly. “Just rest, baby. You’re safe.”

Barry presses his face into his pillow and tries to fight off the urge to sob, but fails miserably. Everything hurts, his body, his mind, everything…

But Len is there...

And Len stays with him, even as Barry breaks into a thousand pieces once more. He is a quiet, reassuring presence next to him, rubbing soothing circles between his shoulder blades and making all of this somehow less awful.

Due to the exhaustion that is still clinging to him, Barry soon calms down and dozes off again. He hardly notices how Len gets up and takes off his shoes or how he spreads his blanket over him, tugging him in.

The sensation of warmth follows Barry into his sleep, though, and he dreams of someone holding him, of being safe.

Chapter End Notes

Look at that, we finally met Wally again in this chapter. Though, I’m pretty sure Barry would have preferred not to, and considering how this meeting turned out, it is understandable even if not unexpected.

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, it is one that is really dear to me. I think I changed it like seven times or more since I wrote it the first time down a couple years ago, and for a while I was considering taking it out completely, but I’m glad I decided against it. We never had Barry in the middle of a heist before, and I just liked the idea of him experiencing it firsthand. You can believe me if I tell you that Len is really pissed about it, and seeing that he is pretty good at reflecting his anger on others, we can be rather proud of him that he didn’t try to bite Barry’s head off first chance he got. Why that is, you will learn in the next chapter. ;)

It is probably silly, but I’m also very excited that Barry called Len ‘Lenny’ for the first time. It is just a nickname, but it does have a deeper meaning here, and shows how Barry and Len grow closer, similar to when Len calling Barry ‘baby’ the first time around.

I want to thank you all who took the time to leave me feedback over the last couple of chapters (and in general). I really appreciate it and love to read your comments about what you take away from a chapter and what your thoughts on it are. Being able to share this story with you means a lot to me, and I’m happy that I found people who
enjoy it. :)

Next chapter will be from Len’s POV, and it will be up on Sunday in two weeks!


At Gilbert’s – Aftermath Part I

Chapter Summary

Len has a talk with Lisa. He would much rather not, though.

Chapter Notes

This story has been edited by my lovely friend Katzerover, who did as much of a splendid job as usual. Thank you, sweetheart! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Len listens to how Barry’s breathing slows down and evens out after he sat back down next to him. His hand is once again between the other man’s shoulders, rubbing soothing circles, but eventually stops when he is certain that Barry is deep asleep.

He sits back up, the quiet, dark room around him, and heaves a tired sigh.

What a fucking night.

The heist went well enough everything considered. They got away with most of the loot, after all. Though, he would have preferred if Sam and the others could have kept the Flash off their backs for a little longer. Seeing in what kind of a pissed off mood that fucker has been in for the last couple of months, he isn’t really too surprised they couldn’t keep him busy for too long, though.

They will have to break the others out, over the next couple of weeks, but that is hardly news these days, especially after a job like the last one. It still annoys him that he is going to be four men short for the time being.

He initially hoped that, at worst, no more than a maximum of two would be put back into prison. With the old Flash turning up as well and Hartley being preoccupied with keeping the younger speedster from strangling Barry, it was probably the best outcome the situation could have had.

Len turns his eyes back to the sleeping man next to him and hesitates briefly. Somewhat reluctantly, he reaches for the collars of Barry’s coat and shirt and pulls them down, giving away the view of his neck.

Even in the dim light that falls through the curtain from the streetlamps below, the bruises around Barry’s throat look dark and angry, resembling a very twisted version of a choker necklace.

An all too familiar anger starts to stir in Len’s guts at the sight. He let go of Barry’s clothes again and pulls his hand back, clenching it into a fist, tightly enough that his knuckles turn white.

If the Flash had attacked Barry while Len was still around, he would have tried to strangle that bastard himself, and while he doesn’t possess no superpowers like the speedster, he has been long enough in the game to know how to seriously injury him if he had to.
Len takes a deep breath in and forces himself to relax as he exhales slowly.

Not that him getting into the fight would have been a good idea with how closely Garrick had followed after the younger hero. Still, Len would have considered another sit out in the Heights worth it just to hurt that miserable speedster for what he did to Barry.

He had already been back in the hideout with the rest, though, and just learned of what was going on when Sam told them about the situation back at Gilbert’s. Hartley had the Flash already paralyzed when they got back there, and leaving the mirror would have been idiotic after Garrick had turned up as well. The older speedster made their interference unnecessary, after all, and trying to get a hit on the younger hero would have been reckless for Len, no matter the satisfaction it would have gotten him. Not that his urge to fire his gun at the red fuck has gotten any less intense since then.

Len closes his eyes for a moment, taking another slow and deep breath to calm the fury that is currently pulsing hot in the pit of his stomach and remembers he needs to stay calm. He was fuming when they returned to the others afterwards, angry enough that Lisa intervened when he told Sam he should take him over to Barry’s apartment.

“You want to go over there like this?” Lisa asked him with an incredulous frown when she stepped in his way back to the mirror after they briefly discussed the current situation. “Furious and close to ripping his head off again?”

“Shut up, and get out of my way, Lisa.” He had hardly been able to keep his voice down, angry at Lisa, at the Flash, and especially at Barry.

Thinking back to it now, Len dreads to imagine what he would have done if he actually came across Barry like that.

“No, not before you don’t calm the hell down, you idiot!” Lisa made no sign to move even just an inch, stubborn like only his little sister was. “You’ll end up being an utter bastard again if you go over in such a miserable mood, and Barry really doesn’t need a temper tantrum throwing jackass on top of what just happened to him.”

“He shouldn’t have been there!” Len finally snapped, not only livid because Barry was there to begin with, but because he was there with his employee’s grandson. That schmuck has become a too big part of Barry’s life as it is.

A small part of Len knew even back then that it was hypocritical of him to make a fuss over this, seeing he wasn’t exactly what one would call faithful either, no matter that neither Barry nor him established any rules or even just what this relationship of theirs really is.

Len puts his hand back down on Barry’s back and rubs it absentmindedly, a silent apology for what he nearly did again if it hadn’t been for Lisa.

Barry sees that Lai jackass only as a friend, Len is more than aware of that, but he is a very territorial person, and he doesn’t react well to guys he considers rivals in any area of his life. Especially when it comes to someone he is attracted to. This is probably also the reason why he wasn’t aware of Barry’s plans tonight.

Barry knows him and his bad temper when his jealousy rears its ugly head, and Len probably made sure that he doesn’t want to talk with him about anything regarding James if it can be avoided.

Regret settles over Len’s shoulders as he remembers how Barry touched upon his hunch about Lai’s attraction towards him, and how badly he took that piece of information, reacting with anger and
jealously, and keeping the blonde at a distance for the following couple of days until he snapped out of it again.

Barry hadn’t brought James up again afterwards, and Len was kind of glad for it… until now at least.

Exhaling a soft and tired sounding sigh, Len tries to ignore the irritation as he thinks back to how Lai reacted to Barry being attacked by the Flash. It irks him how upset and worried that man seemed, and how his whole body language and expression made his interest in Barry so very obvious.

Len’s mind trails back to the conversation he had with his sister prior to coming over. She was really pissed off by his temper, and now, in hindsight, he is grateful that she never coats her words when it comes to pointing out that he is making an ass out of himself.

“We was all right with that?” Lisa hissed and looked every bit as agitated as Len. “How could he have known we’re going to be there? We’re not talking with him about this stuff. This, by the way, is something I was against from the very beginning if you remember, and exactly for this very reason!”

“He didn’t tell me he was going to visit that damn gallery!” Len gritted out, feeling upset and ridiculously betrayed by the mere notion that Barry could go behind his back like this.

“So what!” Lisa laughed and shot him another incredulous look. “He has to tell you what he’s doing in his free time now? What the hell, Len?! You’re being a jackass, you’re not his fucking pimp—”

“Shut up—”

“He can do whatever he wants, and it is a good thing when he decides to get out every once in a while!” Lisa went on, ignoring him. “Most of his life exists of work, sitting at home, or being over here! He hardly ever does anything fun in his free time that doesn’t involve poker or sketching.”

“I’ve no problem with that,” Len argues, his fists itched for something to hit, and he wished his sister would just shut up. “I’ve a problem with him turning up at one of our heists because he fails to mention to me that he has a fucking date with that schmuck!”

The moment the words were over his lips, he already regretted them.

A surprised silence fell over the room, and Lisa seemed honestly taken aback, staring at him like she couldn’t believe what he’d just said.

Then, Mick, who leaned against the wall next to them with a beer in his hands, snorted and shook his head. “You’re so full of shit, Snart.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed from his spot still inside the mirror behind Lisa, while Roscoe added with a scoff. “And this is unexpected how exactly?”

Lisa gave her partner a warning look and turned her attention back to Len, suddenly looking just as livid as her brother had felt not even a minute ago.

“You’re still fucking whores on a nearly daily basis, Len,” she reminded him angrily, pushing her index finger against his chest emphatically. “You’re the one who is not faithful in whatever this not-relationship-thing is that is going on between you two!”

“Nothing is going on between us.” Len grunted and returned Lisa’s glare with just as much vigor.

“Bullshit.” Lisa rolled her eyes and sighed in annoyance. She cut him off as he was about to protest.
“But that aside, you’ve no right to be all pissed at Barry for him spending an evening with a friend just because you can’t keep your damn jealousy under control. Remember what happened last time to him when you lost your temper like this.”

Len did remember, of course, and now as he sits next to Barry, watching him, he can’t help but also remember how close to breaking apart the younger man looked when he woke up to his presence. No harsh words from his side were necessary for that, and he is grateful that Lisa stepped in and kept him from getting ballistic on him.

It is more than obvious to Len now that this would have done a ton of damage, not only to their relationship but also Barry himself.

Barry was utterly distraught when he woke up earlier. He was visibly close to falling apart, and Len hates the notion he could have hurt him even more, because he felt betrayed by Barry going out to have a nice evening with a friend.

Len takes another deep breath in, closes his eyes, and exhales slowly through his nose. He tries to push the rage still coiled up tightly inside him far away from himself.

The sound of someone stepping out of the mirror cuts through the otherwise silent room, and Len looks over his shoulder, only slightly on alert as he kind of expected Lisa to check up on him and see whether he messed things up again. She is a rather protective person by nature, and she has grown very fond of Barry over time. Enough so, that she would want to make sure her dear brother’s temper doesn’t cause everything between them to go to hell.

Len watches his sister step out the mirror while Sam stays behind. The other man only gives him a brief nod and vanishes again.

Lisa’s eyes meet his briefly as her gaze moves to study Barry. Her brows knit together, and her expression becomes slightly pinched as she takes his exhausted form in. She turns back to Len and signs to the bedroom door.

Len gets the suggestion, but he doesn’t know whether it would be a good idea to move away from the mirror after what happened not even two hours ago.

He doubts Garrick would just intrude into Barry’s home without warning, but he isn’t so sure about the younger Flash. The man looked absolutely mad with anger, which is also one of the reasons why Len actually wants to be here now, just in case he should decide to pay his uncle a visit. Though, he is pretty sure Garrick would probably keep tabs on the Flash for the rest of the night after what happened in the art gallery.

The speedster attacking some guy seemingly without any reason will definitely end in bad publicity for the superhero community, should the public gets news of it. Len doesn’t believe that Barry would try and press charges against the speedster, but the notion itself triggers a grim smile over his lips. Then he turns back to the sleeping man next to him.

*Alvares* would love that. That’s just what he has been waiting for, something else he could use in his campaign against the Twin’s protectors. Len generally wouldn’t have a problem with the Flash getting into some nasty sort of trouble with the public, especially after what happened tonight, but he knows that Barry would take it badly, and any kind of media attention would have consequences for him personally as well.

The sound of his sister’s soft steps prompt him to let go of this thought, and he looks back to her as she come up next to him.
“He looks exhausted,” Lisa remarks quietly and glances to Len. “You kept it together?”

He frowns in response, annoyed she keeps beating that particular horse, even though she probably has a right to do so.

Lisa chuckles and shrugs. “Just asking. We both know how mild-mannered you can be, Lenny.”

“You already laid into me about this,” Len points out tersely and gets up, careful not to wake Barry by doing so while his eyes linger a second longer on the sleeping man. He turns back to his sister.

“I know,” Lisa agrees but smirks. “You just suck at keeping it cool.”

Len shoots her a dirty look, causing her to appear rather pleased with herself, and they both make their way towards the door.

The living room is dark, and they leave it that way, keeping the light turned off. Len walks over to pull the curtains of the kitchen window closed as well just in case. Lisa gets them two beers from the fridge and they both take a seat at the kitchen table, the room only dimly lit by the light of the street lamps outside.

Len use a lightener to open his bottle and hands it on to Lisa afterwards, taking a long pull that floods his mouth with the welcome bitter taste of the cold beverage. He puts the bottle down and closes his eyes, sighing wearily.

“What a heist,” Lisa agrees and takes a pull of her beer. She chuckles and meets Len’s eyes with a rather mirthless smile when he looks over to her. “Red was in a miserable mood tonight. Worse than usual, and doesn’t that mean something?”

Not really wanting to discuss what happened before but knowing he wouldn’t come around it, Len grunts nonverbally and turns his gaze back to the bottle in his hand.

“I mean,” Lisa goes on, either not getting the hint or outright ignoring it, which is more likely. “I wasn’t yet in this business back when he was supposed to be a more mellow fellow, but even for what a bastard he usually is these days, he generally doesn’t attack random bystanders.”

Len purses his lips, tightening his grip around the cool bottle in his hand, and stays quiet.

His sister’s eyes are on him, she is watching him, he can feel them, like they are burning the side of his face.

“Len,” Lisa finally proceeds when a minute or so ticked by between them in silence. “Do we have to worry about Barry?”

It is a question that can be taken two ways, and Len knows she probably put it like this on purpose. It nearly causes him to smirk. She is a clever girl, his little sister, has always been… Much too clever to end up with a life like this.

Len pushes the thought away, not wanting to go down there right now, and focuses on what Lisa asked.

Do they have to worry about Barry? About him staying safe, or about him being trouble for them that could potentially cost them their necks.

He has wondered for a while now whether the others know something, suspect something, but he doesn’t really want to find out. They have currently enough to deal with as it is, and Barry…
Barry is good for them, good in a way Len would have never expected. A calming, caring person that helps to keep the Rogues grounded and their temper in check better than any booze or threat ever was able to.

Len snorts and reaches up to rub his eyes.

It didn’t start with him intending for Barry to become a part of them, as Len generally doesn’t like to bring outsiders in.

They just tend to complicate things.

It’s something he learned the hard way early on and that eventually lead to the Rogues being able to work so well together. They’ve gotten used to depend on each other and watching each other’s back during a heist. Keeping the same members for the group was essential for that, something Len realized soon after they started to do collaborations.

There are many people with gadgets around, many even with powers that would offer their service to them if the price was right, thus it would be easy to exchange members, keep the blood fresh, so to speak, and make sure their numbers stayed constantly the same.

But the group of thugs the Rogues are made up of these days fit together surprisingly well from the very beginning. Just by sheer coincidence it seems, and while they tried their luck with new guys a couple of times, Len realized eventually that it was safer for them to stick to themselves seeing how trust under criminals is rather hard to come by.

Barry was already in prison when the Rogues really became the Rogues, despite what the media called them back then. In a way, Len knows it is thanks to the current Flash they’ve reached the point where they’re able to utterly relay on each other.

Thanks to the new Flash, it has become ridiculous hard to pull a successful heist within the Twins’ borders and stay out of the Heights over the years. Working on your own or with someone unreliable only elevates the risks and the chances to fail.

“Len…” Lisa’s voice makes him glance over to her, directing his attention back to the matter at hand.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Len tells her curtly and takes another pull of his beer. His gaze turns back to the table in front of him.

“So you know why exactly the Flash nurses such a grudge against Barry that he would actually choke him to death in front of dozens of onlookers?” Lisa presses on, and really, it is a fair question. It is also one that prompts the anger that slowly but surely started to dim down inside Len to spike up once more, and he shoots her a warning glare. “It’s none of your business, Lisa.”

“Bullshit.” Lisa snorts, her face surprisingly grim and concerned. “The Flash being after Barry is damn well our business.”

“That worry comes a bit late, doesn’t it?” Len replies sharply, annoyed and tired, and not in the mood to have this conversation. Now or ever.

“We didn’t know that he had business with that red fuck-”

“You learned about it a year ago, so give me a break,” he points out angrily, but Lisa presses on despite his clearly withering mood. “And you conveniently forgot to clear us up about what this whole thing is about since then.”
“He doesn’t mean any trouble.” Len bores his eyes in hers as he speaks, in a low tone and with a forced calm. “Not to us, and we’re not going to cause him any trouble over this.”

Lisa grits her teeth for a second, looking visibly pissed off, as she returns his icy glare with just as much fierce. “Of course we’re not causing him any trouble, you damn moron. We’d just like to know what is going on for a change.”

“Because I leave you out of the loop when it comes to business.” Len scoffs, annoyed, but Lisa isn’t having any of it and interrupts him with a huff of frustration. “Don’t play dumb, Lenny, it doesn’t become you.”

She doesn’t even blink when he scowls at her and instead nods to the direction of the bedroom where Barry is still resting.

“There’s more to Barry’s whole story, isn’t there? I mean, he’s a former cop, and for some odd reason you of all people took him under your wings while in prison-”

“I did no such thing,” Len denies angrily, and he hates to be reminded of that time, of what Barry had to go through and of how little he really did to help him.

Next to bringing Lisa into a life of crime, Len regrets that the most of all the things he has done so far.

“Really?” His sister arches an eyebrow and picks her bottle up but doesn’t drink. “Because the others-”

“The others don’t know shit,” Len cuts her off. “They’d do good to focus on our jobs instead of running their mouths about something that is none of their concern.”

“Barry is none of our concern?” The bottle in Lisa’s hand is slammed down on the table with enough force that the bang cuts through the silent apartment like a sharp knife, making both siblings to momentarily pause. Lisa grimaces slightly, and shoots him a somewhat apologetic look after they waited for a minute to see whether the sudden noise would cause Barry to stir.

“Barry’s past is his business,” Len finally proceeds, quieter, and reaches up to rub his eyes. “I get that you’re spooked about the Flash, but we’ve been on that bastard’s shit list for much longer than Barry has been hanging out with us.”

It doesn’t come unexpectedly that Lisa and the others don’t like this. Len is honestly surprised that they’ve been so quiet about it after they learned that Barry could mean even more trouble for them when it comes to the Twins’ protector. Even so, he really doesn’t want to discuss this if he can help it. It would inevitably change things if the rest of the Rogues found out about Barry’s past, it is just a question of how, and Len really would rather no add this to his already full plate of stuff he has to worry about.

“You ever thought that we could possibly care about him?” Lisa asks. “You know, it’s really starting to piss me off that you think you’ve to protect him from us, considering what a magnificent job you usually do when it comes to messing him up.”

The words are like a punch, and seeing how well Lisa knows him, it isn’t a surprise she is good at hitting him just where it hurts.

Len grits his teeth and looks away, towards the couch, as he tries to keep his hand from gripping the bottle hard enough for it to break.
“Len.” His sister’s voice softens, the audible irritation from earlier once more gone, and he nearly shakes her hand off when she touches his wrist lightly. He doesn’t, though, because, like for him, this is a way for her to apologize without needing to say so out loud, and he knows that she didn’t really mean to hurt him. They both just inherited the crappy temper of their deadbeat father.

“I know you care about him,” Lisa tells him and gives his wrist a squeeze. “And I’m not trying to suggest that we should cut him off or anything, Len. I’d just like to know what is going on, as would the others.”

Her gaze is no longer harsh when Len meets it again, and he notices with some relief that his own rage has dimmed significantly as well.

It is difficult for him to hold onto the ire he feels for his sister when he knows she is right.

Well, other than when it comes to Roscoe. Not that he would ever acknowledge this out loud…

“It’s Barry’s secret to tell.” Len sighs and reaches for his neck to rub the taut muscles there that are starting to give him a headache.

Lisa lets go of his wrist and leans back again, studying him quietly.

A car passes by down in the streets, briefly breaking the silence of the very early morning. Len takes another pull of his bottle and waits for his sister to speak. He knows she wants to say something else but is hesitating, and this probably means it won’t be something he likes.

“Barry knew the Flash before he was put into prison, didn’t he?” Lisa finally asks. “I mean on a personal level.”

“Yeah.” Len agrees with a frown. He has his eyes on the bottle in his hand, studying it without really taking it in.

“Was it because he was a cop? Did they work together?” Lisa proceeds, sounding more curious than worried by that prospect.

“Barry’s past,” Len starts and seeks her eyes out, “is irrelevant now, isn’t it? Whatever he did or who he was back then lost its meaning the day he was locked into the Heights.”

Lisa doesn’t appear satisfied with his answer, but she likely makes her own conclusion from it all the same.

“He was set up, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

It is something none of them ever really talks about, but everybody thinks so anyway.

Barry doesn’t mention his past very often, hardly ever, really. He is as tightlipped as it gets when it comes to his former wife and nephew, or what he allegedly did to them. Except with Len, that is, and even then he brings it up only on very limited occasions.

Barry is an extremely private person in that regard, probably has always been considering that he learned to carry ugly secrets around with himself from a very early age on.

They still knew early on what happened to the blonde, of course, as news travel fast in a place like the Heights, and pedophiles are always just what other prisoners are waiting for to take some of their
pent up aggression out on.

Len hates thinking back to that time, to how he did nothing in the beginning to help Barry who was damned to be at the bottom of the pecking order, the doormat of the lowlife that was forced to reside there as well.

“Why?” Lisa moves, adjust herself so she is facing him. “He wasn’t even a real cop, only a CSI. What did he do that someone would want a retaliation like that?”

This time, at least, Len doesn’t have to hide some of the truth as he answers. “I don’t know.”

It is something, he has pondered over many times himself in the past. Not that someone like the Flash lacks enemies who would want him to wither away in prison, something that would be an awful and ironic revenge on any superhero.

What really bothers Len, though, is the question how the person or people were able to pull this off.

Barry was incredibly powerful as the Flash. He fought among the kind of Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Green Lanterns, and it certainly wasn’t easy to take his powers away.

Or force them to stay dormant, as Len now thinks is actually the case.

Whoever did mess Barry’s life up, did make the Justice League do the dirty work for them by getting them to take care of the former Flash’s powers.

… which is something that is hard to believe and likely even harder to accomplish.

What else gives Len a headache is that he doesn’t understand how Barry’s former colleagues could actually do this to him. Len knows enough people who would turn on their so-called friends in no time if it was advantageous for them, but seeing that the lot of the Justice League is mostly made up of a bunch of idealistic and self-righteous goody two shoes, it is a bit harder to swallow that they would turn on one of their founding members like that.

“The Flash acts like Barry personally wronged him,” Lisa remarks, and Len shoots her an impatient glare, really no longer in the mood to discuss this any further.

“Don’t give me that look.” Lisa huffs. “You can’t tell me this doesn’t bother you.”

“Barry tries to stay as far away from the Flash or anybody else from his former life as he can. Him meeting that jackass tonight was purely bad luck-”

“And a lack of communication between both of you,” Lisa cuts him off and smirks slightly. “I told you already, this is why I think it is an idiotic idea to not inform him about the whereabouts of our heists. You should have at least checked up with him whether he had plans last night.”

“He didn’t mention to me that he intended to visit Gilbert’s,” Len reminds her, shaper than he intended to, but Lisa only snorts and arches an eyebrow again. “Wonder why that’s the case.”

“Will you shut up?” Len grumbles and rubs his eyes. “I told you already that I’ll talk with him about it.”

“And that you’ll try to be less of a jealous and hypocritical asshole,” she agrees and grins when he shoots her another glare. “I’m just looking out for you, Lenny, so don’t get all pissy on me.”

“It’s none of your business,” Len points out grimly. “I’m not intermeddling with Dillon’s and your
relationship, am I?"

“Because you wouldn’t castrate Roscoe if he ever dared to have a fling with another woman?” Lisa snorts in a rather unladylike way and takes a pull of her beer.

“I actually hope you’d do that on your own,” Len remarks with a small, lopsided smirk but his expression quickly becomes serious again, “and what is going on between Barry and me is between the two of us.”

“Oh shut it.” Lisa shoots him a dirty look. “You can tell me that the day you start to not laying into me about Roscoe.”

Len doesn’t reply, knowing that Lisa has a point there.

“You’re hurting him.” Lisa meets his eyes with a sombre look. It isn’t hard to guess what she is talking about, and Len nearly scowls at her for it.

“He knows that I’m not feeling the same for Izzy I feel for him.” It really starts to annoy him how his sister seems unable to keep her damn nose out of this business. “There’s nothing between Izzy and me.”

The incredulous way Lisa studies him in response, irks him, but before he can say something, she cuts him off. “You’re such a bastard at times that it isn’t even funny anymore.” She huffs a laughs and points with her bottle to him. “Izzy is head over heels into you, and you know that.”

“Lisa-,” Len starts, the warning audible in his voice, but his sister, as usual, ignores him and presses on. “And Barry probably feels horrible about you insisting on fucking some prostitute because he can’t give you that.”

Len’s fist slams into the table, cutting Lisa off, and he bores his eyes into hers as a nearly choking rage overcomes him. 

“Shut up! This is none of your damn business, Lisa!”

The taken aback silence that follows is nearly deafening, but it takes his sister only a second to recover until her anger returns.

Instead of biting his head off, she turns towards the direction of Barry’s bedroom, and Len, who also remembered by now that the other man is actually sleeping next-door, does the same, already regretting how he lost hold of his temper once again.

They both listen for a minute. Lisa gets up. “I’ll check on him.”

“Let him rest,” Len tells her. It is unlikely that Barry overheard really anything from their conversation, but the notion to face him right now still doesn’t sit well with Len.
Lisa turns back to him, giving him a dirty look. “If your little stunt woke him up, he is probably confused and scared right now.”

Len purses his lips but nods. He watches her leave the living room and listens to her footsteps as she makes her way to the bedroom door. There she hesitates for a second before she opens it.

Another pause.

“She’s just me, Barry.” Lisa’s faint voice reaches him easily a moment later in the otherwise quiet apartment.

Putting his bottle back on the table, Len gets up to join his sister. He could kick himself for waking Barry up who clearly needs his rest after what happened last night.

“You should go back to sleep,” Lisa says and Len doesn’t miss the soothing quality her voice has now, calming, all the traces of anger gone.

“I-I c-could m-m-make y-you c-coffee.” Len hears Barry suggest, sounding still half asleep and confused. He steps into the bedroom and comes to a halt next to his sister. It isn’t lost on him how Barry, who got up from his bed, immediately turns to him and how some of the tension leaves him in response.

“Sorry we woke you.” Len gives the other man a faint smile and wishes Lisa wasn’t here. The urge to touch Barry is like an itch he can’t reach due to her being present.

“It’s ok-kay.” Barry returns his smile but still looks pretty much out of it. “I-I c-can m-make y-you a s-snack if y-you w-want… or c-cof-fe.”

“Barry,” Lisa interjects before Len can say something. “You should rest, you’d a long day.”

A shiver runs through Barry, and he hugs himself, something he tends to do when he is upset, making it clear that he doesn’t like Lisa’s advice very much. It maybe even scares him.

“Lisa’s going to leave now anyway,” Len states and steps closer to Barry. “We can have some coffee tomorrow, okay?”

“Y-you’re g-going as w-well?” Barry asks, and it nearly painfully obvious how much he wants Len to stay with him.

“No.” Len cups the blonde’s shoulder, and notices with concern that the blonde is actually trembling. “I’ll spend the night here, if that’s okay with you.”

Some more of the tension eases away from Barry as he says this, and the younger man leans into the contact as he gives him a tired smile. “Y-yes.”

“Try to get some rest, blondie,” Lisa tells Barry affectionately with a reassuring smile. Then, she turns to Len and the warmth is replaced by a more serious, slightly irked expression, as she is probably not happy about their former conversation having come to such an abrupt end.

“Think about what I’ve said,” she reminds him, and Len agrees with a curt nod.

Even though he knows that his sister means well, he can’t help but feel relieved when he finally watches her call for Sam. The other Rogue looks less than happy when he turns up about two minutes later, wearing only a pair of loose grey pants. He was probably about to go to bed.
“You told me you’d stay here overnight!” Sam complains and glares daggers at both Len and Lisa.

“Sorry, change of plans,” Lisa points out and sounds anything but sorry as she steps closer to the mirror.

“You know, despite what people believe, I actually do not only live off love and cheap beer,” Sam grouses as he lets Lisa in. “I do need at least a couple of hours sleep a day as well.”

Len ignores Sam’s complaining and instead turns to Barry, who stepped closer to him and looks like he is about to fall asleep on his feet.

“Let’s go to bed,” Len suggests quietly, and a fond smile spreads over his lips when the other man murmurs his agreement but only leans into him instead of moving.

“Yes, get some sleep, you look like you’re about to keel over,” Sam agrees grumpy.

“Shut up, Sam,” Lisa tells her friend with a sigh. “Let’s get moving so that you can get some more of your beauty sleep. You clearly need it.”

“Bite me, princess.”

Lisa and Sam disappear, leaving back only the reflection of Len and Barry, and the room around them.

“Come.” Len brushes his lips against the warm temple of the other man and starts to steer him towards the bed. Barry lets him, only humming in agreement as he seems to lose the battle against his exhaustion.

After they both laid down, Len keeps watching Barry sleep in the faint, warm light of the streetlamps from below for a long while.

Chapter End Notes

So, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter!

It was fun writing Lisa and Len interact with each other again! They are typical siblings, similar bad when it comes to their tempers and taking no nonsense from each other, and, right now, Len is more than grateful for that.

Initially, in my earlier drafts of this story Len was supposed to go ballistic on Barry after the events at Gilbert’s, and it would have had caused a deep cut in their relationship that would have taken quite a while to mend again. Due to me having changed a lot of the story, especially when it comes to the progress of Barry’s and Len’s relationship, it would not have fit anymore.

In this version, Len already did hurt Barry badly once when he got overpowered by his anger, back when the security guard got hurt, and while he could have lashed out like that now as well, I really didn’t want to put another obstacle like that in their way. Especially because I’m not sure how their relationship would have turned out after another incident of that kind as it would have left scars that possibly would have made things between them impossible to progress past a certain point.
At the same time, Len is still having problems with his temper, so I didn’t want to cut his reaction out. Thankfully, we have Lisa, and she did quite a marvelous job at keeping Len from flipping his shit again and regretting it dearly afterwards. :)  

Next chapter we will have Barry and Len have a heart to heart and both will open up more about their feelings to each other.  

Enough of my babbling now! Thanks for the wonderful feedback you left me for the last chapter, I enjoyed your comments like you wouldn’t believe! :D  

Next chapter will be up in two weeks’ time as usual!
The first thing Barry notices when he wakes up is the slight throbbing behind his temples. It is a persistent ache that spikes when he tries to roll onto his back, causing him to freeze again and groan softly. He grimaces and decides to stay still for now.

His mouth feels dry, and the all too familiar taste that follows when he cries himself to sleep coats his tongue.

Slowly, Barry opens his eyes, a feeling of disorientation engulfing him that is accompanied by a nagging fear as he can’t remember where he is or what happened.

Relief floods him when he recognizes his bedroom after his eyes adjust to the dim light, and he tentatively tries to turn his head to look to the bedside next to him.

It’s empty.

Barry frowns, wondering why he assumed that this wouldn’t be the case.

His confusion is once again replaced by concern when he notices that he isn’t wearing the loose shirt and pants he usually prefers to sleep in but his coat, and from there it takes his mind only another second to catch up with last night’s events.

Heavy dread settles over him as he remembers Len and the others turning up at Gilbert’s to pull a heist. Then, the Flash showing up there to stop them…

Wally…

Barry squeezes his eyes shut and takes a shuddering breath, as he does his best to push those memories away.

He is such an idiot; he shouldn’t have accepted James’ invitation. If he had stayed at home, this
wouldn’t have happened!

A shudder runs through him, and he presses his face into his pillow as he forces himself to concentrate on nothing but his breathing.

It takes him a couple of minutes till the pain in his chest and the burning of his eyes start to ease off, leaving him slightly shaken and nauseous.

The noise from down the street, where cars and people pass by his apartment building, fill the otherwise quiet room, and he listens to it absentmindedly. He wonders how late it is, but feels too lethargic to bring himself to get up and look.

Slowly, Barry reaches for the other pillow, the one Len rested on last night, and pulls it close so that he ends up hugging it to his chest. The faint scent of the other man still clings to it, which is familiar and comforting, and helps him to relax somewhat in response.

Burying his face in the soft material of the pillowcase, Barry’s grip on his mind slips, and he can’t stop it from going over everything that happened last night once more. He starts to tremble when he thinks back to how angry Wally was, how his nephew had tried to strangle him…

It is then that he picks up on the pain in his throat, causing his eyes to itch again as he is filled with a chilling sensation of misery.

Frustrated and angry at himself for not being able to stop himself from recalling that, Barry hisses and grits his teeth hard enough that a sharp pain erupts in his jaw joints. He welcomes it and tries to focus on it, pushing the memory of last night far back, in the secluded area of his mind he hardly ever dares to visit.

It doesn’t really work, he is just too upset, but the pain still helps him to divert his focus a little, as his awareness once again picks up on Len’s smell.

Vaguely, he can remember that his friend had come over sometime after he fell asleep last night, and that he sat by his side, comforting him after he had awoken to his presence.

A calming sensation accompanies the memory of Len’s soothing voice and helps Barry to relax somewhat. He exhales a shuddering breath, and his mind seems to finally take pity on him as it stops clinging to what occurred in the art gallery and instead moves on to what happened later that night.

Barry believes that Lisa had been there as well, but he isn’t entirely sure. What he does still know clearly, though, is that Len didn’t lose his temper, something he didn’t expect but still is immensely grateful for.

Everything part of Barry felt raw when he finally arrived home after the disaster at the gallery. His insides were like an open wound, and he isn’t sure what he would have done if Len had gone ballistic on him. That never happened, and instead he recalls how the other man had been there for him, a quiet and soothing presence when he succumbed the need to cry for everything he lost.

Eventually, Len’s presence lulled him back to sleep, but Barry is pretty sure that he was woken again later on by something.

A noise?

No, it was an angry voice, and it scared and confused him. That is, until Lisa knocked on his bedroom door and told him that it was just Len and her out there in his living room.
She left soon afterwards, or, at least, Barry thinks she did. He isn’t too sure as his memories of her
being around are fogged up and are difficult for him to recollect.

Something he has no problem recalling is how Len pulled him close after they went to bed and how
safe he felt in his arms.

Barry tightens his embrace around the pillow in his arms and wonders whether Len is still around.
He glances over to the mirror.

It would be better if he wasn’t, Barry is well aware of how much trouble he would be in if someone
found his friend here.

After last night, it’s probably a good idea if Len doesn’t come over for a while, especially if Wally
really suspects something.

They got careless.

*He* got careless.

In the beginning, the notion that Wally or another hero could find out about his friendship with the
Rogues outright terrified him, enough so that he pulled his curtains closed whenever Len or one of
the others were around. He always feared the worst and jumped at any unexpected noise…

But, eventually, things changed, and his paranoia eased away, replaced by a false sense of security
whenever one of them was around.

Barry just couldn’t help but grow comfortable with his relationship to the Rogues over time. He
started to enjoy having them around him and eventually stopped checking over his shoulder every
other minute when they visited or he travelled to one of their hideouts.

When nothing happened for such a long time, he just wanted to believe that he didn't have to worry
about someone possibly being there, watching him, anymore.

He doesn’t even want to imagine what would happen if the wrong people found out about their
friendship. It would get him back into Iron Heights within hours, and the mere idea is just plain
sickening.

A frown settles over Barry’s face as he absentmindedly studies the plain wall he is currently facing.

He wonders whether Wally found it suspicious that he was present at one of the Rogues’ heists. It is
ironic that it really was nothing but pure bad luck for him to be there, and it certainly doesn’t help his
case that his nephew already seems convinced that he is up to something.

Could Wally really know of his friendship to Len and the others? And if so, why hasn’t he taken him
in yet?

The events happening towards the end of his visit to the gallery are hard to recall. There are mostly
only emotions that overcome Barry when he thinks back to it now. It allows him to hope that he is
wrong, and that Wally isn’t aware of what is going on between him and the Rogues.

The more he thinks about it, the more this seems to be the case as he doubts that his nephew
wouldn’t already have taken him in if he even just suspected something like that.

The sound of his bedroom door being opened startles Barry out of his thoughts, and he looks over to
it with his heart beating like crazy against his chest.
The fear subsides when his eyes fall upon who is joining him, and he relaxes.

It is Len.

Of course it is Len.

Barry nearly huffs a nervous chuckle, feeling stupid for how he immediately expected the worst again. He should have known that it’s just his friend...

A part of him tries to remind himself that there is a reason why he usually expects the worst in situations like this, but Barry ignores it and focuses on the other man instead.

“You’re up.” Len observes unnecessarily after he studied Barry for a moment. His voice is low and calm, and there is still no trace of anger in it. He closes the door behind himself and walks the couple of steps around the bed to Barry’s side.

Barry rolls onto his back, wincing slightly as his shoulders and neck still protest the movement, but is able to produce a small smile for the other man who takes a seat next to him.

Len is missing his parka now, wearing only a plain black shirt, but, Barry notices he is still wearing the pants that are part of his *Captain Cold* outfit.

“How are you feeling?” Len puts a hand onto Barry’s stomach, starting to rub it slightly through the thin layer of the dress he put on for last night’s visit to Gilbert’s.

“Ok-kay,” Barry replies quietly, tiredly.

It is obviously a lie, but Len is kind enough not to point that out. Instead, he only nods and a silence settles between them.

The thoughtful way Len watches him makes Barry a bit nervous as he can’t help but wonder whether his friend is secretly angry at him for not letting him know beforehand about the James’ and his visit to the art gallery.

He should have told him. If he had, Len would have informed him about their planned heist and the whole thing could have been avoided.

For the most part, at least, seeing that Barry wouldn’t have been able to warn James without giving the Rogues’ plan away, and he doubts that Len would have been willing to postpone the job for him.

The thought is sobering, and Barry averts his eyes, feeling guilt and helplessness engulf him once more.

This is nobody’s but his own fault. He has known from the very beginning who Len and the others are, and he sought them out anyway.

“Hey.” Len touches his chin and lightly urges him to look back to him. His eyes are sombre but not angry or reproachful when their gazes lock. “I’m not angry, Barry, and last night could have gone much worse, everything considered.”

“I sh-should h-have t-told y-you.” Barry utters unhappily and swallows around the lump in his throat. He shivers when Len let go of his chin and rests his hand on his chest, close to his collarbone.

“You should have,” Len agrees, though he still doesn’t sound accusing or upset. “But I understand why you didn’t.”
“I’m s-sorry…” Barry reaches for Len’s arm and holds onto it. He is really sorry, not only for not telling him, but for the trouble he means for Len and the others in general.

… and to Wally.

“Don’t be.” Len gives him a faint smile and starts to draw small circles with his thumb just below Barry’s collarbone, causing him to shudder in response. “I didn’t exactly make it easy for you to come to me with that kind of stuff, did I?”

Barry doesn’t reply immediately but studies the other man with sad eyes.

“Y-you d-didn’t,” he finally agrees softly. “B-but… it w-was s-stupid o-of m-me th-that I d-didn’t c-c-consider th-that th-this c-could h-happen.”

“And it was stupid of me that I didn’t consider that keeping you out of the loop wouldn’t work forever,” Len points out.

“I-I…” Barry grimaces unhappily and glances back to him. “I d-don’t w-want t-to knknow…” He pauses briefly but eventually proceeds. “B-but I th-think I-I c-can’t r-r-ally h-have th-that l-luxa-r-ry an-anym-more.”

Not knowing what the Rogues are up to makes it easier for him to ignore the guilt that comes with the fact that they are criminals.

Being ignorant about those things allows him to just pretend that Len and the others… “You won’t have to join us when we plan something,” Len reminds him, obviously not missing how upsetting this is to him. “I’ll just give you a heads-up about where not to be when we’re doing any future jobs.”

It doesn’t really help, but Barry can appreciate his mindfulness. Len means well; he is trying to make him feel better even after last night’s fiasco. This is unexpected but comforting, and Barry gives his arm a light squeeze. “Ok-kay.”

He tenses up when Len moves his hand that was resting on his chest to touch his chin once more, lightly urging him to move his head back so that it allows him a better view of his throat. It takes Barry a second to realize why he does so, and when he remembers the ugly bruising that has to be visible there, he shudders.

The thought of Wally strangling him is still unsettling and painful.

“How’s your throat?” Len studies him with a rather void expression, clearly careful to school his features to not give away what he really feels just then. For the most part he is successful, other than for his eyes, where his anger is plainly visible beneath the layer of fake calm.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Barry murmurs and looks away, biting his lower lip. He shudders once more when Len starts to lightly trace the ugly bruises Wally’s hands left behind.

“Does it hurt?” The concern is audible in Len’s voice and nearly overshadows the anger. Barry reaches for his hand, grasping it in a loose hold to keep it in place, and swallows nervously. He tries to ignore the pain this causes and how much more pronounced it feels all of a sudden. It is as if his own body somehow hadn’t really been aware of the bruises until now.

“A l-little,” Barry admits and keeps his eyes on the wall next to him.
Another silence settles over them, and Barry can feel Len watching him. It makes him somewhat uneasy, nervous even, because he very aware of how his friend must be silently seething on the inside, no matter what his outward demeanour tries to portray. He doesn’t want Len to be angry, it worries him what this could cause the other man to do during his next clash with Wally.

It also makes it harder not to think about what occurred at Gilbert’s...

He takes a shuddering breath and chuckles.

“I-it’s f-funny,” Barry says before he can stop himself. “I w-was h-hoping th-that… ththat h-het w-wouldn’t h-hate m-me… d-despit-te ever-ryth-thing I w-was h-hop- ping wwe…” He breaks off and chuckles, a miserable sound that has nothing cheerful or warm to it. “I th-thought th-things w-would m-maybe h-have ch-change a-aeter s-so m-much time.”

Deep down, Barry has known from the very beginning that this will never be the case, that Wally will never want to reconcile with him.

The longing for his life to go back to how it was before everything went downhill, is still there, though. It is a persistent ache in his chest he got used to over time and hardly ever notices these days.

Right now though, it feels like something in him is on fire. Like a part of him is shrivelling away in flames, and it hurts so much.

He swallows again and tries to keep his voice from breaking as he goes on.

“I w-want-ted us t-to… I-I th-thought m-maybe, aft-ter en-nough t-time, w-we c-could bbec-come a f-family ag-gain…” Barry speaks quietly, no more than a whisper. “H-he hhat tes m-me…”

It is an ugly realization about something he should have never had any doubt about to begin with.

Barry shudders when Len slightly tightens his hold on his wrist, reassuringly so.

“I l-love h-him…” The white of the wall he is starring at is blotchy, partly grey, with some cracks, but Barry can hardly make any of that out due to how smudged his vision is as he proceeds to explain. “I c-couldn’t p-prot-tec h-him-”

“Barry.” Len, who has kept quiet so far, interrupts him in a low but firm tone. He doesn’t sound irritated, thankfully, but the concern in his voice causes the itching of Barry’s eyes to get even worse. “You aren’t responsible for what happened to your nephew.”

They are moving dangerously close to a line Barry never wanted to cross, but he knows that it became pretend a long time ago.

Len knows that Wally is the Flash, he probably knew already back when Barry was still an inmate in the Heights. They’ve touched upon it a number of times in the past, but Barry has always been tight-lipped about anything regarding the current Flash. Even so, it eventually occurred to him that his nephew’s secret identity wasn’t so secret anymore, at least not when it comes to Len.

It should worry him more than it does. He is afraid of Len trying to hurt Wally during their next clash, but he knows that Len wouldn’t use the knowledge of the younger hero’s identity against him or his family.

Len just isn’t that kind of person.

“I l-love h-him,” Barry replies tiredly and slowly turns to face his friend. “I alw-ways ddid. H-he is
m-my ch-child.”

It doesn’t matter that Wally doesn’t want to have anything to do with him anymore. Barry will always see his nephew as his son, someone he loved and still loves with all his heart, and someone whom he utterly failed…

“I know,” Len agrees, and the grimness on his face makes it hard to miss that he doesn’t think too much of it.

“H-he w-was s-so ang-gry…” Barry breaks off and squeezes his eyes shut. He takes a couple of shuddering breathes and tries to beat the pain down that threatens to overwhelm him again.

Wally still hates him.

He always will.

Barry opens his eyes slowly, and it helps a little that his gaze falls on Len, that the other man is here. He is grateful that he doesn’t have to be alone with his own thoughts right now.

Len is watching him silently as he keeps holding on to his hand, and Barry wonders what exactly he is thinking. Whether it is about Wally, the heist, or James.

“I’m r-really s-sorry f-for n-not t-telling y-you ab-bout g-going t-to th-the g-galler-ry w-with J-James,” Barry tells Len once more and gives him a faint, apologetic smile. “I rreally sh-should h-have.”

This whole mess wouldn’t have happened, if he had.

“Yes,” Len agrees like before. The way he is watching him makes it clear that he still doesn’t hold it against him, though. “But I understand why you didn’t, and… I’m sorry I made you feel like you have to hide this from me.”

Barry nods and appreciates the apology, even though he wishes it wouldn’t be necessary in the first place.

Unfortunately, Len’s temper can be a beast of its own, and they both suffer whenever it rears its head.

Even so, last night’s fiasco isn’t the other man’s fault, as Barry is more than aware that, if he wasn’t such a coward, he would have mentioned his plans with James.

“J-James is j-just a f-friend,” Barry reminds Len somewhat reluctantly and his heart sinks when the other man presses his lips into a thin line in annoyance.

“He’s interested in you.” Len doesn’t sound angry but there is a slight edge to his voice that makes it clear that this is a sore topic for him.

“H-he kn-knows h-how I f-feel.” Barry frowns and tries to push the slight irritation away that rises in him at the other man’s hypocrisy. He averts his eyes and adds quietly, bitterly. “And y-you kn-know m-me… it i-isn’t as if anyth-thing c-could ever h-happen bbetw-ween J-James and m-me anyw- way.”

Len tenses up next to him, he can feel it, and briefly he worries that the other man could have understood his words wrong, taken them as a slight against him despite how Barry really directed them only towards himself.
Seconds tick by, causing Barry’s stomach to knot up in apprehension, and he can’t bring himself to glance back to Len for fear of the anger he would find in his eyes.

Then, Len’s hand returns to Barry’s abdomen, and he starts to rub it once more. It is a purely soothing gesture, no trace of aggression in it, and takes the edge off the apprehension Barry experiences. “I know I’m a hypocrite,” Len admits, causing Barry to look back at him in surprise. “And that I’m making an ass out of myself by laying into you about that schmuck.” His frown deepens as he proceeds. “But I hate how he keeps giving you stuff and keeps hanging out with you even though he knows you’re not interested.”

“Th-that’s w-what f-friends d-do,” Barry points out drily but clasps Len’s hand on his stomach. “And y-you…” He falters briefly. “Y-you d-don’t n-need t-to w-worry ab-bout h-him, L-Len… I d-don’t… h-he’s j-just a f-friend.” Then, he gives the other man a chiding look and adds. “And J-James is n-no sch-schmuck.”

Len smirks, bemused. “You’ve always been a horrible judge of character, Barry.”

Barry smiles, arching an eyebrow. “S-so y-you’re s-saying I’m w-wrong ab-bout y-you nnot b-being a sch-schmuck?”

The other man snorts and grins. “I’d like to think you’re just proving to have good taste in this particular case.”

Barry huffs a laugh and smiles. “Y-you w-would, w-wouldn’t you?”

They watch each other quietly for a long minute, the air between them relaxed and much more comfortable than before.

Then, Len’s expression loses its warmth and turns grim again, causing Barry to tense up, surprised and worried by the sudden change in his demeanour.

“You aren’t broken because you can’t have sex with me,” Len tells him, and the statement is so out of the blue, that Barry can only stare at him with wide eyes. “I told you already that it doesn’t matter.”

Barry looks away as the corner of his lips pull downwards.

“I’m not seeing Izzy because I want to hurt you,” Len reminds him with a slight note of frustration clinging to his words.

“I-I kn-know…” Barry agrees quietly, unhappily. He knows why Len seeks out that woman’s company, and he knows he is an idiot for actually being hurt by it.

“Barry, this doesn’t mean you’re lacking anything,” Len urges, causing Barry to utter a bitter laugh before he realizes what he is doing. It sounds as hurt as he feels, and he can’t help but shoot Len an angry look.

“I-I a-am l-lack-cking…” He shivers and grits his teeth, causing his jaw to ache again. “I-I’m d-dam-maged.”

“That’s-”

Barry ignores Len and presses on. “I’m n-not en-nough, I c-c-can’t g-give y-y-you whwhat y-you n-n-need…” He hisses and hates how his eyes start to itch once more.
“Izzy is not you, Barry,” Len reminds him, and it is frustrating, because Barry knows that Len doesn’t mean it as a slight, but it still feels like one.

Of course that woman isn’t him! She is normal!

He reaches up to press his free hand against his eyes, feeling the sudden urge to hide from Len. If he could, he would just crawl into a hole and disappear…

The hand holding his lets go, and it is like a stab as he expects Len to finally be fed up with him and just leave. Instead, he shudders when his cheeks are cupped, and Len starts to brush the tears away that start to fall despite Barry’s best effort to hold them back.

“I don’t feel for Izzy what I feel for you,” Len repeats, softly. “I never have, and I never will. It is purely physical between us.”

“B-bec-cause I c-can’t-”

“You don’t have to,” Len interrupts him, sounding exasperated now. “I’m not going to pressure you into something like this, Barry. I’d never do that, and I don’t hold this against you in the slightest.” He huffs, and Barry can feel him shift.

The feeling of warm lips on his forehead cause Barry to shiver as the contact is both frightening and comforting.

“It’s not your fault, and it’s not because you’re broken,” Len goes on, his breath hot against Barry’s hairline, he shivers in response. “There are people who don’t do sex. Some just because they don’t want to even though they’ve led a good life. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Len then pulls back to meet his eyes as he goes on. “And me hooking up with Izzy for sex doesn’t mean anything. It’s just that — sex.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Barry pulls his hand away from his eyes that feel puffy and red, frowning sadly as he meets Len’s gaze.

“I-I c-can’t g-give y-you a-anyth-thing…” he utters miserably.

“Bullshit.” Len grunts and looks seriously annoyed. “You’re not a prostitute I keep around for sex, Barry, stop comparing yourself to Izzy.” When Barry flinches in response to the sharp words, Len grimaces and adds in a more soothing, apologetic voice. “I told you already that I feel… different about you.”

This can mean a lot of things, and Barry wishes Len would be a little more specific, but he is aware of how confusing his own feelings for the other man are, and that he isn’t really ready to open up this particular can of worms just now either.

Even though they’ve briefly touched briefly this bond between them in the past, they have yet to really talk about it and what it means.

… and whether it will change things.

Because the notion that it could do so, irreversibly, is frightening.

Barry reaches up and cups Len’s face in return. He is not happy with Len seeing Izzy, but he can understand why he does so, and his words are comforting and reassuring. They calm a fear in him he
usually tries not to face because a part of him is certain that he would end up being left behind once more.

“Y-you m-mean s-so m-much t-to m-me,” Barry states quietly and watches how Len’s expression becomes fonder as the tension eases from his shoulders. “I d-don’t w-want yyou t-to...” He swallows, and it is ridiculous how hard it is for him to get that simple word out. “… l-l-leave.”

“I won’t,” Len replies, and he sounds so certain about it that it causes something in Barry’s chest to constrict painfully. He knows how unlikely such an outcome really is, he has had so many people walk away from him in the past even the ones he was certain would stay with him.

Len doesn’t notice his reaction, though. Instead, he leans down and kisses Barry’s forehead once more, over his right brow, causing him to shudder.

His lips ghost lightly over Barry’s skin as he adds. “You’re stuck with us, Allen.”

Barry swallows and closes his eyes as he puts his arms around Len’s back, holding onto him. He hardly tenses up when his friend does the same before pulling him closer into a firm embrace.

It is odd how relationships change. Barry thinks back to how the Rogues were once his enemies and he theirs, and how different things are now. How close these people are to him and how much they mean to him.

Len and he stay like that for a long moment, holding each other, creating their own bubble of comfort and security while the world around them moves on.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! It is a little shorter than usual, but I promise that the next one will be longer again! :)

Len and Barry talked about what happened at Gilberts and it didn’t turn into a miserable experience for either of them, so YAY! You go, boys!

I know that despite Len’s reasoning for keeping Izzy around, and Barry’s acceptance of it, it is still an awful thing for Len to do, but I hope this chapter gave him some brownie points at least. Something is coming up very soon that will cause a shake-up and make Len rethink his actions, though.

Next chapter will see Jay turning up again with very sad news, and the Rogues will be around again as well, discussing their suspicions about what is really going on with Barry and the Flash. :)

A huge thanks you to all my readers and especially so to everybody who left me a kudos or a comment! You make this whole journey so much more fun for me! :D

I’ll see you in two weeks! <3
“Thanks,” Jay accepts the cup of coffee Barry hands him with a tight smile.

Barry returns it, probably looking just as tense. He feels bad about it, but he can’t help the anxiety that has settled over him with the other man’s visit.

After yesterday had come and gone without Jay turning up to talk, he had started to hope that it would stay that way as he would much rather forget that the night at the gallery had ever happened.

Things don’t work like that, of course, and he can’t say that he is really surprised that Jay does eventually turn up. Even so, he wishes that his apprehension about the upcoming conversation isn’t so plain to see on his face. He doesn’t want to make himself look suspicious by accident, and it is hard to miss that something is bothering Jay — most likely the fiasco that took place at the Gilbert.

“How are you feeling?”

The question causes Barry to turn his attention back to Jay. He tries to smile but is pretty sure that he fails miserably.

“F-fine,” Barry replies and doesn’t miss the doubt in the other man’s eyes, so he adds. “R-really, th-the m-medics l-looked at m-me and g-gave m-me th-their okay t-to g-go hhome. Everyth-thing’s alr-right.”

“You still sound a bit hoarse.”

Barry frowns and looks down in to the cup in front of him, giving a small reluctant shrug. “I’ve p-probably c-caught s-something.”

Jay’s incredulous look makes it clear what he thinks of that, and while Barry knows that he just means well, it is still frustrating to be forced to talk about this.

What does Jay want him to say? That it was Barry’s own fault that he went there in the first place, and if Jay thinks he is holding this incident against Wally, he really doesn’t need to worry. He doesn’t.
Absentmindedly, Barry bites his lower lip but catches himself just a second later, realizing that he is probably making himself look guilty that way which is exactly what he wants to avoid. The thing that worries him the most and that makes him feel wary about Jay stopping by today is the nagging fear that the other man could suspect something about his friendships to the Rogues. He presses his lips into a thin line and lowers his head some more, fixing his gaze on the tea in front of him as he tries to force himself to relax.

“I’m just worried,” Jay explains as he seems to notice Barry’s uneasiness and adds quietly. “Wally’s a strong young man.”

The cup of tea is pleasantly warm when Barry picks it up. He keeps his eyes on the amber liquid it holds and marvels over how quickly his mood can turn from alright to outright depressed. He just wanted to have a small snack and go to bed after returning home from work. Jay, who turned up not even five minutes after Barry himself had arrived at his apartment, clearly has other plans, though, and Barry wishes he had the option to just turn him away. He feels too tired for this.

“I-didn’t hurt me,” Barry repeats but amends when he sees that Jay is about to object again. “N-not m-much, aside f-from m-my th-throat I’m f-fine.”

He takes a sip from the warm liquid and glances briefly to Jay, who is now studying his own cup with a thoughtful and slightly grim expression.

“I-it’s alr-right, J-Jay, r-really,” Barry assures him again.

It is still hard for him to understand why the other man is so obviously troubled by this. Wally didn’t really hurt him, and it was more than likely an incident which wouldn’t occur again. His nephew probably just had a rough day, and seeing his uncle at the scene of the crime could not have made it any easier for him.

Jay lifts his gaze to meet his then, and Barry doesn’t like the slight anger he can spot there.

“You were attacked, that is hardly alright.” Jay doesn’t sound upset per se which is somewhat of a relief, but it is still an odd statement. Not that Barry doesn’t understand where the other man is coming from, but why he would deem this to be something to be troubled over is still beyond him. Wally didn’t seriously injure him, he just lost his temper, and considering what Barry means to the younger speedster, this shouldn’t have come as a surprise to Jay.

“M-maybe,” Barry finally agrees reluctantly, “b-but h-he w-was up-pset. It w-was j-just b-bad l-luck th-that w-w-e m-met th-there.” He shrugs half-heartedly and averts his eyes as he takes another sip of his tea.

“He’s a good man and a good Flash.” Jay’s expression holds something sad as he says this, and Barry nods quietly in agreement. There is no doubt in him that Wally is.

A slight pause settles over them before Jay proceeds, sounding worn-out all of a sudden. “There’s just this anger in him.” Barry purses his lips and tries to ignore the guilt that starts to gnaw at his inside as the older man points this out to him. “He tries to keep it in check, and he succeeds most of the time, but there are situations which cause him to react very rashly and without thinking his actions through at first.”

“You d-don’t n-need t-to d-defend or exp-plain h-his actions.” Barry would give a lot to be able to forget what he let happen to his nephew, what the consequences the young man has to carry around with himself for the rest of his life because of Barry’s failure, but his guilt keeps this knowledge fresh
in his mind.

Jay doesn’t know this, of course, or maybe he assumes that Barry could hold Wally’s attack against the younger man, which is utter nonsense. The only person he holds responsible for how much is nephew hates him, is himself.

“I und-derstand wh-why h-he r-reacted t-to m-me th-the w-way h-he d-did.”

Jay nods, but Barry’s assurance doesn’t seem to appease his concern, and his frown stays as he studies him quietly.

“It still wasn’t right of him to attack you,” Jay finally says, and he makes it sound as if he actually has to remind him of this fact. Barry grits his teeth and shrugs, trying to push away the conflicting emotions these words cause in him. “I k-know th-that.”

For some reason, Jay’s words are upsetting to him. They feel more like a stab than the comfort they were meant to be. Barry doesn’t understand why this upsets him so much, but he hates the notion that Jay could think he condones Wally attacking him. He doesn’t, not really…

Wally is a good man and imagining that he would actively hurt someone helpless because he isn’t able to control his anger doesn’t sit well with Barry. It causes remorse to engulf him firmly enough that it becomes hard to breathe.

“The Justice League isn’t very happy about this incident,” Jay goes on, causing Barry to look back at him in alarm. “Especially because it happened in such a public location.”

“H-he isn’t in t-trouble, is h-he?” Barry asks concerned, and the notion that Wally has to face repercussions because of him is as daunting as imagining that the League could have been talking about him.

“No.” Jay shakes his head and leans back into his seat, exhaling a soft sigh. “They’re also aware of the circumstances that lead to his actions.”

This is a relief, and Barry relaxes somewhat, at least until he notices that Jay doesn’t seem to share his sentiment. He isn’t sure what to make of the other man’s grim expression. Jay takes another sip from his cup and looks over to the window above Barry’s kitchen sink, lips slightly pursed.

Barry glances towards it as well, and absentmindedly notices that he can see both of their reflections in the dark glass. “Y-you s-seem b-bothered b-by it,” he remarks tentatively, and Jay gives him a small, humourless smile as he turns back to him.

“I’m bothered by the situation as a whole, Barry,” Jay explains. “I’m worried about Wally.” His eyes meet Barry’s firmly as he proceeds. “About you as well.” He pauses briefly but doesn’t seem intend to wait for Barry to reply, which is good, because Barry wouldn’t have known how to respond anyway. “And there’s just a lot going on right now in general.”

The older man heaves another sigh, a very weary sounding one this time, and reaches up to rub his eyes.

“Wally attacking you is probably going to create a stir none of us need right now,” Jay points out and turns to the kitchen window again, his frown deepening, looking nearly annoyed for a moment.

Barry picks his cup up and presses his fingers hard into the smooth ceramic, enough so that his joints start to complain, as he hesitantly asks. “Is it b-because o-of Alv-vares?”
Surprise flickers over Jay’s expression as he looks back to him.

“I-I r-read ab-bout h-him,” Barry explains quietly and grimaces. “N-not th-the m-most am-miable f-fellow.”

Jay huffs a chuckle and nods. “At least if you’re in our business.”

An uneasy silence settles between them, and it is obvious that Jay didn’t mean anything by it, but Barry is pretty certain that he is not the only one of them who finds the wording of his last statement a little uncomfortable.

Our business…

It’s ironic, and Barry tries to tell himself that he is an idiot for picking up on it, for feeling uneasy about it in the first place. Jay seems to have done the same thing, though, as he looks rather ill at ease for a minute.

“Th-there’ve b-been p-people l-like h-him b-before,” Barry reminds Jay after the silence becomes too tense. “T-the T-twins’ r-resid-dents kn-know wh-what y-you’re d-doing f-for th-them. Y-you d-don’t n-need t-to w-worry ab-bout s-someone l-like him, p-people knknow th-that h-he is j-just using h-his s-smear c-campaign ag-against y-you as a w-way tto g-get at-tention.”

Politicians like Alvares are not uncommon. They’ve been there all along, since the early dawn of superheroes, and while some of them certainly have valid points with how they speak out against the destruction most hero-villain fights bring along, and the possibility of such powerful beings abusing their abilities, it is more often than not only a certain type of person who really tries to rally up animosity against heroes and certainly not for the greater good of their fellow citizens.

Barry himself had been rather lucky when it came to the public’s attitude toward heroes while he was still the Flash. During his years as the Scarlet Speedster both the government and civilians have been very pro superheroes, but it was only a couple of years prior to that that Jay had had to deal with quite the contrary attitude towards him. It seems that that kind of public disfavour is currently returning again, and while it does worry Barry somewhat, he is certain that it is going to wane again, just as it has in the past.

While the public’s goodwill is a fickle thing that can change within weeks, people aren’t stupid, and they do want to do the right thing in the end, after all.

Jay seems surprised by his words, and Barry isn’t sure what to make of the thoughtful, but guarded expression with which the older man is considering him now. It causes the urge to fidget to rise in Barry, and he briefly wonders whether his words could have been taken the wrong way by accident.

Then, the intensity leaves Jay’s gaze, and a softer, warmer expression settles over the other man’s face. He still looks troubled, but a little less so, and when he speaks, he actually smiles slightly. “You’ve always had faith in people.” It is an odd statement, and Barry stays quiet, not sure how to take it or how to respond to it.

“I hope you’re right.” Jay nods and picks up his cup but doesn’t take a sip. Instead he keeps his eyes on Barry, looking rather sombre all of a sudden. “I sometimes think that times were easier when I was younger.” He chuckles in a self-deprecating manner that catches Barry off-guard and causes him to wonder again whether everything is alright with Jay.

Another brief silence settles between them then, and Barry notices once more how exhausted Jay actually looks tonight. As if something was bearing down on him, and he is pretty sure that the
situation with Alvares is only part of it.

“No, I am not going to move to Denver for a while,” Jay informs him out of the blue and meets his surprised eyes with a rather grim and worried expression. “She didn’t feel too well over the last month, and suffered dizzy spells which caused us to seek out a doctor a week ago.” Pain and sorrow flickers across the older man’s face before he reaches up and rubs his eyes, exhaling a tired sigh.

Barry starts to feel ill, and even without having Jay tell him so, he already knows that something has to be seriously wrong with Joan. The notion is upsetting, and he feels his stomach knot in response, causing a familiar nausea to join the worry that digs its claws into him.

“They found an abnormally high number of white blood cells in her bloodwork and did some more testing,” Jay proceeds, sounding nearly reluctant as he does so. “It’s leukaemia.”

Slowly, nearly painfully so, he lowers his hands and meets Barry’s taken aback expression. “Denver offers the best treatment possibilities for her type of cancer, and the doctors we spoke with assume that her treatment should take between five to nine weeks. We’re planning to return after that if the cancer goes into remission.” Jay gives him a tight smile, clearly trying to put on a brave face, but Barry doesn’t miss how much this hurts him or how afraid he looks.

It is daunting to think that Joan could die, even with how old she actually is, it seems absurd to imagine her gone. She has always been such a strong woman, so full of life and energy, and kindness… She’s always been there since he met Jay. The notion of Joan suddenly being absent is daunting, painfully so, and he feels nothing but sympathy for the other man, knowing how horrible it is to lose your spouse.

“I’m so sorry,” Barry utters, sounding coarse, and he really wishes he could do something, help somehow.

“Thank you.” Jay nods and gives him another tight but honest smile. “Joan is already on her way to the hospital, she wanted to say goodbye to you herself but we got her a spot in one of the new treatment programs at the DHMC, and they told us it is better if she starts with it as soon as possible.”

“Of course.” Barry nods, touched by the fact that Joan actually wanted to say goodbye to him at all, or that Jay would bring it up. “I’m sure she’s going to be fine, Jay. She’s one of the strongest people I know.”

It hits Barry how unfair life can really be. How stuff like this can happen to good people like the Garricks after they’ve helped others so much.

A cynical little voice in his head reminds him that there’s nothing fair or unfair about life, that everything is just a series of coincidences, and Barry, while not completely agreeing with it, feels slightly comforted by that notion. He pushes that line of thinking away, seeing that this is not the time to split his focus.

“Yes,” Jay agrees, clearly grateful for his kind words. “She really is.”

Jay stays for about another fifteen minutes during which they talk some more about Joan before he has to leave. He tells Barry that he’s going to run over to Denver to stay there the rest of the night, and that he would stop by towards the end of the week again when the whole moving business is hopefully finished.

“Please tell Joan that I wish she gets well soon,” Barry tells Jay after he opens the door for him.
“Of course,” Jay agrees with a faint smile, and while he still looks tired, he doesn’t look as burdened as he did at the start of his visit.

Instead of turning and heading out as Barry expects him to, the older man hesitates and considers him with another thoughtful and concerned expression.

“You can still call me if you need help with anything, Barry,” Jay reminds him. “Or Max. We’re both here for you.”

It is a kind offer, but it sets Barry’s nerves on edge, and a part of him wonders what the other man thinks he could need help with. The Rogues? Could he know about them? Or is it meant in a more general sense?

… or could he be talking about Wally? And isn’t that an upsetting thought?

Jay doesn’t elaborate, and Barry doesn’t ask him to.

“Take care.” Jay gives him a nod and another smile. Then he is gone, and the faintly lit hallway is empty again.

Barry steps back into his apartment, about ready to close the door when he pauses and thinks the better of it. He grabs his keys, turns off the lights, and locks his door behind himself after he entered the hallway.

Eddy doesn’t need any time at all to answer his knocking. The man looks a bit surprised about seeing him, but as usual, he seems to welcome Barry's visit, since a wide grin spreads over his lips as he steps aside to let him in.

“Is this going to be a slumber party?” Eddy asks, eyes glinting. “Because I’m all for that. We can make popcorn, stay up till the early morning hours, and read creepypastas to each other. I can even try and get Mary to join us.”

Barry chuckles tiredly, and lets his friend urge him over to the couch. “I’d p-prefer j-just th-the s-slu

“Of course you would,” Eddy remarks with a snort but doesn’t protest and instead vanishes in the direction of his bedroom for a moment. He comes back with a spare pillow and blanket, both of which Barry accepts gratefully.

“You c-can t-tell m-me i-if I’m b-bothering y-you,” Barry points out but knows that it is pretty much unnecessary.

“I know, and I totally would if this were the case,” Eddy agrees amused and picks the remote off his coffee table. Before he can turn the television off, Barry stops him. “C-can w-we w-watch T-TV f-for a b-bit?”

“Of course.” His friend takes a seat at the other end of the couch after Barry pulls his legs back to make space, and nods to the screen that is currently showing some commercials. “Miami Vice alright with you?”

“S-sure.” Barry moves so that he rests on his side, pulling his legs up closer to his chest and the blanket up to his chin. His friend’s presence is soothing, and he starts to relax just a few minutes into the movie after it starts again, grateful that Eddy doesn’t enquire why he came over. He probably picked up that something had upset him, anyway.
It has been a long couple of days, and Barry really just wants to forget about them for now.

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“I really don’t understand why we can’t get one of those.”

“Because it is stupid?”

James glares at Sam and retorts. “It’s not! They’re totally wicked! You’re stupid!”

Sam snorts and rolls his eyes, amused by his friend’s antics. “If you say so Tricks.” He returns his attention back to the cards in his hand.

“They could be worth a lot of money in a couple of years,” James tries again. “Because of collector’s value, you know?”

“They are mass produced toys, idiota.” Marco shoots the other man an annoyed look and turns back to studying his hand. “They’ll never be worth any money.”

“You can’t know that!”

“Mass produced, Tricks, the key-words are mass produced,” Sam points out with a smirk and takes a sip of his soda. He picks a five dollar note and throws it on the small heap of money in the middle of the table. “The only way such junk could have any worth is if it stems from the first series and is still unopened in its original box.”

“That stuff can actually be valuable?” Mick seems both amused and slightly bothered by that notion. “Who the fuck would actually pay money for toys?”

“Collectors are crazy.” Sam shrugs. “I’ve read in some newspaper that a guy paid like 100 grand for one of those plushies that are filled with small marbles or something.”

“Plushies filled with marbles?” Marco eyes his colleague sceptically as he puts his own wager down.

“Beany Babies,” Digger provides absentmindedly and when everybody turns to him in a mixture of surprise and incredulous amusement he scoffs annoyed. “I was the mascot of bloody toy factory once, so shut up.”

“Touchy, touchy, aren’t we, Digger?” grins Sam.

“Back off, fuckwit.”

“I don’t care about Beany Babies!” James interjects angrily, clearly not pleased by how the others are ignoring him. “I want Shopkins! Why can’t we break into a Toy’s R Us?! This is so stupid! We always break into places, but we can’t go there!? Why?!”

“Calm down, James.” Hartley frowns disapprovingly at his friend, who sits next to him. He’s somewhat worried that this will turn into another one of James’ temper tantrums, but to his and everybody else’s relief, James makes do with huffing in annoyance and crosses his arms in front of his chest in a deviant manner, glowering accusingly at Hartley.

“We’re not going to break into a toy store,” Hartley states firmly. “Especially not with how pissed off the Flash is right now.”

“Not to mention that breaking into a toy store wouldn’t do much for our reputation,” Mick adds.
“Since when are we concerned about our reputation?” Sam snorts and picks up another card. “We’re criminals, we don’t give a fuck about what other people think, remember?” “Doesn’t mean that I wanna steal stuff from kids.” Mick shrugs.

“A fucking big softy under that hard shell, aren’t you, Rory?”

“Let’s see how long you’re still able to talk shit when I knock your teeth out, Scudder.” Mick grins right back.

“What has Sam done to earn your wrath this time?” The men glance to the entrance where Lisa appears just then and makes her way over to them.

“Why me?” Sam huffs in fake indignation and glares at the blonde woman as she takes a seat next to him. She gives him an unimpressed look in return.

“You like to mess with others,” Lisa reminds him. “And more often than not, it is you who starts something.”

“Lies!” Sam argues with a disapproving frown. “You’re full of lies, young woman.”

Lisa smirks as her gaze lowers to Sam’s hand before the man can pull them out of her view.

“Shut it princess,” Sam warns her, glaring menacingly.

“I’m not playing, so I couldn’t care less which of your dimwits win,” Lisa points out as she reaches for the bag of chips resting next to Sam’s beer.

“Hey! I’m not a dimwit!” James demands angrily.

“I wasn’t including you, James,” Lisa explains easily and watches, amused how James’ irked expression lightens in response.

“So everybody but him?” Mick asks with a smirk and lifts an eyebrow. “You’re picking favourites, dollface.”

“I’m great! Why wouldn’t she pick me?” James gloats but then turns back to Lisa and adds with a more serious expression. “But Hartley isn’t a dimwit either, you know.”

“I’m sorry, I should have clarified. Everybody present but Hartley and you are dimwits.”

“So your brother is also a dimwit?” Sam wonders aloud with a smirk plastered on his lips.

“I said everybody present,” Lisa reminds him. “But, sure, dimwit would probably be one of the kindest words that come to my mind when describing him right now.”

“Ouch, good thing your dear brother isn’t around.” Sam laughs and leans back against his chair. “By the by, where is our dear Captain right now?”

“Where do you think?” Lisa arches an eyebrow because, really, where else would Len be. “He is sticking to that guy like bloody glue.” Digger takes a pull of his beer and makes a face. “You think they’re doing it right now?”

“Shut your stupid trap, Digger. That’s none of your damn business.” Lisa glares daggers at the other Rogues. “And do you really wanna talk about my brother’s sex life?”

“What sex life,” Marco interjects with a suddenly grim frown as he picks up his beer but doesn’t
actually drink. “You really think Allen lets him get any? He’d probably eat broken glass before that happens.”

“Can we not talk about that?” James looks uneasy as he shuffles his cards nervously. “I don’t wanna talk about what happened to Barry.”

None of them really wants to touch upon this topic, and the game proceeds in a rather uncomfortable silence for the next couple of minutes.

Mick’s chuckle startles the others out of their thoughts. “That’s some messed up shit,” he notes grimly, the smirk on his lips harsh and humourless. He grabs his beer and takes a long pull before he sneers. “And those fuckers call themselves heroes.” Nobody says anything to that for a long moment.

“Are we gonna tell him?” Mick asks into the silence.

“Tell him what?” Lisa eyes the other man warily. “We don’t know anything, Mick.”

“Like hell we don’t,” Mick argues. “So we just go on and pretend as if we don’t know who he is?”

“Why not?” Sam frowns and adds with a shrug. “We won’t do him any favours if we tell him we know.”

“But what if he knows we’re on to something?” Marco inquires. “He isn’t the type of guy who lies to himself about such things.”

“He isn’t stupid,” Hartley agrees, looking less than happy about this fact. “He’ll eventually realizes that we know about his past sooner or later.”

“We know nothing,” Lisa argues firmly, crossing her arms. “And even if our speculations are true, what do you want to do about it? You wanna approach him the next time he is over? Tell him ‘Oh, by the way, we know you are the former Flash but don’t worry, no hard feelings, mate.’?”

Lisa watches her colleagues grimly and focuses back on Mick. “We don’t know for sure whether he really is… or was the former Flash, we have no proof of it.”

“Seriously.” Sam huffs a laugh and meets Lisa’s grim eyes firmly as he proceeds. “He turned up in prison just when the old Flash vanished and the new bastard appeared. He knows Jay Garrick – the fucking first Flash – well enough that they are on a first name basis, which isn’t all that common for criminals, mind you? And you can’t know about this, but back when he was put into prison, he was barely able to move around for the first couple of months. Barry Allen never had problems with rheumatism or articular gout before that point, though. I’m sure that that had something to do with what they did to get rid of his powers.”

“You looked him up?” Lisa asks with a disapproving frown.

“Why not?” Sam shrugs and reaches for the bag of chips to grab a handful. “And it isn’t really like I went out of my way to do so. Len wanted me to get his medical files a while back, and I may have peeked into them a little.” His face turns grim then and he chuckles humourlessly. “Not something I’m ever going to do again if I can help it.”

“Why?” James asks curiously, but he also looks somewhat wary. “What did you find out?”

“Ask Barry,” Sam replies with an annoyed frown. “That’s stuff I really have no place to spread around.”
James doesn’t look pleased by Sam’s taciturnity, but he doesn’t inquire any further, and instead points out. “The Flash also doesn’t seem to like Barry very much.”

“The guy hates his guts,” Marco corrects with a snort. “Jackass singled him out in a mass of people just about three weeks ago because of ‘reasons’ according to Len.” “You wanna bet I know what those reasons were?” Sam puts his wager down, smiling grimly.

“I also think that these are pretty convincing points,” Hartley adds quietly. “But I’m with Lisa on this one. What good would it do for him to know that we know? It would change things.”

“He wouldn’t have to lie anymore,” Sam remarks. “Can’t be easy for a guy like him to keep up such a charade all the time.”

“So, we don’t hold it against him?” Marco asks, causing each of the others to turn their eyes to him in a mixture of surprise, consideration, and annoyance.

“I’m just playing devil’s advocate so don’t get all bitchy at me when I say so, but is everything really forgiven? I mean, we did fight him for more than half a decade, and he did ruin the majority of our jobs back then, not to mention that he put us back into the Heights on most of those occasions.”

A tense silence follows as none of them like being confronted with that part of their past and how Barry once was connected to it.

“He did what he had to do,” James objects, dissipating the uneasy air that has settled over the table. He sounds utterly convinced when he goes on, much to everybody’s surprise. “He was a hero, he was supposed to fight and catch us, and he wouldn’t have put us there if he had known how awful that place is. He is a good man.”

Marco meets the blonde’s angry and stubborn gaze with a chuckles and nods. “Okay, no reason to glare daggers, Tricks.”

“Still can’t wrap my mind around it that he was that bloody wanker once,” Digger remarks and puts his cards down, as none of them are really bothering with the game anymore. “Do you remember how fit that guy used to be? Now he’s like a walking stickman.”

“You’ve been checking out the Flash, Digger? ’s there something you wanna share?” Sam wiggles his eyebrows at the other man and snorts when he gets the bird in response.

“He’s sad because of what happened.” James meets the other’s eyes with an unhappy frown. “He’s gotten an upset stomach from it.”

“I think he has gotten more than just an upset stomach from that shit.” Mick grunts grimly.

They fall quiet again.

“Len doesn’t want us to know,” Hartley says into the silence and meets Lisa’s eyes. “I’m pretty sure he suspects that we are on to something by now.”

“Well, tough shit for him,” Lisa grumbles but sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “He’s such an idiot.”

“He’s worried about how we are going to react to this,” Hartley remarks with a faint smile. “You noticed how tense he got when we mentioned the Flash yesterday with Barry around?”

“They both did.” Sam leans back into his chair and scratches his chin as he remembers last night. “It
was uncomfortable to watch.”

“I think what none of you really considers” – Marco leans back and crosses his arms as he gazes through the round – “is that this isn’t our secret to share. If Barry wants to tell us, he will, but till then I think we just should leave the whole thing alone.” Everybody consider this for a long minute.

“This sucks.” James morosely frowns down at his cards. “I don’t want Barry to feel uncomfortable around us. He is already coming by less…”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that, James. Barry just has a lot to do because Christmas is approaching.” Hartley gives his friend an encouraging smile. “This time of the year is the busiest for people in his line of work, and I’m sure that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t like being around us anymore.”

“Can’t wait for Christmas to be over then.” Mick grunts as he shuffles his cards. He grabs one of the five dollar bills resting next to his beer and throws it at the heap in the middle of the table. “Cold is even more of a pain in the ass these days than usual.”

“Maybe we should at least talk to him,” Lisa suggests. “It probably would take away some of the tension when Barry is around if he knows he doesn’t have to question everything we say.”

“This would probably be good for Barry as well,” Hartley agrees. “He notices when Len worries about something, and it only causes him to grow anxious and nervous as well.”

“Aren’t those two like a fucking picture book couple?” Sam huffs a laugh. “Have you noticed that they don’t even really need to talk to each other half the time these days. They just give each other these looks; it’s like their own private language.” He scoffs, looking a little disgusted as he proceeds. “I thought that kind of shit only exists in those schmaltz romantic movies.” He frowns. “It’s creepy.”

“Because Cold has ever been so big on talking?” Marco asks drily.

“Not a man of many words,” Sam agrees solemnly, which causes his friend to smirk.

“A fucking idiot is more like it,” Mick amends. He gets up and stretches the muscles of his back. Scratching his neck, he looks in the round. “I don’t like how things are right now. Let’s talk with Cold when he comes back later if we’re still sober enough.”

With that, Mick turns around and starts to make his way over to the entrance. “I gotta take a piss, don’t touch my cards, Trickster, or I’ll break your nose.”

“I would never!” James exclaims in indignation that sounds so fake that Mick shoots him a warning glare before turns to Sam. “You too, Scudder.”

“What ever.” Sam shrugs. “You’ve a shit hand as it is.”

“If I find out you’re cheating again, I’m going to break your jaw,” Mick calls back before he is out the door.

“You bloody cheating fuckwit,” Digger exclaims annoyed and puts his cards down once more, his eyes on Sam. “I gonna stick one of my boomerangs up your ass if you’re peeping at my cards again.”

“Wouldn’t you like that,” Sam leers back and looks utterly unconcerned.

“Well, considering that he has a Royal Flush, I don’t think a lot of cheating is necessary to determine that he’ll likely win,” Lisa remarks sweetly and gets up to get herself a beer as well.
“Well, I’m out,” Marco says, putting his hand down, and Digger, Hartley, and James are quick to follow suit.

“The fuck!?” Sam cries out in irritation and glare daggers at Lisa’s back. “You damn snitch! I was about to win this fucking round!”

“Too bad.” Lisa shoots him a smirk over her shoulder. “I think it’s called karma.”

“Karma my ass! You owe me fucking 150 bucks now!” Sam points out, but Lisa only flips him off as she exits the room.

“Considering how often you’ve cheated us out of our money,” Marco remarks, visibly amused by the outcome of the game. “It really seems a lot like karma to me.”

“Yeah!” James agrees gleefully, grinning broadly. “You totally deserved that one!” “You’re one to talk, jackass.” Sam leans back into his chair and huffs a sigh. “And I didn’t even cheat this time.”

“Poor you,” Hartley remarks drily as he starts to collect the cards to shuffle them for a new round.

“Bite me, he-princess.”

“Wouldn’t touch you with the end of a stick, asshat.”

“What the heck?” Mick’s voice causes them to look to where the other man has just entered the living room again and is now making his way back over to them, new beer in hand. “Why did you end the game? I had good cards!”

“Bloody wanker over there had a Royal Flush,” Digger explains, pointing the bottom of his bottle towards Sam. At Mick’s surprised expression, Hartley adds. “Lisa was nice enough to point this out to us.”

“She’s the bloody wanker here,” Sam grumbles darkly, glaring at Digger and Hartley. “And you fuckers keep complaining about me cheating but you’re no better at all!”

“My heart bleeds for you and the injustice you have to endure, Scudder.” Mick smirks and retakes his chair, picking up the cards Hartley deals him.

“Fuck you!”

“Now, now, what’s with that language,” Lisa asks as she too returns, and shoots Sam a fake concerned look. “Did those mean men bully you again, Sammy?”

“Suck a cock, princess.” Sam grunts and picks his new cards up. Lisa chuckles and takes her seat next to the sulking man. “Aren’t you charming, cupcake?”

“Watch it, or Scudder can deal with your lovely Roscoe’s envious side,” Hartley points out amused.

“Yeah, nothing funny about that, asshole,” Marco remarks with a disgruntled expression, and everybody is reminded of the time when Roscoe actually was convinced that Weather Wizard had the hots for his girlfriend. Probably because it was true back then. Marco quickly decided that Lisa’s hot booty wasn’t worth the hassle after the other man caught him off-guard outside the Saloon one night and beat the living shit out of him to make sure he would leave his girlfriend alone.

An envious Roscoe definitely wasn’t a good Roscoe to have around.
“Not his finest moment when he beat you up, but you really shouldn’t have kept flirting with me in front of him so blatantly,” Lisa reminds him with a shrug and shoots Marco a knowing smirk. “You riled him up on purpose.” “Didn’t know that ass would go for something like that.” Marco shrugs in return. “Usually he is the most level-headed fellow out of all of us.”

Before anybody else can give their five cents to that statement, Sam perks up, catching their attention. The man swiftly grips something from his pocket, a small mirror, and says with exaggerated irritation. “I’m in the middle of a game, Cold, what do you want?”

Lisa rolls her eyes and picks her own cards up, studying them while she listens to the other Rogue.

“You can’t wait for another hour—” Sam break off and listens for a moment. Eventually, he grumbles annoyed. “Yeah, yeah, I’m on my way.”

Getting up with a heavy sigh, Sam glares in the round. “I’ve got to play taxi again, but it won’t take more than a moment, and I’ll keep an eye on my cards, so if you little shits try to peek, I’ll know.”

“Just piss off, Scudder,” Mick advices, looking bored. “We’re going to start if you aren’t back in five minutes.”

“Bite me—”

“Are you only picking up Len?” Lisa interrupts her friend.

“Both of them,” Sam explains and smirks grimly. “So no heart to heart with Cold regarding Barry’s big secret tonight, it seems.”

Another uneasiness settles over the table at that.

“Just go pick them up,” Marco finally tells Sam and turns back to his hand.

Sam snorts, grumbling something under his breath which sounds a lot like an insult, but does just that.

The uneasy tension stays with them for the next few minutes till Len and Barry arrive, and both decide to join them in the game. Things become more relaxed afterwards, and for the rest of the night they can pretend that they do not suspect anything and nothing has changed.

Chapter End Notes

Well, turns out the Rogues are on to what is going on. Clever guys.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, it was a blast to write, and I’m really happy I’m finally able to post it!

The second part with the Rogues is actually already two years old, and, initially, it wasn’t really part of the main story. I kind of just played around with the idea of the Rogues knowing about Barry, and it was supposed to take place later in the storyline, but things have changed quite a lot since then, so I decided to introduce this part here. It just fits nicely, and I can totally see them figure out what is going on, as all of them are smart enough to put things together on their own without needing Len or Barry to tell them.
I’m feel bad for Jay and Joan, but I like to introduce elements of the comics, and she dealt with cancer there too. It is also important for something that is going to happen soon, but more on that later. ;)

I really like the Garricks, but I know that Jay is not a favourite among my readers right now because of how he's treated Barry in the past. Things are evolving, though, and something seems to have caused him to change his initial opinion on Barry, at least somewhat. I’m looking forward to later when both Jay and Joan are going to have a bigger part in the story, and it is just amazing to watch how we are slowly but surely getting there!

Thanks to all of you awesome people who read this story and leave me feedback. I love to read your thoughts and takes on things, and I’m not exaggerating when I say that these comments never fail to make me smile. <3

The next chapter will be in Len’s POV, as he will be forced to realize that there are repercussions for him to face and that a big change is coming his way.

Till Sunday in two weeks! :)

Len and Lisa have a siblings-evening, but it promptly ends when an unexpected guest turns up.

My dear Katzerover was nice enough to quickly go over the chapter for me despite how busy she is with her new job. Thank you for finding the time, my dear! <3

Len watches a re-run episode of *Friends* without paying any real attention to it. He feels drowsy, and thanks to Lisa being over who has claimed the spot next to him on the couch, he is comfortable enough to let himself give into the exhaustion and close his eyes for a moment.

He doesn’t intend to nod off, there’s going to be a game between the Hub City Slashers and the Philadelphia Flyers on in about an hour that he intends to watch, but for now he allows himself to zone out. The sound of the show fades into the background as he relaxes into the old but comfortable cushion.

It has been a long week, and he would rather forget all about it for the next couple of hours.

As it is usually the case when he finds a moment to unwind a little, his mind turns out to have other plans for him tonight though. His thoughts drift to their last heist two days ago, and how they are already two men short again after breaking the others out not even a month ago.

Len frowns, irritated by how his extensive planning was pretty much for nothing despite the effort he put into it. Some days would just deserve to be flushed down the drain. He pushed the urge aside to get up and pace around in frustration once more as he did many time in the past days and instead forces himself to stay relaxed and keep his eyes closed.

It was the Flash who thwarts their plans again.

*Of course* it was that that fucker.

The jackass is currently in an abysmal mood, more so than usual, probably due to the time of the year, since that man tends to become even more of a pain to deal with as soon as summer turns into autumn.

Why exactly that is the case, Len doesn’t know, but it probably has something to do with the death of the hero’s aunt. Knowing who is behind the red mask for sure now does explain a lot of things, and it is hard to miss that West has yet to succeed in making his peace with anything that happened nearly a decade ago.
Not that he is the only one, considering how Barry's back is constantly in danger to breaking under the weight of all the guilt he is carrying around with him even to this day.

“Careful, or your face gets stuck like this,” Lisa quips next to him and meets his grim frown with a slightly exasperated but also amused expression.

“You’re still all hung up about Tuesday?” she asks.

He grunts non-verbally and turns his gaze back to the TV. A commercial about some hair conditioner is on, and he thinks about getting up to grab himself another beer.

“It’s annoying,” Lisa agrees, not at all disconcerted by his gruff demeanor. She huffs and lets her head drop back so that she is staring up at the ceiling, her mouth briefly pursed. “It’s not the first time we blew a job, though.” She shoots him a look out of the corner of her eyes. “This usually doesn’t bother you this much.”

Len shrugs, not wanting to talk about this yet or later, and gets up.

“Get me another one as well,” Lisa calls after him as he makes his way to the kitchen. “And grab the bag of chips in your cabinet.”

“There’s no bag of chip in my cabinet,” Len replies and opens the fridge, causing cool air to greet him like an icy breeze.

“Like hell there isn’t.” Lisa snorts and turns her head a little more so she can actually watch him. “I’ve seen it just the other day, and we both know you don’t eat them on your own.”

“Who said I didn’t have company?” Len grabs to cold bottle of beer and closes the door of the fridge before he makes his way over to said cabinet to grab the bag of chips so his annoying sister would leave him be.

“You’ve been staying over at the hideout for the last week, numb nut,” Lisa points out and shoots him a triumphant grin when he returns with the snack.

“You’re such a leech,” Len grumbles good-naturedly as he hands her the bag.

“I’m the best leech anybody could ask for,” Lisa retorts easily. “Not to mention, I’m such a nice sister that I stick around my older brother despite his annoying moodiness.”

Len nearly tells her that he isn’t being moody but knows that he wouldn’t be able to convince either of them.

He is in a rather bad mood, has been so since that their last heist went south since he knows that it should have turned out perfectly. The guy who hacked into the security system for them is an expert, a friend of Gael’s, and Gael’s friends don’t do mistakes.

Nobody should have noticed them. They should have gotten into the safe without troubles, get the valuables along with the art piece that caught Gael’s interest in the first place, and made their exit without anybody any wiser till the following morning.

Instead, someone tripped the alarm off, someone other than them, and they had to face a really pissed off Flash not even five seconds later.

Even for the damn speedster that was ridiculously quick, and Len just can’t shake off the feeling that something fishy went on there.
“Our next job will work out fine again,” Lisa says in a nearly consoling tone and lightly bumps into his shoulder.

Len smiles slightly and nods. “Yeah.” He takes a pull of his beer and lets himself sink lower into the couch. Even though the wariness persists in holding onto him, there is no real proof that justifies his suspicion other than his gut feeling, and while he knows that he shouldn’t take it lightly as his intuition usually tends to save his neck, he is also very aware of how on edge he has been feeling for the last couple of months because of Amunet.

Exhaling a tired sigh, Len reaches up to rub his eyes, pushing away the thought of that annoying and troublesome woman.

“And they call me the dramatic one of us two,” Lisa snarks, but her grin doesn’t reach her eyes as she studies him. Her expression turns serious, then, as she asks. “You think that crazy bitch had something to do with the busted heist?”

Len shrugs, not really thinking so. It is just an annoying itch at the back of his mind, but he is pretty sure that Amunet didn’t cause their latest run-in with the Flash. It would be even more worrying to think that she actually knew anything about the job at all, as they didn’t share any details with anybody but themselves.

Well, other than Barry, but it is out of question that he is somehow involved in any of this.

“You don’t consider accepting her invitation, do you?” There is a slight suspicious quality to Lisa’s voice, and Len can’t help but shoot her an annoyed look.

“Of course not,” Len replies gruffly, glaring. “I’m no idiot, Lisa-”

The sharp and loud tone of his doorbell cuts through the air and pulls both their attentions to the entrance door.

They share a look, and Len feels himself tense up as a familiar rush of adrenaline floods his body. It is already half past eleven, and he isn’t expecting anybody. Briefly, he wonders whether it could be Barry, but he knows from Sam that he got the blonde home about half an hour ago.

Another ring of his doorbell, an audibly impatient one by the sound of it, that is quickly followed by someone very familiar and very annoyed sounding.

“I know you’re up, Len,” Izzy’s loud but slightly muffled voice reaches him through the still closed door.

Len frowns as he gets up, ignoring the disapproving looks Lisa shoots him now. The apprehension lessened somewhat, but he still doesn’t exactly relax as he makes his way over to let his late visitor in. He hasn’t seen much of her since that night she stormed out in a temper when Barry passed by his flat to look after him. They’ve met up a few more times after that, but Izzy never stuck around for much longer than the actual sex lasted.

She is pissed at him, that much is clear, and his initial plan to just ignore her crankiness and sharp tongue till she calmed down again and things go back to normal did unfortunately not come to fruition. Instead, she just seems to disappear after their last get together about two weeks ago, just when he finally decided that he would sit down and talk with her about the elephant in the room.

Because of that, he is somewhat relieved to have her pass by, even though Len really doesn’t feel like he has the necessary patience to have any kind of conversation regarding their situation tonight. He likes Izzy, has so for a long time now, which is also the reason why he tends to stick to her when
it comes to sex, and he doesn’t want to have anything bad happen to her. The spunky young woman he met over a decade ago is one of the few people other than his Rogues he can actually tolerate and even enjoy to have around.

What he said to Barry is true, though. His feelings for Izzy are nothing more than platonic, despite the sex they have. Well, there is a physical attraction, of course, but it really doesn’t go past that.

… and for the longest time he assumed that this was mutual for both of them.

Apparently not, which makes all of this so much more complicated than it really has any right to be.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” Izzy sneers in lieu of a greeting, and Len can already feel his patience thin even further. He doesn’t miss how tensed up she looks, angry, clearly willing to fight and maybe even hoping for a confrontation, which is exactly what he doesn’t want to deal with right now.

There is something else in her eyes other than irritation, though, which gives him pause. Izzy, for whatever reason, seems worried. Maybe even scared, and this doesn’t sit well with him at all.

“You’re in trouble?” Len asks, not bothering to beat around the bush seeing that he is tired and the notion that someone could bother the woman sets his teeth on edge. His concern spikes when the briefly surprised expression on Izzy’s face is replaced by one that looks like she is about to break out in tears, and he steps closer to her, grabbing her left upper arm lightly.

“What’s-” He is cut off when Izzy breaches the gap between them and pushes herself into his arms, making a noise that sounds both like a hiss and a sob.

“You’re such an asshole,” Izzy grits out through clenched teeth, and Len grimaces when she digs her long nails into his back as she presses her face firmly against his shoulder. “Such a damn bastard.”

“What’s going on?” Lisa turns up behind Len, eying the woman in his arms with a confused frown, and she meets his gaze with a look that clearly asks for an explanation. Seeing that he knows about as much as she does, he ignores her and turns back to Izzy.

“Let’s go inside,” Len tells her, rubbing her back lightly, and tries to ignore the dread that has settled in the pit of his stomach. He is already certain that he won’t like whatever comes from this visit.

It takes Izzy a long moment to get a grip back over her emotions, but she eventually nods and pulls back, her eyes still teary, but she is no longer actually crying. Despite her little break down having not lasted any longer than a couple of minutes, her makeup looks like a mess, and she has to be aware of it, as she starts to angrily wipe away the smudged lines the tears left behind while Len lets her pass into his apartment.

“You want a beer?” Len asks after he closed the door behind them and follows Lisa and her into the living room. Lisa tries to catch his eyes, but he purposefully doesn’t look her direction.

Izzy stops next to his couch, arms tightly crossed below her bosom, her lips pursed, and for a moment she seems about to cry again, which confuses and frustrates Len to no end. He has no idea what about his question could have set her off.

“No,” Izzy finally declines and shoots him a grim and tight look. “I can’t.”
her a glance and turns fully to her when he picks up on a taken aback expression that quickly turns angry.

“You’ve to be kidding me,” Lisa hisses under her breath and rakes her fingers through her hair in a way that makes her agitation obvious, while her other hand is balled into a fist, confusing Len even more.

“What?” he asks, frowning at his sister before he shoots Izzy an assessing look. “What’s going on, Izzy?”

Izzy, who is glaring daggers of hostility at his sister, turns her angry look back onto him. She lifts her chin in a defiant manner and seems about ready to bite his head off. It is pretty obvious that her anger is mostly superficial, though, and that there lays actual fear below the aggression.

It is then, that it hits Len, the answer to his friend’s odd behavior, and it is as if someone was pulling a ruck from underneath him. His alarmed expression must have given away the fact that he is on to the actual source for Izzy’s visit, as the woman gives him a shallow, humorless smile, her eyes grim and tired.

“Yeah, I’m pregnant,” Izzy agrees, and Len doesn’t miss how one of her hands slip down to her lower abdomen briefly, probably unconsciously.

That is not what Len expected, not at all, and suddenly Izzy’s temper of the past two months that has been even more outrageous than usual starts to make a lot of sense, as does her sudden absence over the last couple of weeks.

And then, out of the blue, another thought hits him, and his guts curl up into a nearly painfully tight coil.

“Who’s the father?” Len asks, voice rougher than he intended for it to be, and Izzy’s expression turns furious once again, which can’t completely overshadow the nervousness or worry as she meets his eyes firmly.

“Who do you think?” Izzy spats upset and lowers her arms, clenching her hands into fists.

An all too familiar anger starts to rise in Len in response, and he can already feel how his temper starts to slip. He forces the ire down, knowing all too well that it is not going to help either of them if this turns into an actual fight, even though he can’t help but feel livid over Izzy’s words.

“We’ve used condoms every fucking time,” Len reminds her, voice forcefully calm.

“Because condoms are known to work 100 percent.” Izzy scoffs but looks oddly guilty for a split-second, which doesn’t go past him.

“You’re on the damn pill, Izzy,” Len insists and feels his anger rise as the guilt on Izzy’s face returns, staying this time long enough that it becomes obvious that something is going on. The urge to break something rises in him, but it is quickly replaced by a much more paralyzing feeling of incredulity and panic.

Izzy’s next word should be a shock, but they really aren’t.

“I’m not anymore,” she admits reluctantly, her eyes on the ground now and her face pale.

“You’re a fucking prostitute!” Lisa cuts in, huffing an incredulous laugh. “Why the hell wouldn’t you be on the pill?”
Both women exchange a heated glare while Len's mind seems to go numb, making it difficult for him to grasp any real thought as the weight of the possibility that the child in Izzy’s belly could be his starts to press down on him.

“Why aren’t you on the pill?” His voice is calm, low, and it causes Izzy to turn her attention back to him. The sneer eases away from her pale face when their eyes meet. She frowns unhappily and reluctantly explains, “I never reacted well to these damn pills, and the company who produced the only brand that did worked out for me got shut down a couple of years ago.”

“A couple of years ago?” Len stares at Izzy in sheer, numbing disbelief for a long couple of seconds and hardly picks up on how Lisa starts to lay into the other woman for being so irresponsible. “You were sleeping with your johns for years without using contraception?! You just said yourself that condoms aren’t 100 percent safe, why the fuck would you be so damn stupid to risk getting knocked up just because the pills let you gain some pounds?”

“Fuck you!” Izzy looks ready to hit Lisa who has stepped closer to her. “You don’t know shit about me, you stupid blond bimbo!”

Len walks between them, forces them apart and glares at Lisa. “Back off.”

Then he turns to Izzy, face grim but not angry. “You told me you’re on the pill.”

Izzy frowns and shrugs, looking petulant and miserable at the same time. “I lied.” She scoffs. “I know you and what a control freak you are, Len. You wouldn’t have kept me around if I told you about it.”

“Instead you decided to lie to my face?” Len demands angrily. “And risk getting pregnant by me or any of your other johns?”

“Fuck you.” Izzy hisses but sounds less venomous and far more exhausted. She reaches up and rubs her forehead. “What was I supposed to do? I’m depending on my looks, it’s what gets me my clients and money.”

“You should have told me,” Len insists. “You know my rules—”

“Yes,” Izzy cuts him off with a sad smirk. “No sex if you can’t be sure that you don’t leave a little surprise behind.”

“Is this a damn joke to you?” Len feels the anger rise in his chest and has difficulties to believe how damn daft Izzy is behaving right now.

“I’m the one with a fucking brat in my womb!” Izzy spats furiously. “You think I find anything funny about this situation!?”

“What did you expect?” Lisa interjects, meeting Izzy’s glare head on. “You are the one who decided to play with fire, now you’ve to deal with the repercussion, and so does whoever is the actual father of—”

Izzy is around Len and punches Lisa’s face hard before he has any chance to react. With a frustrated huff, he quickly pulls her back and pushes her behind himself taking the chance from Lisa, who is now spotting a black eye, to give the favor right back to the other woman.

“Go to hell, you fucking cunt!” Izzy seethes, her face an upset, livid grimace, and Len is certain that she would have tried to go after his sister again if he wasn’t keeping her put. “I know who the father is!”
“Really?” Lisa scoffs, sneering. “It’s your job to fuck different men daily, you’ve some magical sixth sense that tells you whose sperm won the lottery?!”

An angry cry erupts from Izzy, and Len has to grab her again and pull her away from Lisa, whom he shoots an angry look. “Shut up, Liz, you’re really not helping.”

“Because you believe her that you’re the one who knocked her up?” Lisa demands but stays back.

“Fuck you!” Izzy sounds furious. Her livid expression starts to crumble just a second later, though. “Fuck you…” Tears run down her cheeks again as she starts to sob. “I know who the father is…”

An uneasy silence follows that is only broken by the Izzy's weeping, and the angry aggression starts to dwindle. It is replaced by a much more sombre, shocked mood.

“Let’s sit down,” Len tells Izzy quietly, who is holding onto him again, and starts to urge her towards the couch. He takes a seat next to her and doesn’t protest when she leans into him for support again, rubbing her shoulders as she keeps crying, and he hates how utterly distressed and miserable she sounds.

They don’t talk for the time it takes Izzy to calm down, and he listens to Lisa moving around in his kitchen, where she's retreated to.

Izzy eventually stops crying but doesn’t move, resting against him heavily with her exhaustion nearly palpable, and Len is sure that it isn’t only of physical nature.

“You’re okay?” Len asks calmly, rubbing her arm, and smiles slightly when she snorts incredulously.

“Have been better,” Izzy replies and sniffs, pressing her cheek firmer against his shoulder, her eyes still closed. She tenses up when the sound of Lisa walking back over to them reaches her, and Len turns his face to see what his sister was up to in the meantime. He isn’t surprised when he spots a cup of what is likely tea in her hand as she really acquired a taste for the soothing beverage thanks to Barry.

The thought of Barry causes Len to halt, and the dread from earlier returns with full force.

“You want tea?” Lisa asks Izzy, the earlier hostility gone, but there is still an aloofness to her which doesn’t surprise Len, seeing that both women never could stand each other.

Izzy seems to consider it, and Len really hopes that she will accept as he doesn’t want to deal with a repetition of their catfight from before. Spotting Lisa’s black eye, it is both a surprise and relief to him that his sister seems intend to extend the olive branch. He knows that it probably cost her a lot of self-control to display any form of kindness towards the other woman after their last clash. Lisa is a caring person at heart, though, no matter how tough and unforgiving she tries to play it off at times.

Len guesses that is probably also one of the reasons why his sister feels so drawn to Barry. Lisa welcomes kindness, and Barry not only is one of the kindest people either of them probably have ever met, he also makes it easy to treat him likewise.

Eventually, after what feels like a short eternity, Izzy shoots Lisa a cool look but nods as she reaches for the cup. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Lisa lifts her gaze and meets Len’s eyes grimly when she takes a step back. “I think I’ll give you two some space to talk.” She gives him another look, one that says she would be back later, and that they would talk then. She waits for him to nod in agreement and finally makes
her way over to his bedroom, where his standing mirror is placed.

Both Izzy and him listen to Lisa leave, and once again silence settles between them, somehow less tense but still more oppressive than the last one.

“I know what you think,” Izzy says quietly, her head once again resting against his shoulder. “But it is your child.” There is a trace of petulance back in her voice as she speaks as well as sadness as she presses herself firmer against him.

Len stays quiet for a long minute, feeling the warmth of her body against his, and he can’t help but think of Barry, and how much this is going to hurt him should Izzy really be right.

“How can you be sure?” he finally asks, just as tired sounding as he feels. “Lisa may have been crass and out of line before, but she does have a point, doesn’t she?”

The words cause Izzy to tense up, and he feels bad for not mincing his words, but at the same time it is only the truth. Not to mention that he is still pissed that she kept having sex with him even though she stopped taking the pill, and that apparently for years.

“She doesn’t,” Izzy argues annoyed and pushes back so she can meet his eyes. She still looks pale and tired, but the expression in her eyes tells him to dare to call her a liar as she goes on. “It can’t be anybody else. I haven’t had sex with another john for nearly six months now.”

Len freezes and isn’t sure how to replay. Izzy glares at him, probably sensing that he has a hard time believing her.

“I’m not lying,” she insists.

“Why would you do that?” Anger starts to settle back in him, and he isn’t entirely sure why, but this is even more upsetting than Izzy lying about taking the pill.

Izzy averts her eyes, biting her lower lip as she shrugs. “I didn’t feel like sleeping with anybody else.”

“Really?” Len huffs an incredulous laugh and pulls back, moving a little away from her. “You just decided to cut your source of cash down because you felt like it?”

“Why not?” Izzy hisses, scowling. “You’re not my fucking pimp, I can sleep with whoever I want, I’m not yet at the age where I’ve to take whatever crawls across my way-”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Izzy!” Len cuts her off sharply and feels like a bastard when he watches her flinch. He hates it when women do that, he’s never hit one that wasn’t a criminal themselves and heading in on a fight with him, he wasn’t his damn father!

“You’re such a jackass,” Izzy tells him, voice low and angry, and she isn’t looking at him. It takes her a moment but eventually she forces herself to go on. “I thought things could change if I stopped sleeping with other men.”

“What the hell do you mean?” Len feels the urge to get up and grab himself another beer, but he pushes down on it, knowing that now is clearly not the time to get drunk, no matter how alluring the idea may be.

“What do you think I mean?” Izzy asks back in irritation. “I thought we could… I…” She breaks off and lowers her eyes, scowling down at her lap.
“I’m not in love with you,” Len reminds her, and he is aware that he is hurting her, he can see it by how she flinches, but it is the damn truth, and he is starting to get fed up with how she refuses to accept it. How is it that hard for her to grasp that the sex between them is nothing but business?

It is her actual business, after all!

“Yes,” Izzy agrees and he lips start to tremble again as she fights to get a hold back over her emotions. She lifts her gaze to meet his, eyes angry and hurt. “I get that, okay? I’m just some stupid woman who thought that I could change this if I show you that I would stop having sex with other men for you!”

“Izzy, me not being interested in you that way has nothing to do with your occupation,” Len explains quietly, and forces himself to keep his frustration down.

“I know.” Izzy huffs a sharp, upset laugh and kicks against his couch table in a bout of anger, making it slide back a couple of inches with a screech and spreading part of its topping on the floor around it. “That stupid, skinny tranny-

“Shut up!” Len meets her caught off-guard, slightly alarmed eyes in anger. “You’re not talking about him like this-"

“Because he is your sweetheart, now!?” Izzy barks a laugh and bares her teeth. “Because you suddenly turned into a fucking fag for him!?”

The fury that rips through his body is nearly smothering, and Len gets up, needs to get some distance between him and Izzy because he is scared what he would do otherwise.

Fag…

He grits his teeth, hands clenched into fists, and makes his way over to the small bathroom, breathing hard.

Fag… a fucking fag…

His dad voice is in the back of his mind, repeating these words, tauntingly, nastily, and Len wishes he could get his hands around that old bastard’s throat, squeeze his air off till the disdain would slowly fade out of his eyes and be replaced by nothing but a lifeless, far-away look…

Len forces that imagine away that fills him both with repulsion and satisfaction, and tries to concentrate on counting down from ten instead, like he used to do when he was younger, when his grip over his own emotions, over this ugly monster named anger, was much more slippery than it is these days.

Or used to be, at least.

A stream of cold water starts to gush out the faucet of his bathroom sink, and Len starts to scoop it into his face, focusing on the biting feeling on his skin.

He is no fag. His feelings for Barry…

They can all go to hell!

Len grits his teeth and slams his fist into the tiled wall next to the faucet head, causing his hand to burst up in pain.
It is nobody’s fucking business if he feels attracted to Barry! He is not going to let anybody push him in some damn box just to make themselves feel more comfortable!

It is nobody’s business but his! Not his father’s, not Izzy’s, not anybody’s! Who are they to judge him!?

Why is he so damn stupid to even still give a damn!?

Len exhales a hiss, starts to count again, but instead of emptying his mind as he intended to, Barry’s comes to his mind again, his face. His friend watches him with his warm blue eyes, tiredly but fondly, and it somehow helps.

“Len?” Izzy’s voice reaches him from the entrance to the small bathroom behind him. She sounds unusually small, probably scared of how he suddenly lost his cool, and he exhales slowly one last time before he turns around to her.

They study each other quietly for a long minute.

“Barry is none of your business,” Len says quietly, but there is still an unspoken anger lurking beneath his seeming calmness.

Izzy scowls but seems to know that now is not the time to let her dislike for the blonde be known, as she settles on an unhappy grimace and a reluctant nod instead.

They proceed to watch each other wordlessly, but eventually Izzy asks, visibly reluctantly. “What’s going to happen now?”

“We’ll see,” Len replies and proceeds when she looks about to protest. “I’ll help you out financially, Izzy, but you know as good as I that I’m hardly in the position to be a family man.”

“It’s your child,” Izzy argues stubbornly, clearly dissatisfied with his answer.

Len stays quiet, and both of them fall back into thick, uncomfortable silence.

“You can stay tonight,” Len finally offers when the tensions between them becomes too stifling.

Izzy has her hands crossed again, and in a way she reminds him of Barry in how she seems to hold herself just then. It is unsettling and tugs at something in him that makes this whole situation even more taxing.

“Will you sleep with me?” Izzy asks and meets his eyes with a tired and somewhat distant look.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Len steps towards her and meets her eyes firmly. “I never meant to lead you on, Izzy.”

She snorts, an unhappy smile spread over her lips, and she brushes over her eyes.

This is an awful situation, and Len wishes he could make it somehow easier for her, knowing that she has to be feeling nothing but miserable and disappointed right now.

“Will you sleep next to me, at least?” Her voice is thick with unshed tears, and he can’t bring himself to reject this wish as well.

He nods. “Yeah. Sure.”

Izzy smiles again, and it looks just as unnatural and pained as the one prior. She closes her eyes,
then, causing a couple of tears to finally fall.

Len lays an arm around her and pulls her closer so that he is holding her as she starts to weep again.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. I know it ended on a sad note and that Izzy’s pregnancy is pretty big news, but I’m also glad that we reached this point, as it eventually forces Len to pull his head out of his ass and make decisions. Even so, I want to let you know that Izzy isn’t becoming much more of a presence in this story for now, and I ask you for not wishing Len to hell right away. I found this to be quite an interesting idea to go after, seeing what a difficult topic a pregnancy on itself, especially one that wasn’t planned for, and what it can mean for relationships of the people involved.

A friend of mine was quite shocked about this development, which is good on one hand, because it shows that the story is able to get your emotions invested, but I don’t want to be put you off, so try to stay patient with me, Len and the story. ;)

Barry’s reaction to this will be shown next chapter which will be focused on Len and him.

I crossed the 1k kudos mark, and I’m ridiculously excited about it! :D Thank you so much to all of you amazing people who took the time to leave me a kudos or a comment. Your feedback means a lot to me and can brighten my whole day! I didn’t think I would find so many people who like this story, and while I never set out with the main goal for it to get popular in mind (I was hoping for it, of course, but I really just wanted to publish it :), it is still such a nice thing to see one’s work appreciated.

My betas who’ve helped me so far clearly also deserve a lot of the credit as well, as it was their willingness to spend their free time to edit my stories that improved the quality of this story as a whole. You girls were and are a wonderful gift! :)

Next chapter will be up in two weeks! You all have a wonderful time till then! <3
The Uncertainty of the Future Ahead

Chapter Summary

Barry learns that things are going to become much more complicated.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not edited, I hope I was able to take care of the most glaring mistakes even so. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It has been a quiet day so far, probably due to the bad weather that is keeping people inside. With the ongoing snowfall, nobody chooses to leave the warmth of their homes or work places if they didn’t have to.

Barry pauses from mopping the floor and looks over to the windows of the store, frowning slightly. He watches the storm which has gotten even worse over the last couple of hours and is now causing an icy mixture of rain and snow to drum against the glass.

Moments like this really make him appreciate that he can rely on Sam as his way to travel these days. At least, usually, that is the case.

Right now, his friend is dealing with a bronchitis and bedridden, thus unable to pick him up and bring him anywhere.

“At l-least I’ve m-my umb-breally,” Barry says to nobody in particular, something he tends to do when he is alone at work since it can be a little creepy to be the only person around. Mrs. Ming is sick again and staying with James for this week because of that which leaves him to take care of the store mostly on his own.

He usually doesn’t really have a problem with working on his own, in many cases he even prefers it, but his working place isn’t exactly placed in the nicest area of Keystone. Even with how unlikely it is that anybody would pick tonight of all nights to try and rob them, his mind stays more than persistent to bring up unsettling possibilities of what could happen.

Barry is no stranger to his own bad luck, after all, and the landline isn’t working either because of the ongoing storm. The thought has him a little on edge, and he can’t help but think that he likely wouldn’t have the possibility to get to the phone anyway, should someone decide to pick this location for a raid.

Annoyed at himself for being such a worrywart again, Barry knits his brows and pushes the pessimistic thought away.

It is not the first time he had to take care of the store without anybody else around, and with far
worse weather at times.

Looking over to the counter, Barry eyes the radio with a slightly wistful feeling, wishing that it would at least fill the store with some music or the false sense of company, but, right now, the only thing it is playing is white noise and would probably keep doing so for the near future until the storm ceases a little.

Turning back to his task at hand, Barry proceeds mopping the floor that isn’t really that dirty in the first place since hardly any people have passed by today who could have carried any mud inside.

Absently, he starts to hum to himself, ignoring the odd nagging worry that has stuck to him since he got up this morning.

The floor is done not even ten minutes later, and he proceeds to look for something else to do for the rest of the hour the store is supposed to still stay opened. He doesn’t like the idea to close earlier, since there still is the possibility that some customers could pass by, no matter unlikely it is.

As Barry takes note of their inventory in the storeroom, his mind goes to Axel, and he hopes the kid has somewhere dry and safe to stay tonight. The teen visited just yesterday, assisting him with restocking most of the shelves for which he was more than grateful as his joints has been acting up since the weather got worse a couple of weeks ago. Carrying boxes with canned food and other goods isn’t exactly an easy endeavor for Barry anymore because of that, and he very much welcomed Axel’s help as he isn’t sure whether he could have gotten it done all by himself.

Barry offered him to stay in his apartment for tonight since the weather forecast did predict how ghastly today’s weather would get, but Axel explained that he already had other plans with friends. If Barry had to guess, he would say it is likely some party somewhere, probably in one of the abandoned factories at the outer borders of Keystone, something he knows is a popular place among teenagers these days.

Feeling the knot of worry tightening in his guts, Barry forces himself to focus back on the list he is currently going over, making a note that they would need to reorder their cleaning agents soon.

It is just as he finishes writing, that he picks up on the sound of the entrance bell reaching him from the front of the store. The sound causes him to freeze for a second, and his mind, being its usual treacherous self, immediately starts to picture the worst possible reason for the sudden disruption.

He feels frightened enough for a moment that he can’t get himself to move at all, silently berating himself for not thinking.

Having left the front of the store without locking the door has been stupid – really, really stupid! He could kick himself for being so careless, seeing that he knows that bad weather was no guaranty for people to actually not pass by, especially the shady kind. Leaving the store open and without anybody in the front is an invitation for trouble.

Shivering, Barry finally gets himself to move again, turning around to walk up to the exit of the small storeroom with dread firmly nestled in the pit of his stomach.

He is probably worrying about nothing, just being his scared, stupid self again-

Spotting Len standing in front of the counter causes Barry to immediately relax, and he meets his friend’s eyes with a relieved smile, noticing how it seems so much easier to make the rest of the way over to him all of a sudden.

“H-hey,” Barry greets him as he walks around the counter. “Wh-what are y-you d-doing h-here?”
Len hasn’t passed by the store in a long while now, something Barry generally prefers due to how much trouble it could mean for both of them should someone spot them together and recognizes the infamous criminal.

Seeing how Len’s mere presence makes him feel safer already, Barry decides not to point out that coming here is a reckless thing to do.

Especially as his last run-in with Wally still has him feeling rather paranoid most of the time.

“I thought I could pick you up now that Scudder has an actual excuse from doing so,” Len explains with a smirk. Barry huffs a chuckle, shooting him an amused look. “S-Sam’s s-sick,” he reminds him before he arches an eyebrow and points out. “And d-don’t act as if y-you w-weren’t g-going t-to ch-chew h-his ear off sh-sh-should h-he t-try t-to d-do anyth-thing else b-but r-rest.”

Len snorts incredulously. “I’m not his nanny.”

“H-he’s y-your equ-equivalent of a g-get aw-away d-driver, and m-most of y-your p-planned h-heists d-depend on h-him b-bein th-there,” Barry retorts and grins when the other man scowls at him for obviously hitting the nail on its head.

“You’re clearly too much around the brat of yours,” Len grumbles with a frown, though the humor in his eyes is hard to miss. “You’re getting as annoying as he’s.”

“Axel’s n-no b-brat.” Barry steps closer to him, still smiling, glad that his friend decided to pass by, no matter how reckless it may be. With the ongoing bad weather, it is unlikely that anybody would have picked up on Len coming this way anyway.

“He is,” Len disagrees. “You just don’t realize it because he’s wrapped you around his little finger.”

Barry laughs, his mood already lighter than it has been for the most part of today, and nods towards the back of the store where he just came from. “G-go b-back t-to t-the b-break r-room, I’ll b-bring y-you a t-towel. Y-you’re d-drenched, and I j-just f-finished m-mopping th-th-the f-floor.”

“Aren’t we bossy tonight?” Len arches an eyebrow and grins when Barry shoots him an annoyed look that holds no real irritation. “Right, I’m moving.”

While Len heads towards the store’s back, Barry makes sure to lock the door this time around before to following him. It is not eleven yet, but it is more than unlikely that anybody would pass by within the next ten minutes anyway due to the storm that is still going strong, and he doesn’t want to risk his luck.

Making a brief detour to the storeroom where they keep a couple of towels around just in case, he grabs one and proceeds to Len, who already found his way to the small room Barry uses to stash his backpack and coat in during work.

Len accepts it gratefully since he once again forwent an umbrella. “Thanks.”

“S-Sam w-won’t b-be th-the only one s-sick f-for l-long if y-you k-keep r-running ar-round in th-this w-weather l-like th-this.” The frown with which Barry studies him this time is quite real, causing Len to shoot him a look that is both exasperate and quite fond. “I’m not getting sick from a little rain.”

“It’s r-raining and s-snowing,” Barry reminds him.

“You do remember what my alter ego is called, right?” Len asks. Barry rolls his eyes in response and points out. “Y-you l-like s-snow ab-bout as m-much as c-cats l-like w-water.” He then shoots a
poignant look to the leather jacket Len is wearing. “And y-you r-really c-could have p-picked s-someth-thing m-more w-weather a-ap-propriate.”

“You want me to run around in my blue parka in public?” Len inquires sarcastically as he finishes drying his hairs with the towel.

“Th-th-there’s th-this am-mazing inv-vention c-called an umb-brella,” Barry replies drily. “M-maybe y-you’ve h-heard of th-them b-before.”

“Probably in passing,” Len agrees which gets him a chuckle in response.

“Y-you’re h-hopel-less.” Barry shakes his head in amusement. “Y-you w-want s-someth-thing t-to d-drink w-while I f-finish up?”

It is calming to have Len around, to know that he is no longer the only person in the building, and the prospect to leave is suddenly much more appealing as well. He hopes Len would agree to stay over, they haven’t seen that much of each other over the last two weeks due to the Rogues being busy planning their last heist, and due to how badly that one went, it makes him appreciate his friend’s presence even more.

Len doesn’t answer right away, and it is then that Barry notice the slight sombre expression that sticks to the other man’s face as he is studying him now. A slight sense of foreboding settles over him in response, causing the worry from earlier to return.

“Yeah,” Len agrees just as Barry is about to speak, giving him a smile that doesn’t look that natural anymore. “You’ve a beer for me?”

“S-sure…” Barry hesitates but adds somewhat warily. “Is everyth-thing al-r-right?”

The somberness vanishes from Len’s gaze, as does pretty much any other emotion, which is disconcerting. Something is going on, it’s clear that something happened, and Barry doesn’t have to ask to know that it is bearing down on Len. It’s obvious by the way he pulled away and is now hiding behind a mask of coldness.

“Yes.” Len even sounds distant, and briefly Barry wonders whether this could be about the failed heist. It would be plausible but still feels somehow different.

Len appears less annoyed and frustrated, but there is a grim anger sticking to him…

“Ok-kay.” Barry decides against pressing the matter and instead gets Len a beer. Then, he hurries to finish the closing, which is done in less than ten minutes due to how he already did most of the cleaning beforehand.

An uneasy tension settles over the room when he returns to Len to count the money of today’s intakes. Contrary to before, the other man seems in a rather broody mood, clearly deep in thoughts about whatever must be bothering him, and Barry can’t help but glance at him every once in a while, as he takes care of the cash.

When he is finally done, and they are ready to leave, Len thaws a little up again, even giving him an apologetic look when he holds the backdoor open for him.

There is still a mixture of rain and snow coming down, but the harsh wind has eased up by now, which makes it less of an ordeal to make their way over to the bus stop.

The bus runs late tonight, most likely due to the bad weather conditions, and as they wait for it, Barry
does notice that Len is standing closer to him than usual, enough so that their shoulders are nearly touching. It doesn’t bother him, contrary to how he usually prefers his distance to other people in general for the most part.

It seems that things are always different when it comes to Len, a fact Barry has started to accept, and he allows himself to enjoy having the other man so close. Nonetheless, he isn’t sure what to make of the way Len keeps looking at him, frowning darkly, still looking troubled for some reason.

It is a bit unnerving, and Barry is glad when the bus eventually arrives with a twenty minutes’ delay. The silence between them turns somewhat stifling because he feels too apprehensive to ask Len outright about what is going on. He has an inkling that it must be about something big, and that he would probably rather not know.

Even so, Barry is aware that they are only postponing the inevitable, since Len clearly choose to come by to have the conversation about whatever is currently eating away at him.

The inside of the bus isn’t exactly warm, but it is still an improvement over the biting, wet cold outside, and Barry is grateful for it seeing that even the little increase in temperatures offer a release to the joints in his hands that are pulsing painfully again. He absentmindedly rubs them after they take their seats in the back, trying to warm them up while he studies the back of the seat in front of him.

Len’s touch is unexpected, and it startles Barry when he reaches for one of his hands, taking it between his own much warmer ones, and starts to rub it gently.

Barry is so taken aback by this, that he can only watch for a moment, eyes wide, unable to really grasp what is just happening. Then, his cheeks heat up intensely.

“The circulation in your hands is crap,” Len remarks, smirking slightly as Barry meets his eyes, clearly amused by his overall reaction to the touch.

Barry hums wordlessly, relieved that they are about the only passengers in the bus which gives them some privacy.

“You keep on nagging about me and how I’m not appropriately dressed for this shitty weather, and you’re boneheaded enough to not take gloves with you,” Len admonishes him. There is no real reproachful to it, though, and he sound more like he is ribbing him a little. The warmth in his eyes makes it clear that he isn’t really irked, in any case.

“I f-forgot th-them,” Barry explains and can’t help but watch how Len keeps warming his hand, feeling his callused skin that causes a faintly familiar and a little unsettling warmth to settle into his lower belly.

“On a day like this?” Len clearly finds it hard to believe, and Barry meets his incredulous look with a frown. “I overs-slept and w-was in a h-hurry.”

“You overslept?” Len lets go of Barry’s hand that feels pleasantly warmer by now, but his disappointment about the lack of contact only last for a second as his friend reaches for his other one to repeat the procedure. “You’ve troubles sleeping again?”

Barry shrugs. It is common for him to have worse nightmares around this time of the year. He thinks it is due to the weather, the lack of sun, and how bleak most everything tends to look.

“You look more tired,” Len observes, a pinched look returning to his eyes as he seems to study him.
“I’m f-fine.” Barry gives him a weary smile. “It’s F-Friday, I’ll b-be able t-to c-catch up on m-my s-sleep t-tomorrow n-night.”

“You should have more than one day a week to relax.” A slight anger creeps into Len’s voice, and Barry purses he lips, knowing where this conversation is about to head. They’ve talked about it a number of times already, and he is really not feeling like having another repetition of that discussion right now.

“I’m t-tired, L-Len,” Barry tells him honestly, hoping he could stop his friend this way so that he wouldn’t start another argument about the number of working hours he absolves every week.

“Because you’re working yourself into the ground.” The gaze with which Len meets his is intense, nearly harsh, and Barry can’t help but avert the eyes. His body tenses up in response, and the other man’s touch suddenly feels too intimidating. Thankfully, Len lets him pull his hand back without resistance, although it is plain to see on his face that he isn’t happy about it.

“I know that it is difficult for you to find another job,” Len starts and quickly proceeds when Barry is about to protest. “And I’m not saying that you should, you obviously like it there, and that’s good.” Shifting, so he is facing Barry more directly which causes their knees to bump lightly as a result, he reaches out for him again, grasping his right wrist lightly with a loose grip that holds nothing threatening. “You’re working too much, though. Six days a week, a ridiculous amount of hours for hardly any pay—”

“I d-don’t m-mind it, I t-told y-you s-so,” Barry interrupts him, annoyed. “I-it g-gives m-me a p-purp-pose, s-something I c-can c-concent-trate on, a-and th-the p-people th-there are n-nice.”

Not to mention that Mrs. Ming is hardly in the position to keep the store open without his help, anymore, and Barry was certainly not going to forsake her for some additional hours of sleep.

The irked and pinched expression has returned to Len’s face, and he doesn’t have to say it out loud to make it obvious what he thinks of that. Barry knows that Len means well, and he also knows what him working for far more than twelve hours a day for six days a week has to look like to other people.

The simple truth is, that working at the store is good for him, though, even if Len or anybody else didn’t believe him. It helps him to be at least somewhat financial independent, and it gives him a feeling of being appreciated, as both Mrs. Ming and most of their regulars are really happy to have him around.

Working six days is not exactly something new to him either, he did work many over hours as an CSI, with hardly ever two days off at a piece, and even during his time at university, he kept odd jobs at the side to save up money for getting an apartment after graduation.

“You can’t let people walk all over you,” Len says after a long moment of silence between them, startling Barry out of his own thoughts. He looks slightly pained as he does so, and for some reason Barry doesn’t think he is really talking about his job anymore.

“I kn-know,” Barry agrees quietly. “And I’m n-not, L-Len, r-really.”

Len huffs a humorless chuckle. “Yeah, because you’re not utterly horrible at putting your own needs before others’. ” He sighs and reaches up to rub a hand over his face. He fixes Barry once again with rather displeased gaze. “Your employer’s grandson has money like hay, why can’t he add some additional bucks to your salary.”
The mention of James causes the conversation Barry had with him just the other day to come to his mind, and how they actually talked about just that.

“I’m n-not w-working f-for J-James,” Barry argues curtly. This is what he also said to James, when he declined his offer, and he thinks that it is funny how Len really can’t stand the other man when they are really not that different in some ways. Like Len, James means well, but the notion to be financially dependent on his friend, even though he knows that James really wouldn’t mind, causes him unease.

Barry’s knowledge about his James’ feelings for him is something that makes their whole relationship still somewhat awkward. He feels awful for it, but he can’t help but be at least a little unsettled by the realization that James is interested in him that way. Maybe he would have considered the offer prior to learning that, but now the notion alone makes his skin itch, even though he knows how stupid that is of him.

“Then he should give his grandmother the money, and she can pay you more than under minimum wage.” Len looks pissed, really annoyed, and Barry feels a familiar irk rear its head as well. He pushes it aside, though, seeing that he is not willing to have another fight with Len.

“M-Mrs. M-Ming d-doesn’t w-want t-to ac-cept his m-money, and it’s her r-right.” He huffs, turning his head so he is facing the window next to him behind which he can see the lights of the streets outside pass by, as well as the still ongoing mixture of snow and rain that is clouding most of the sight.

“He’s her grandson.” Len grumbles, clearly not getting why the elder woman wouldn’t accept financial help from her grandson, and if Barry was honest, neither did her. As far as he knows, it seems to be somehow connected to James’ mother, but he never really asked since it wasn’t really his place to do so.

“I’m s-sure sh-she h-has h-her r-reasons,” Barry replies quietly. He really doesn’t want to discuss this any further, not tonight, not ever, but he knows Len, and he knows that hoping that his friend could leave it be for good is a silly thing to do.

The silence that settles between them is only disrupted by the noise of the moving bus around them, and the sound of the mixture of snow and rain hitting against the windows and roof.

The light tug on his wrist, causes Barry to turn back to his friend warily. Len watches him and meets his eyes with a grim but no longer angry expression. Instead, there is an odd melancholy to him, something dark and sad, and Barry can’t help but grab his friend’s hand in return, concerned by the sudden change in his demeanor.

“I don’t want to criticize you.” Len’s voice is low, nearly tired sounding, and there is an exhaustion to it that really worries Barry. “I know that you’re dealing with everything that happened to you far better than most would.” He frowns before he chuckles humorlessly. “Certainly better than I ever would.”

For a moment, Len averts his gaze, looking down at their joined hands. He pulls them closer and cups the back of Barry’s hand with his free one, similar to how he did prior, starting to rub his thumb lightly over his knuckles as he proceeds. “You’re one of the strongest people I know. You keep moving on no matter how much life pushes you down, and you’re still able to be kind despite everything…”

Len pauses and meets Barry’s eyes again.
His regret is palpable, and Barry wonders what happened, what his friend did that it would weigh on him this much. A part of him really doesn’t want to know, though, and the dread that settles into the pit of his stomach makes him feel queasy as he watches Len study him in return.

“I wish I could be better for you,” Len finally says, his voice grave and sad.

“L-Len…” Barry isn’t sure what to make of any of this or how to reply. Len’s behavior makes him feel a little apprehensive seeing that he is well aware of what his friends are capable of doing and the other man isn’t exactly what one would call a model citizen. He isn’t a bad person either, though, at least not like most people believe, and he tries to do better, Barry knows so.

There is goodness in Len, kindness, in how he treats Lisa, the other Rogues, in how he looks out for them and tries to take care of them, even if it is in his own gruff way. He isn’t perfect, far from it, but he tries to live to his own set of rules that keep him and the others in line.

… for the most part, that is.

Barry bites his lower lip nervously as a light shiver runs through his body. He knows that Len killed in the past, and that he would likely do so again. It is something Barry would never be able to make his peace with, but he can accept that, has to accept it if he wanted to keep Len in his life.

It is difficult at time, nearly painfully had, though, and while Barry tries not to, he can’t help but hold it at least a little against his friend during the times he feels bone tired and lays awake late at night when the guilt of it all slowly eats away at him.

Seeing Len this upset, this remorseful looking, causes a dread to overcome him, and he wonders what is the reason for his guilt.

Then, Wally crosses Barry’s mind, and his heart nearly leaps up his throat. He feels angry at himself a moment later, though, as he knows Len wouldn’t do that. That that a line the other man wouldn’t cross.

“Wh-what is g-going on?” Barry finally urges quietly, since giving his mind the opportunity to speculate is something that would only result in him making himself feel sick.

Len doesn’t immediately answer, and Barry stays silent, allowing his friend to collect his thought. He can see that it is difficult for him to come forward with what is troubling him.

“Izzy’s pregnant.” The words leave Len’s mouth and seem to hang in the air between them like something tangible, and Barry feels…

He isn’t sure.

His mind seems too full and utterly empty at the same time, like his head is crammed with thoughts but also vacant…

“Izzy is…” He swallows, shivers, and keeps searching Len’s face for… he doesn’t know.

Izzy is pregnant…

Barry blinks and shivers again. He pulls his hand back that is still between Len’s, or tries to, because this time the other man keeps holding onto him.

“She is pregnant,” Len agrees, the grimness from earlier has returned tenfold.
“I—is i-it y-y-yours?” Barry asks, and he notices how feeble his voice sounds, and how utterly weak and heavy his whole body suddenly feels. Len’s grip around his wrist tightens, not painfully so, but it still startles him.

“She says so.” The way Len says it makes it clear that he is not entirely sure that it is the case, and Barry is reminded that Izzy is a prostitute and that it’s possible that another of her customers could be the child’s father…

“Y-you d-don’t b-believe h-her?” His voice still sounds small, coarse, and he has troubles meeting Len’s eyes.

Against his expectations, Len doesn’t immediately response but hesitates. Eventually he sighs and shakes his head. “I don’t know. She said she stopped sleeping with others months ago, but…” He frowns and shrugs. “She lied before.”

“Sh-she s-slept o-only w-with y-you?” Barry asks surprised, pained by that notion, and isn’t able to keep the accusation out of his next words he proceeds. “Y-you s-said y-you t-two w-weren’t-”

“We aren’t.” Len cuts him off, meeting his eyes with a look that is both angry but also pleading. “I didn’t lie to you, and I’m still meaning everything I said.”

“Sh-she’s p-pregnant w-with y-your ch-child,” Barry points out quietly, his voice hardly more than a whisper, and the smile he gives Len is sad and weary. “Th-this ch-changes everyth-thing.”

Saying it causes a cold numbness to wrap around him. He closes his eyes, ignoring the pain in his chest and the back of his throat as-

Barry is startled once more when Len cups the back of his neck. Their eyes meet again, and he doesn’t fight when the other man pulls him closer, enough so that he can feel his breath on his lips and chin when he speaks.

“It changes things,” Len agrees softly as he fixes Barry with an intense gaze. “If it’s my child, I’ll take responsibility for it, and try to be as much of a father to it as it’s possible for me. It doesn’t mean that things between Izzy and me will suddenly turn upside down, though. I’ll help her, and I’ll try to take care of her and the child, but this doesn’t suddenly turn us into spouses. She knew that I’m not loving her, and she’s to deal with it even if she doesn’t like it.”

“Th-the ch-child…” Barry swallows and lowers his eyes, an unhappy frown on his face as he allows himself to lean a little back into Len’s touch, seeking comfort in it. “I-it w-would b-be b-better f-for it i-if i-it h-had b-both p-parents…”

Growing up without any actual parents, being pushed from one broken home to the next, Barry hates the notion that he could be the cause for another child to have to live through something similar.

“Having parents living in a loveless marriage and silently hating each other for it won’t do the kid anymore good either,” Len points out. “Izzy and I… we are good in the shack, and she is one of the few people aside from the Rogues I can stand having around for a while, but while she prefers to ignore it, I know that we just wouldn’t work out. We’re both too stubborn and proud, and she may think that a relationship with me is a good idea, but there’s a reason why I’m a notorious single.” He huffs a laugh that sounds both self-deprecating and grim. “You know my temper, I tend to become an utter jackass when I feel wronged, and Izzy isn’t much better. You wanna imagine what it will be like for a babe to grow up in a household with two parents like that?”

Barry stays quiet. He did grow up in households like that, and he remembers well what it was like to
try to make himself as small as possible so his foster parents would not notice him and redirect their anger from each other towards him.

The memory is livid and painful, and he clenches his fists as he fights it off again, back into the dark corners of his mind where he tries to never look.

“Y—you’d b-be n-not l-like th-these k-kind o-of p-parents,” Barry murmurs quietly. “Y-you are n-nothing l-like th-these f-fathers.” He swallows and redirects his gaze back to meet Len’s. “Y-you w-would n-never h-hit a ch-child o-or ab-buse it in any o-other w-way.”

A range of emotions crosses Len’s face then, and they flicker by too fast for Barry to really grasp all of them before the other man regains his composure again and puts a collected, rather cool expression back in place.

Even so, Barry was still able to make out the fear, doubt, and hope, and it isn’t for the first time that he realizes that Len is afraid of the notion that he could be capable of doing the same horrible things his father once did to Lisa and him. It causes Barry to reach for him and cup his cheek as he meets him with an honest and open, nearly pleading look.

Absentmindedly, he notices the feeling of his friend’s stubbles on his palm, the warmth of his skin, and there is a longing back in his chest that is nearly painful in its intensity.

“Y-you’re n-not an b-bad p-person, Len,” Barry says, his voice low and earnest. He needs it to get through his friend’s skull that he is not the kind of man he seems to try and make himself out to be so often. “Y-you’ve y-you’re f-faults, b-but y-you’re n-nothing l-like y-you f-father.”

Len looks surprised for a second, like he didn’t expect Barry to understand the root for his self-doubt. A pained expression settles over his face, and he closes his eyes, leaning into Barry’s touch.

They fall quiet, and for a while there is nothing but the droning of the bus around them and the still ongoing patter of the rain against its outside.

Barry studies Len’s face, feeling oddly disjointed from the world around them that seems far away all of a sudden, giving him an illusion of privacy.

It hurts seeing Len like this and not really knowing what was done to him in his youth but more than able to imagine the possible abuse. If Barry could, he would take it away from him and cause the traces all the pain and anger left behind to cease to exist.

The reality is, that nobody can make those things go away. The damage is already done, and there is nothing else left for people like them to do but to persevere and try to live as good as they can despite these painful scars.

Barry rubs his thumb lightly over Len’s cheekbone, imitating the gesture of comfort the other man displayed with him so many times in the past.

“Y-you’re a g-good m-man, d-despite everyth-thing,” Barry tells him, and watches how Len opens his eyes again, meeting his in return with a pained look that is both doubtful and grateful.

They study each other wordlessly for a few long minutes, the world around them forgotten, and Len starts to lightly urge him closer. Barry tense up automatically, baulking without thinking, but the fear that rises for a second quickly fades again when he notices how calm the other man looks.

He also doesn’t miss the warmth in his eyes, or the gratefulness, or…
Barry shiver slightly in response to the desire that lingers in Len’s dilated pupils, and he makes a small sound that lies somewhere between a protest and an inquiry.

Len hums, still urging him to move closer, but the touch is light, not insistent but more like a request. “You’re safe with me.”

The words cause something in Barry’s chest to loosen, some of the apprehension and fear to ease off a little, and he utters the other man’s name quietly as he allows himself to be pulled close the last inch that lays between them.

Len’s lips are warm and soft, and cause a shudder to run through Barry’s body in response to this most basic of ways to display their feelings to each other.

Right now, Barry can’t help but wonder why he is always so very apprehensive about the mere idea of kissing Len as it is an indescribably wonderful feeling, something that is elating despite how intimidating it is as well. Allowing himself to lean a little more into the intimate contact, he moves his hands to Len’s shoulders, holding onto him as their kiss prolongs.

It is nothing more than the touching of their lips since both of them know that Barry can’t handle more, but it still feels so very intimate.

Barry shivers when Len’s hands start to roam over his back, moving up and down lacily, causing him to hum into the kiss, moving closer to his partner. His eyes are closed, but he still can feel the other man’s gaze on himself, knows that he is being watched attentively. It is arousing in a way, causing the warm coiled up ball in his lower belly to tighten a bit more, and he whimpers in surprise when one of Len’s hands suddenly move lower on his back, past his belt, to his buttocks.

It is only a brief touch, nothing lingering, but Barry feels suddenly too tight all over, too hot and cold at the same time, and it scares him, even though a part of him still doesn’t want to pull back-

The monotone movement of the bus suddenly comes to a halt, and Barry recoils when the noise of the front door being opened cuts through the silence around them.

His heart hammers against his chest, and the throbbing of his pulse is too loud in his own ears as he turns towards the front of the bus where he spots three teenagers enter, all of them looking quite inebriated already. They don’t even glance in their direction, but Barry feels so embarrassed and unsettled, that he wishes the ground would open up and swallow him whole.

He kissed Len while they were out in public… where anybody could have seen them…

“Hey.” Len’s voice is low and soothing, and he meets Barry’s wide and scared eyes calmly. “Everything is alright, Barry. Nobody saw anything.” His hand reaches for Barry but doesn’t touch him immediately, seemingly waiting to see whether he would shy away from him or not. He doesn’t, and Len takes hold of his hand again, giving it a light, reassuring squeeze.

“Everything’s okay,” Len repeats quietly but firmly while his thumb starts to draw small soothing circles on the back of Barry’s hand. “I’m here, and you’re safe.”

Barry feels caged up, like the bus around him has suddenly shrunk, and he tries to calm his breathing, stop the panic to really get a hold of him as his eyes dart to the front of the bus again where still nobody is paying them any attention.

His skin is itching again, and he wishes he could get under a shower and scrub the feeling off. He looks over to the window next to him behind which he can hardly make out anything due to the increasing mixture of snow and rain, and he wonders whether anybody who stand out there has just
as hard of a time to look inside. He hopes so.

Len moving closer startles him out of that thought, and he turns back to the other man, eyes still wide and afraid. He tenses up when Len lets go of his hand and pulls him closer instead, so that the side of their bodies are touching.

A small protesting sound escapes Barry, and he realizes just now that he is trembling again.

“We’ll be home soon,” Len reminds him once more, and starts to rub his side lightly, calmly. “Nobody saw us. You’re safe.”

Barry searches Len’s face before he buries his own against the other man’s shoulder, pressing himself firmly against his body as if he could hide away from the world around them that way.

He prays that Len is right. He knows that it is unlikely that anybody picked up on them or what they did, but travelling at all with Len is a very dangerous thing to do, and it really just hits him now how stupid he was for agreeing to it in the first place.

Wally is suspicious of him, he made it more than clear at the gallery. Who says his nephew isn’t shadowing him or has him shadowed?

Barry starts to tremble at the thought, feeling terrified by it. Len notices it and presses his lips onto the top of Barry’s head, a reassuring gesture that causes him to shiver in response.

It has been a long day and a sudden exhaustion settles over Barry, causing him to lean even heavier against Len, who has started to rub his back again soothingly.

As he feels himself calm down again, his mind returns to Izzy and the fact that she is possibly bearing Len’s child. The idea fills him with uncertainty and worry, and despite what Len said, Barry knows that things like these never can be that easily resolved. Izzy’s pregnancy will inevitably change things, and he dreads the day that Len will realize that having a kid and a possible family is worth much more than an ex-superhero who is bringing along nothing but baggage.

Barry squeezes his eyes shut and concentrates on Len holding him, and the feeling of security that comes with him being so close.

He will take what he can get, no matter how long it eventually will end up lasting.

“I have you,” Len tells him, and Barry tries not to think of how much he is going to miss this when it will eventually break apart.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, my dear readers! :)  

So, Barry learned of Izzy’s pregnancy, and he is understandably distraught over it. It will be interesting to see how this affects Barry’s and Len’s further relationship, though it is obvious that Len is not willing to let it crumble over this. Barry, on the other hand, is worried about the unborn child, and what it would mean for it to grow up in a broken home since he himself has a lot of firsthand experience when it comes to that.

I enjoyed your feedback for the last chapter greatly, it was awesome to read through
your comments, and I’m not surprised that Izzy is not getting too much sympathy. It is still not certain whether she planned on getting pregnant or not, but she did make herself quite suspicious everything considered and her lying to Len in the first place to manipulate him to keep her around is certainly not making her any less of an egoistic jerk. Even so, I can’t help but feel a little sorry for her due to her situation, since it is rather obvious that Len doesn’t want to be in a relationship with her regardless, and due to his occupation, she probably can’t expect too much support from his side (other than financial one) once the child is born.

There is of course also the possibility of abortion, and maybe some of you are wondering why this hasn’t been brought up yet. This probably is the reason because Izzy hasn’t really thought too much about what to do now other than hoping that Len would get together with her and they becoming a family. Len himself is considering that option, but while he can’t see himself as a father, in case the child really is his, the thought of having it aborted doesn’t sit well with him either.

I’m surprised how many think that Len is not aware that this whole thing could be planned by Izzy, or that she is lying, as he is, but while most readers really dislike her due to her past appearances in this story, he feels true affection for her – not love, but he doesn’t want to see her hurt or miserable. I think, regardless whether the child is his or not, he would help her financially out, simply because he like Izzy and does see her as a friend in a way. He is going to be pissed at her for lying to him, but he has a soft spot for Izzy.

Unfortunately, it seems that I’m missing someone who can regularly edit Singularity for me once again, due to personal reasons coming up in the busy lives of my two wonderful betas. I don’t mind it too much as I think I’ve gotten an alright grasp on written English by now, enough so that my chapters are okay to read without extra editing, at least – I’m aware, of course, that I still make a lot of mistakes due to it not being my native language (present perfect and I will probably never become friends after all...), but I really hope that it isn’t bad enough that it takes away from your reading experience. If someone would be interesting to edit the upcoming chapters of Singularity for me, I would very much welcome and appreciate it, though. :)

My workload increased significantly over the last weeks, and it will do so even more with the next semester starting tomorrow. This is one of the reasons why I was so late to reply, and I wasn’t able to write more than two pages for chapter 80, which is frustrating since writing is like water to me – I get irritated when I’m thirsty. ;)

Because of that, I consider expanding the time between uploads to three weeks. I will wait and see how the next two weeks go – the next chapter is up on Sunday in two weeks in any case – but if it turns out that I’ve not enough time to write on new chapters, I prefer to spread out the time between my uploads instead of reaching a point where I either have to take a break for a while or get stressed out over getting new chapters ready. I hope you guys can understand that and that it won’t come to that!

Thanks so much again for your awesome feedback, it is very much appreciated as it does brighten my day to hear from you – and I’m not exaggerating here. :)

Next chapter will have Lisa and Roscoe pass by at Barry’s place to cook! :3

Till in two weeks! Take care! <3
"You don’t like burgers?" Lisa, who currently has both her hands buried in the grinded meat, eyes Barry with a sceptical look. Then, she turns back to the bowl with the patty meat in front of her and frowns. “You could have told me. We could have settled on something else.”

“I l-like b-burgers j-just f-fine,” Barry assures her smiling, briefly pausing in cutting the potatoes for the fries. “I j-just c-can’t eat th-them t-too oft-ten, or m-my s-stomach g-gives m-me p-problems.”

"Really?" Roscoe studies him with a thoughtful and curious look, also seeing this as an opportunity to take a small break from chopping the onions. “Is it psychosomatic?”

Barry lowers his gaze back to the potato he is currently working on and shrugs. “P-possibly.”

“Roscoe,” Lisa hisses, and Barry knows even without looking that she is glaring disapprovingly at her partner.

“It’s a legitimate question,” Roscoe argues but does sound somewhat apologetic, something he only ever does with Lisa.

“It’s sticking your nose somewhere where it doesn’t belong.” Lisa huffs annoyed and turns back to Barry, addressing him with a much softer tone. “Ignore him, you know that Roscoe and sensitivity don’t go along well.”

Roscoe grumbles something under his breath but doesn’t object outright. It causes Barry to smile, and he gives both of them a fond look. “It’s ok-kay.” He shrugs again, meeting Roscoe’s eyes briefly, before he lets his own drop back onto the half-cut potato in front of him. “And I g-guess it’s p-psychos-somatic.”

“Have you always displayed symptoms like that when you feel emotionally unstable?” Roscoe asks, causing his girlfriend to groan in annoyance.

“Seriously?” Lisa turns around so she can face her partner. “We talked about this, Roscoe. You don’t have this kind of conversation over dinner, and we’re here to spend a nice and relaxed evening with Barry, not to make him feel like one of your science-projects.”

“He is an adult, Lisa,” Roscoe replies and nods to Barry. “I’m sure he is able to tell me himself if he
doesn’t want to talk about something.”

Lisa’s frown deepens into a scowl, but they don’t actually start a fight since Barry interferes, not wanting something like that to happen while they are at his place. “It’s r-really ok-kay, Lisa,” he says and meets her eyes for a moment. He turns to Roscoe. “I’ve an eas-sily upset s-stomach, b-but it g-gets w-worse wh-when I’m w-worried or n-nervous. It’s s-someth-thing I alr-ready h-had t-to d-deal w-with in m-my y-youth, b-but it d-did e-eventually g-get b-better f-for a w-while after I g-grew up.”

Barry hesitates briefly but proceeds. “I d-don’t l-like t-talking ab-about th-these k-kind of th-things, it’s j-just v-very unc-comfortable f-for m-me.”

Roscoe studies him, and, to Barry, he looks a little like someone who is trying to solve a puzzle, which doesn’t sit all that well with him.

Then, his face relaxes somewhat, and he nods. “Fair enough.”

That said, Roscoe turns to Lisa and gives her a look that says ‘See? No harm done.’ which causes her to roll her eyes but smile.

Barry watches them in fond amusement but eventually goes back to cutting the rest of the vegetable, relaxing again.

It is late Sunday afternoon, early November, and Barry initially planned to spend the day mostly in bed or on the couch, reading and catching up on some sleep.

His plans were cut short half an hour ago by Lisa’s voice, coming from his bedroom, startled him enough to spill his tea over his hand.

Apparently, Lisa decided that it had been way too long since they cooked together last, and asked him whether it was alright with him if Roscoe and she came over so that the three of them could make dinner. Barry didn’t mind since he actually really liked the idea of having some company.

Now, the three of them are busy with preparing an easy but filling meal with Lisa making the meat patties, Roscoe cutting the vegetables for the topping and the salad, and Barry being responsible for cutting the fries. It’s a task he does slowly and neatly, partly because he prefers evenly sized fries, and partly because the weather is still causing the joints in his hands to act up. The potatoes aren’t especially difficult to cut, but the knife he has is not the sharpest one, and it does make the whole thing a bit more arduous than it has to be.

It’s a pity Axel isn’t around; Barry is certain the boy would have loved the burgers. The teen spent the majority of yesterday at Mrs. Ming’s store, helping him out, but he left in the evening because he had plans with some of his friends.

Maybe he could put one burger aside and take it with him to work tomorrow, as he is pretty sure that Axel would pass by at least to say hi and grab some coke-

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen another person cut fries this meticulously,” Roscoe remarks and meets Barry’s surprised look with a familiar arrogant smirk that doesn’t hold any bite, though. “You keep it going like this, and we’ll be done eating before you’re done with your second potato.”

Barry snorts and aches an eyebrow. “Y-you alw-ways s-say th-that y-you’re a m-man of s-science, h-how c-come y-you a-aren’t u-used t-to m-meticul-lous w-work?”

Roscoe scoffs, leans back, and gives him a grin that is all teeth. “What does someone like you know about work of science?” It’s a hypothetical question, as he doesn’t wait for Barry to speak up. “And
"Your work as a forensic scientist doesn’t count. The only thing you did was searching for clues
clumsy idiots had left behind, that’s not something to boast about."

"B-being a f-forensic s-scientist d-does inv-volve m-more th-than l-looking f-for c-clues, wh-which
c-can b-be d-difficult en-nough, b-by th-the w-way," Barry points out, very much amused about the
other man’s pomposity. He doesn’t mention that Roscoe himself was one of those clumsy idiots in
the past, knowing that the Rouge is very well aware of that and is just trying to egg him on.

While Len and the others tend to lock horns with Roscoe because of his rather particular character, it
hardly ever rubs Barry the wrong way.

Probably because he knew someone as a child the other man reminds him of a lot.

"Really?" Roscoe wrinkles his nose and gives Barry a rather condescending look, though it’s
obvious that there is no actual scorn behind it but instead amusement. “Like what? Eating
doughnuts?”

Barry laughs outright in response and can’t help but shoot the other man a slightly disbelieving look.
“Y-you’re p-prone t-to p-pretty p-petty s-stereot-typing f-for s-someone wh-who th-thinks s-so h-
highly of h-his own intelligence.”

Roscoe frowns for a second, looking nearly annoyed, but Barry can see through his act, and stays
relaxed. It probably doesn’t hurt that Lisa is there, who is already watching her boyfriend with
narrow eyes.

Then, the slight scowl slips away from Roscoe’s face and is replaced by a smirk. “And you don’t
actually break when someone isn’t handling you with kid gloves.” The other man then looks over to
Lisa and adds. “Hard to fathom, isn’t it?”

“Oh, shut up,” Lisa grumbles but isn’t able to keep a bemused smile off her lips. She points the
cooking spoon in her hand at Roscoe and clarifies. “I never said he wasn’t able to stand up for
himself. I just know the bunch of you, you get anybody to want to bash their head in on a table.”

“I’m nothing like your brother or Rory,” Roscoe argues sharply. “Nor anybody of these other dolts.”

“Your head is currently growing to the size of a basketball again, my dear.” Lisa gives him a very
unimpressed look and glances over to Barry, a slight frown on her face. “You know that I don’t
think that you’re unable to stand up for yourself, right?”

“I know.” Barry gives her a faint but honest smile. He knows that she doesn’t think that of him, she
is just trying to look out for him, and in all actuality he is quite grateful for her having his back more
often than not. The Rogues can be a bit too much at times, after all.

“Yes, you’re not babying him at all,” Roscoe remarks, conveniently missing his girlfriend’s glare he
receives in return as he goes on to address Barry. “You do make it hard for her not to feel like she’s
to stand up for you all the time, though. Considering how you constantly let Len walk all over you.”

“Roscoe!”

“I’m just stating a fact, Lisa,” Roscoe argues, meeting Lisa’s angry eyes firmly but without any heat.
Instead, he looks calm, curious even, and it is obvious that he isn’t out for a fight.

Barry, who finished cutting his fifth and last potato, puts his knife aside, and tries not to feel angry
with the other man and his bluntness or his obvious lack of tact.
Al comes to his mind, them in the park close to the de Vitis’ home…

How blunt and seemingly inconsiderate of others’ feelings the teenage boy always was.

It is odd, Barry muses briefly, how he hasn’t thought of the other man in a long while. Roscoe is so much like Albert at times, though, that it is hard not to remember him.

He pushes the memory away, unwilling to face anything related to his childhood or his later failings as the Flash. This is a can of worms he won’t open again. Sometimes it is easier to let things rest, to just accept them-

“You know that it is very unlikely that he will stop seeking out prostitutes.” Roscoe’s words startle him out of his own mind, and he reluctantly directs his attention back to him. “I’ve known Len for years now, and the only thing he ever really spent money on was booze and women-”

“Shut up, Roscoe,” Lisa cuts him off sharply, glaring warningly at her partner. “It’s none of your business what my brother does with his money and free time.” Her look turns icy, then, and her eyes narrow. “And you know as much as I do that Len is taking this very seriously.”

“Seriously enough that he would knock up one of his whores,” Roscoe agrees with a snort, but quickly adds when Lisa looks about ready to strangle him. “I’m not dragging your brother through the mud, Lisa. He is doing a great job on his own, I’m just making an observation.”

“You are being a jackass again, that’s what you’re doing!” Lisa grits out angrily and she nods to Barry, her eyes still fixed on her boyfriend. “You think this is something he wants to discuss with you of all people? With anybody?”

“No,” Roscoe agrees, frowning, and looks over to Barry. “But I’m sure he knows by now who Cold is, and that disappointments just belong to the package deal he has with him-”

“S-stop it.” Barry doesn’t raise his voice like Lisa, but it seems to have a better effect of shutting Roscoe up anyway. Probably because he didn’t expect him to say anything in the first place.

“Th-this i-is b-betw-ween L-Len and m-me,” Barry goes on, feeling not so much upset as wary about the other man bringing this up. “I d-don’t n-need y-you t-to p-patron-nize m-me, I’ve kn-known L-Len f-for y-years n-now as w-well, a-and I kn-know wh-who h-he is.”

Roscoe watches him quietly, and it’s obvious that he is surprised about him speaking up.

Then, the brief silence that settles over them ends again before it can become uncomfortable when the Rogues smirks, seemingly bemused. “You know, you offer yourself to be patronized by how meek you play it all the time.”

“I’m n-not d-doing th-that,” Barry argues, frowning.

Roscoe lifts an eyebrow in response but after glancing briefly at Lisa, who is still looking very much pissed, he shrugs. “Right.”

“Ignore him.” Lisa huffs as she walks up next to Roscoe. “He’s just sticking his big nose in something that is none of his business. He’s a real expert at that, believe me.” She shoots her partner another displeased look and backs away when he tries to reach for her hand. “And he is sure as hell sleeping alone tonight.”

“Seriously, Lisa?” Roscoe asks in a mixture of incredulity and amusement. “For touching upon a legit point?”
“No,” Lisa replies drily, “for being your obnoxious *holier than thou* self again.”

She then looks back at Barry. “Don’t listen to him, Bar, he’s just being a jerk again.”

“I’m not.” Roscoe crosses his arms, miffed. “I’m just stating the ob-

“Roscoe.” Lisa’s tone gets exasperated as she turns back to him. “Drop it.”

The other man seems to consider pressing his luck further, clearly not happy about being told to shut up in front of Barry, but he eventually thinks better of it and stays quiet.

“Seriously, I’ve no idea why I ever thought it would be a good idea to bring you along,” Lisa mutters annoyed.

Barry watches them quietly, and he isn’t surprised when he notices his sudden lack of appetite. He bites down on a tired sigh and instead gets up to bring the cut potato slices over to his kitchenette where Lisa has already prepared a pan with oil.

As he turns the stove on, he can hear Lisa and Roscoe having a rather heated whispered discussion, and while he is hardly more than five feet away, he prefers not to listen in too closely.

It should have probably occurred to him that this could happen. Roscoe is a rather blunt and inconsiderate fellow, and he is nosy, especially when something tickles his fancy. It isn’t lost on Barry that the other man seems quite interested in his relationship with Len, even though he hasn’t really touched upon it around him so far. Probably because Len himself was usually around, and it isn’t a secret to anybody how his friend prefers to keep things between them private.

To Roscoe, who is a scientist at heart, their relationship probably is quite an interesting case in a way, and the notion alone nearly causes Barry to snort when he briefly pictures the Rogue following Len and him around with a pad, constantly scribbling down notes about everything they do…

The cut fries sizzle when he puts the first bunch into the hot oil, and he wonders what Len is doing right now.

Whether he is with Izzy or not.

Len hasn’t been exactly withdrawn, but Barry felt that he doesn’t like to have him around right now. He didn’t say anything, but there was a tension to him when Barry was close that was hard to miss. It is confusing and hurtful, especially after what happened on the bus when his friend told him about Izzy’s pregnancy, but he also understands that the other man needs time to think. Len probably just now starts to realize what it really means that Izzy is bearing his child.

Barry sighs quietly, and starts to push the fries around with a fork.

It is difficult to guess what is going through Len’s head these days. Being told that you’re going to be a father is huge news, something that will have a big impact on the other man’s life, whether he wants to acknowledge it or not.

He doesn’t doubt that Len meant what he said to him, that things between them won’t change but…

Becoming a parent will inevitably do just that. It puts things into a new perspective when you realize that there is someone much more important out there than yourself. Someone who will always come first…

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and purses his lips, and while he tries not to, he can’t
help but think of Wally.

Wally, who was as much of a son to him as any kid could have ever been. Who still is, even though Barry knows that the younger man hates him.

Some things just can’t be changed, like the love for one’s child.

His pondering comes to an abrupt end when Lisa steps up next to him. There is concern on her face when he looks over to her, causing him to give her a faint smile, shaking his head.

“It’s f-fine,” Barry assures her. “I’m ok-kay.”

“You don’t look okay,” Lisa argues, shooting a dark frown over her shoulder back to where Roscoe is still sitting at the table. “And it’s not fine.” She heaves an exasperated sigh and grumbles. “At times I really think it pains him not to act like a jerk.”

“H-he’s j-just v-very b-blunt.” Barry shrugs and turns back to the fries.

“Blunt my ass.” Lisa leans with her hip against the kitchenette and crosses her arms. Her gaze is so intense that Barry can actually feel it on the side of his face. He glances over to her, uncertain whether the anger he can see in her eyes is actually meant for him or not.

What she says next, does not exactly surprise Barry, but he still hoped she would not bring it up, especially after she told Roscoe off for doing so just a moment ago. “I didn’t mean to excuse what Len did, before. It wasn’t right.”

Barry turns back to the pan, puts the plate with the done fries to the side and grabs another handful of freshly cut ones. When he speaks, his voice is low but firm. “L-Len and I-I n-never s-set d-down any g-ground r-rules f-for eith-ther of us. I d-didn’t exp-pect h-him t-to s-stop s-sleeping w-with w-women b-because of m-me, a-a-and I d-don’t h-hold it ag-again h-him.” He watches how the fries cause the oil to sizzle sharply and presses his lips into a thin line for a second. Then, he looks over to Lisa and goes on. “I c-can’t h-have s-sex w-with h-him… p-probab-bly e-ever, a-a-and h-he’s alr-right w-with th-that.”

He swallows and averts his eyes to the window above his kitchen sink. A thick blanket of clouds is covering the sky outside. The weather has been nasty the last couple of weeks, and according to the weather forecast, it would only get worse, much to Barry’s frustration. His body is hurting enough already as it is, and the cold, wet weather really isn’t doing him any favour here.

“And I c-can’t exp-pect h-him t-to s-stop h-having s-sex b-because o-of wh-what h-happened t-to m-me,” Barry explains. He chuckles sadly and shakes his head, reaching up to rub his forehead. He was getting a bit of a headache again. “W-we d-don’t even kn-know wh-what th-this thing b-betw-ween us i-i-is-”

“Bullshit.” Lisa’s voice is harsh, angry even, and causes Barry to tense up in response as he looks over to her in surprise. Her frown is so deep that is nearly becomes a scowl as she glares at him, her hands on her hips. “You two know exactly what that thing between you is. You’re both just too scared to really face it, and it really starts to piss me off how you seem to get out of your way to make this relationship not work!”

Barry inhales sharply and feels his face heat up in response to her words. His palms grow clammy, and the itching feeling returns to his skin as he stares at her, utterly unsure how to react or what to say. He wonders what exactly he has done to set her off all of a sudden.

Lisa doesn’t seem like she is done, but then her angry expression changes to one of surprise that is
quickly replaced by regret as she grimaces.

“I’m sorry,” Lisa apologizes, watching him now with open concern. “I shouldn’t have talked to you like that.”

Barry nods as he isn’t sure how else to react and his throat has closed up on him again so that he wouldn’t get a tone out if he tried. He makes a step back, away from her, as she suddenly seems much too close.

“Barry…” Lisa breaks the tense silence that tries to settle over them, not letting it get a footing. “I didn’t mean to snap at you.” She frowns and runs her fingers through her long hair absentmindedly while she proceeds, meeting his eyes firmly. “I know that it is none of my business in the first place, and that there are very understandable reasons why the whole thing is so difficult for you both…”

The frustration on her face is replaced by sadness when she studies him quietly for a second. “It’s just so damn maddening to see how you both handle this at times, and I know it really isn’t your fault. All of this is probably ridiculously frightening to you, and I’m really glad you were able to open up so much around Len and us as it is…”

Lisa sighs and turns to the side so she can lean back against the counter. She pinches the bridge of her nose in a way that reminds Barry a lot of her older brother, and he can’t help but feel bad for her, because he does know how frustrating his relationship with Len actually is. He is part of it, after all.

“He’s not trying to hurt you,” Lisa finally says, letting her hand sink as she crosses her arms. She frowns. “He is just so fucking horrible at this, has always been really.” She smiles humourlessly and adds. “We didn’t exactly grow up in a very open-minded environment, and it freaks him out like hell that he suddenly has feelings for another man.”

“I kn-know.” Barry has a pretty good picture of why Len has about as much trouble coming to terms with their relationship as he does by now, not least because the other man himself gave him quite some insight into it. “And I kn-know th-that h-he d-doesn’t w-want t-to h-hurt m-me.”

Going back to stirring the fries, he points out quietly. “I’m n-not ang-gry at h-him.”

Barry can feel Lisa’s eyes on him, how she keeps watching him for another long minute, and it is nearly palpable how she is pondering about whether she should say what is on her mind or not. He would have her rather not to. If he could, he would have stopped this conversation prior to this damn topic ever coming up, and he already knows what she is going to say anyway.

That he has a right to be angry, something Len himself pointed out to him a number of times in the past, as did Eddy and, at times, even Mary.

The thing is, Barry doesn’t want to be angry. Being angry wouldn’t improve anything for either of them, and while Len isn’t perfect, he tries to be better for him, and he can hardly ask for more…

“For how much you lay into me about butting into stuff that’s none of my business, you do quite an impressive job on your own, Lisa.” Both Lisa and he look over to Roscoe, who unexpectedly spoke up.

Barry’s face grows uncomfortably warm as he realizes that he has momentarily forgotten all about the other Rogue’s presence in his living room. Roscoe’s eyes are on Lisa, though, who appears rather annoyed for a second. Her expression lightens again, though, and she huffs a chuckle.

“I’m a perfect example for a pot calling the kettle black, aren’t I?” Lisa asks a little abashed and brushes a strain of hair out of her face. She gives Barry an apologetic smile and explains. “Len and
I’ve had a talk this morning that didn’t go too well and…” She sighs. “I let my frustration over him out on you, and I’m really sorry about that, Barry.”

The apology is heartfelt, that’s easy to see, and it eases some of the tension and unrest away that took hold of Barry in response to the heated words. He shakes his head, and assures her that it’s alright. “I kn-know y-you w-worry ab-bout L-Len.” He does so too, a lot even, and he can understand how that can wear down one’s nerves.

“I also worry about you,” Lisa points out and steps closer, slowly, as if to see whether he would back away again. When he doesn’t, she reaches for his hand and gives it a small reassuring squeeze. “You don’t only mean a lot to Len anymore, Barry.”

The words catch Barry off-guard, even though he knows that they shouldn’t. He does know that Lisa likes him, but while she doesn’t exactly make a secret out of it, it is still different being told so directly.

Lisa does pick up on his reaction and knits her brows in response. “You really are a bit thick at times for someone so smart, aren’t you?” She gives him a fond look. “Len and you are really meant for each other. You’ll get me to turn grey before I’m forty.”

“You’ll still be gorgeous,” Roscoe remarks very matter-of-factly from his spot at the table, causing both Barry and Lisa to look over to him again. Lisa smiles, both amused and visibly flattered. She pulls her hand back after giving Barry one last reassuring squeeze and makes her way over to the other man.

“You’re still not out of the doghouse tonight,” Lisa starts and cups Roscoe’s neck with her hand while he rests his hands on her hips in turn. “But maybe that will change if you keep up your sweet-talking, you old flatterer.”

“You are the worst,” Lisa accuses Roscoe, and her eyes are glowing with laughter as she meets his. “You always act as if you’re all facts but in reality you’re a true romantic at heart.”

“Nonsense.” Roscoe scoffs, but his haughty and indignant expression is so clearly fake that Barry doesn’t understand why he even bothers trying. “I’m nothing but a scientist with every fibre of my body.”

Lisa’s grin grows, and she bows down, meeting her partner’s lips. Roscoe pulls her closer, slinging his arms around her. The kiss only lasts a moment, then Lisa pulls back a little, for which Barry is grateful because all of a sudden he feels very much like an intruder in his own four walls, and awkwardly averts his eyes to the side.

Both Lisa and Roscoe hold each other’s gaze for a couple of seconds, then she steals another quick kiss from him and straightens up as she looks over to Barry. She gives him an apologetic look when she notices how uneasy he seems and steps away from Roscoe, though her fingers linger a little longer on his neck.
Lisa joins Barry at the little stove again. “Sorry about that.” Still grinning, she leans a bit closer to him as she goes on. “He’s just so damn adorable at times, I really can’t help myself.”

Barry coughs lightly, shifting awkwardly as he nods. “N-no, i-it’s f-fine.”

Lisa eyes him with open bemusement and chuckles. “You’ve gotten yourself quite a serious case of adorable too, Bar, so no need to be envious.”

Surprised, Barry turns back to her. “I-I’m n-not-”

“I know. I’m just being silly,” Lisa assures him, grinning. The expression quickly drops off her face, though, when her gaze falls upon the pan. Barry curses under his breath and whirls around, having totally forgotten about the fries. He quickly pushes the pan with the now dark brown fries off the hot stove, annoyed with himself that he made such a silly mistake.

“It seems we’re one potato short now,” Roscoe observes and adds when he notices Barry’s grim expression. “A true tragedy.”

“Seeing what a smartass you are, you can cut another potato to make up for the one we have just lost,” Lisa decides.

“You do realize that he’s the one who burned them,” Roscoe points out, grabbing one of the potatoes that are still left.

Barry doesn’t pay the other man any mind as he picks up the burned fries, puts them on a napkin, and throws them into the trash can under the sink. Lisa, in the meantime, pulls the pan back onto the hot stove and starts to put some of the remaining sliced potatoes in the hot oil.

Their cooking proceeds without any further incidents from there, and about twenty-five minutes later, all three of them start their dinner around Barry’s little kitchen table. The burgers turn out to everybody’s liking, and their mood is relaxed and joyful as they eat, with Barry mostly listening to Lisa who tells him about some ice-skating show Roscoe is about to take her end of November, and she is already very much looking forward to it.

“W-will it t-take p-place in th-the C-C s-stadium?” Barry asks, knowing that the Central City stadium did have such an event last year around that time of the year as well. They put posters up nearby the bus station he usually uses on his way from work, but he doesn’t think that he has seen anything similar so far this year.

“Nope.” Lisa shakes her head, a wide grin on her lips, making it rather hard to miss her excitement. “At the rink of the Rockefeller Center.”

“N-New Y-York?” Barry can’t say he was expecting this answer, but then again he probably should have, seeing that he does know Sam and how convenient that man can make these kind of trips. If his friend wasn’t using his gadget for crimes, he probably would make millions by offering a quick and easy way to travel all over the planet.

… not that travelling by the mirror verse is really that comfortable. At least not the first couple of times, and for someone with an easily upset stomach like Barry, it will probably always be connected to some nausea.

“I wasn’t aware we had another Rockefeller Center,” Roscoe remarks drily, but both Lisa and Barry ignore him.

“Yes, we’re going to see Stars on Ice,” Lisa tells him. The mere notion alone seems to make her
utterly giddy. “And I’m finally going to get an autograph by Ekaterina Gordeeva!”

Barry guesses that it has to be a rather popular ice skater, and he is reminded that Lisa herself does love the sport quite a lot. It is clear that this is going to be fun for his friend and that she is looking forward to it. He still can’t stop himself from asking whether they really think that this is a good idea.

“I m-mean, th-there are g-going t-to b-be a l-lot of m-media ar-round c-covering th-this,” Barry explains. “Isn’t it r-rather r-risky f-for y-you t-to g-go th-there…” Especially with the Flash, who is currently on the lookout for them once again.

“Don’t worry your head off, Allen,” Roscoe answers in his usual haughty and amused manner. “We’ve been in this business for about two decades by now, we know how to travel without getting unwanted attention.”

“Yes,” Lisa agrees, giving him a fond look. “There’s really nothing to worry about, Barry. This is actually something Roscoe and I do annually.” At Barry’s surprised look, she elaborates. “He knows that I love ice skating, and his Christmas present for me has been a visit to some ice show for years now.”

Lisa reaches for Roscoe’s hand and gives him a warm smile, which her partner returns easily.

Barry watches their exchange quietly, and he can’t help but notice that the other man seems much more open and relaxed today.

… and much more affectionate.

Then again, it probably isn’t such a surprise as Len is not around, and Roscoe and he are really a lot like cat and dog, fighting about one thing or another whenever they are in the same room, especially when Lisa is there too.

“Have you ever been to one?” Lisa inquires curiously, causing Barry to direct his attention back to her. He thinks briefly about it and nods. “Y-yes, y-years ago, at Disneyland, w-with…”

A cold heaviness settles in his stomach, and he doesn’t finish the sentence.

It was a visit to the entertainment park for Wally’s eleventh birthday.

An eternity ago, when Iris was still alive, Wally still loved him, and he still had a family…

Barry swallows and huffs a strained chuckle as he notices the concerned way Lisa is watching him now. He shrugs and fights against the shiver that tries to overcome him. “I-it w-was n-nice.”

It really was, a nice memory he hardly ever allows himself to visit these days.

He lowers his eyes to his plate and takes another bite from his burger, even though his appetite is utterly gone now.

“‘You know,” Lisa says, and while the cheerfulness in her voice is clearly forced, Barry can appreciate it that she tried not to let this moment turn awkward. “We should take you to one. Maybe on your birthday? And Len is going to come as well, of course.”

Roscoe’s snort gets him a warning look from his girlfriend in return. Though he only raises an eyebrow, amused. “Really? You expect Cold to join us to some ice skating show?”

“He does go to ice shows,” Lisa argues, crossing her arms.
“The only reason he goes to an ice skating ring is to watch ice hockey.”

“He doesn’t,” Lisa denies. “He and I went to a number of shows when we were younger, and he always came to watch me practice.”

“Cold went to these shows because you’re his little sister,” Roscoe points out and takes a sip from his coke before he adds. “And he went to your practice for the exactly same reason.”

“So you’re saying he is a good older brother?” Lisa asks with a sly grin, causing Roscoe to give her an exasperated and slightly annoyed look in return but otherwise leaves it at that. It is clear that he doesn’t make it that easy for her to get him to compliment Len.

Barry can’t say that it is surprising for him to learn that Len took the time to watch Lisa ice skating. He knows how important she is to the other man, and that he would go a far way to make her happy.

“Well, we’ll work something out,” Lisa decides and turns back to him excited once more “You’ll like it, you’ll see! It will be fun, and we can get you totally drunk on top of it.”

It is a bit annoying how the Rogues seem kind of hellbent on getting him wasted, something that started with Digger and quickly made its way around to the others. Barry gives his friend an unhappy frown, but doesn’t start another discussion about why this is likely not going to happen.

The idea of going to an ice show with Len, Lisa, and Roscoe is not something he is averse to, per se, but it is much too dangerous in the end to really consider it. If someone noticed them together in the Twins, it would not matter if Barry said that it was a pure coincidence. It would still inevitably mean a world of trouble for him. He has two more years of parole, and he doesn’t want to be put back into prison because he was reckless.

Lisa and Roscoe stay for another hour after they’re done eating, playing Black Jack for points and listening to some music on Lisa’s smartphone.

When his friends finally leave it is close to seven, and Barry can’t help but be grateful that Lisa decided to pass by today.

Roscoe is already inside the mirror, next to Sam who looks as impatient as ever, when Lisa turns to Barry and gives him a hug. He tenses up but manages to shake off the unease rather quickly as he returns the embrace.

“The whole thing with Izzy worries him,” Lisa whispers into his ear, her breath warm on his skin. “He isn’t sure how to deal with it and needs time to think.” She pulls back and meets Barry’s eyes. “He doesn’t want to hurt you, though. He worries about how you’re taking it too.”

Barry nods, smiling somewhat sadly. “I kn-know. It’s a l-lot t-to d-deal w-with. I’m n-not ang-gry a-at h-him f-for n-needing t-tume.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t be.” She studies him fondly for another second. Then, she steps back and walks over to the mirror where she stops again and turns back to him. “It was really nice, Barry. Thanks for having us.”

“Th-thanks f-for c-coming ov-ver,” Barry replies and watches her and the others go.

Feeling lighter than prior to his friends’ visit, he decides that he’s going to have another cup of tea and read some more before making it an early night.
This chapter is a bit of a breather one, it doesn’t really advance the plot, but I wanted to give little more introspective in what some of the Rogues think of the whole issue with Izzy’s pregnancy, and how Barry tries to cope with it.

I’m really happy about finally having a chapter with Roscoe in it. I like Lisa’s and his relationship, and what an outright ass he can be if he wants to. He thinks very highly of himself and enjoys letting the other Rogues know all about it, which lets him constantly egg on with anybody. His relationship with Barry is another thing I’m pleased I was finally able to touch upon a little as there are too many Rogues and too little time to really spotlight each and every one of them all the time. It is probably surprising to everybody that he gets along really well with Barry, considering what a snarky, arrogant ass he is for the majority of the time, but he also really has the smarts to back it up, and he has by now pretty much put together what exactly happened to Barry. It also doesn’t hurt that Barry is also quite smart, and one of the few people who doesn’t really seem to be put off by his rather arrogant and presumptuous behavior, so that Roscoe actually can have a conversation with him without Barry throwing some mug after him halfway through it.

While this chapter was slow and more a possibility to reflect on what happened, the next one will be on the whole other side of the spectrum, and something is going to occur that will lead into the next bigger part of plotline.

I hope you guys enjoyed the read, feedback is as always more than welcome, and the next chapter will be up on Sunday in two weeks as usual!
Dropping by With a Bang

Chapter Summary

Barry is looking forward to end his day on a pleasant note. He is not surprised when it doesn’t turn out that way.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by the marvellous Quintessenza, who did an amazing job doing so! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“How the hell are you able to work with this stuff?” Eddy asks in audible annoyance as he tries to get the gooey dough off his fingers. Unfortunately for him, it seems like he isn’t succeeding and gets most of it on his other hand instead.

Barry watches his friend amused as he is kneading his own piece of pizza dough without any problem.

“G-get y-your h-hands c-clean and d-dry th-them w-well,” Barry recites his words from earlier to Eddy and tries to keep a grin off his face. “Th-then act-tually c-cover th-them in f-flour this time as I’ve t-told y-you t-to.”

It is late Sunday evening, and Eddie invited himself over for dinner again. As usual, Barry has no problem with his friend joining him, and he actually welcomes his presence as he decided that this would be the perfect time to try out the recipe for these very appetizing looking hand-sized pizzas he read about in one of the cooking magazines at work.

“I covered my hands in flour already,” Eddie points out frustrated and glares at his rather miserable looking attempt of a pizza on the plate in front of him.

Barry refrains from reminding his friend that he did so rather sparingly and with still somewhat wet hands, seeing that Eddie has some odd aversion against the feeling of flour on his skin. Instead, he suggests. “Y-you c-can alw-ways c-cover y-your h-hands in a b-bit of oil. Th-that also usually h-helps w-with th-the s-stickin-ness.”

This causes Eddie to turn to him with an even darker frown. “And you couldn’t have told me so beforehand why exactly?”

“I f-forgot?” Barry offers with a shrug but tries to look at least somewhat apologetic.

“You didn’t.” Eddie huffs, glaring. “You just want me to get an ulcer before I’m forty, just like you.” He turns his attention to the dough and gives it one rather excessively disgusted look but still gets up to wash his hands at the kitchen sink again.
“I w-would n-never,” Barry argues with fake indignation which only gets him another glare in return.

“Of course you would,” Eddie says dismissively as he scrubs the stickiness off his hands. “You may fool Mary and the others with your nice-boy spiel, but I’ve looked through it ages ago.” He turns back to Barry and nods to the bowl with the pizza dough. “That thing is clearly the spawn of Satan.”

“Are y-you s-seriously c-calling m-me th-the d-devil?” Barry laughs outright at that amusingly stupid exaggeration. “B-because of the d-dough I m-made?”

“The dough we made,” Eddy corrects him as he returns to the kitchen table while still drying his hands. “But don’t even try making it my fault that this dough is shit. I did exactly what you told me to, I followed your instructions to the t.”

“I d-don’t kn-know h-how t-to t-tell y-you th-this.” Barry gives his friend a clearly feigned look of concern. “I r-really d-don’t w-want t-to ups-set y-you, b-but y-you s-see, p-pizza d-dough is s-supposed t-to b-be s-sticky, Eddy.”

“Shut up, jackass.” Eddy laughs and crumples the dishtowel in his hands up into a ball. He then throws it at Barry and hits him square in the face.

“All g-grown up, aren’t w-we?” Barry replies drily and decides to leave the towel on his lap till he is done with his portion of the dough.

“All g-grown up, aren’t w-we?” Barry replies drily and decides to leave the towel on his lap till he is done with his portion of the dough.

“The abundance of my youthful spirit is probably the only reason you’re not grey yet,” Eddy points out with a smirk. “So stop nagging and go back to work, these pizza loaves aren’t making themselves, are they?”

“Y-you are n-not b-backing out of h-helping m-me j-just b-because th-the d-dough s-scares you.” Barry narrows his eyes as he studies the other man. “Or n-no p-pizza f-for y-you.”

“Hey!” Eddy crosses his arms but his outrage is kind of ruined by the grin on his lips. “I helped you make that dough, and I’m not afraid of it.” Then, he shrugs and leans back against his chair as he grabs his can of coke. “And do you even have oil for me to work with? I mean, with how poor you are and all?”

Barry laughs outright at that, not annoyed or hurt in the slightest, seeing that Eddy is just being Eddy, and there is no malicious intent behind his words at all. It is a bit strange how the other man can talk to him like this without causing the slightest pang of insecurity or distress to stir in his chest. Though, by now, Barry has realized that Eddy is probably one of the closest friends he’s ever had, and that likely helps.

“Y-you’re s-such an ass,” Barry tells him, still chuckling, and nods to the small cupboard next to his small kichenette which he picked up just a few weeks ago when he joined Eddy and Mary’s trip to one of the flea markets where both like to scavenge for hidden treasures. “I’ve a c-can of v-vegetable oil.”

There is a thump coming from his bedroom, loud enough that it can only stem from something heavy falling onto the ground, and it causes Barry to freeze.

Eddy, who heard it too, sits up straight. He looks in the direction where Barry’s bedroom lies, then back at him, and narrows his eyes. Then he is just gone.

Seeing his friend suddenly vanish in front of him causes Barry’s heart to make another leap in his chest, even though he already knows about his powers.
There is a moment of silence-

“Barry, it’s *Snart!*” Eddy’s voice reaches him from his bedroom, sounding worried, and enables Barry to finally shake off his stupor and get up as well.

The words cause a jolt of pure fear to go through his body, and he hurries to join his friends, while awful pictures flash in his mind, causing his stomach to coil up in a painfully tight ball.

The Rogues planned to do a heist today, somewhere in Central City. It’s about a painting Len’s friend Gael wants, and as far as Barry has been told, this was supposed to be an easy and quick job.

Apparently, that hasn’t been the case…

Barry comes to an abrupt halt at the entrance to his bedroom, and it is as if he is suddenly frozen to the spot.

There, on the ground in front of the mirror, knees Len, looking pale like a ghost, face turned into a grimace of pain while his left hand grips his right shoulder tightly. Barry nearly grows sick when he spots where the other man’s blood has started to colour his blue parker into a dark purple, and he can’t move, can do nothing but feel horrified and utterly helpless.

The moment passes quickly, though, and he forces his legs to go on despite how weak they feel.

Barry kneels next to Len, whose eyes were closed so far but open now to glance towards him. He still looks worryingly pale, and a thin sheen of sweat is covering his face. It is obvious that he is in severe pain.

Len’s pupils are dilated and dark, though he immediately forces himself to school his features as good as he can, hiding his discomfort behind a familiar mask when he realizes that it is Barry who joined them. The urge to curse in frustration bubbles up in Barry’s throat in response but he forces it down.

“I’m okay,” Len says, and if this situation wasn’t so damn serious, Barry would have laughed, because this is so clearly a lie. Then, he remembers the rest of the Rogues.

“Wh-what h-happened? Wh-where are th-the o-others?” Barry asks concerned despite a part of him being afraid of what the answer could be.

It doesn’t help when Len’s expression grows even grimmer, and he doesn’t only look in pain anymore, but angry and very worried as well.

Whatever happened, it seems to have caught the Rogues by surprise, and it isn’t hard for Barry to realize that, more than likely, Len is blaming himself for it.

“I don’t know,” Len finally answers after a long and tense silence passed. He swallows and looks over to meet his eyes. “I think Sam got them away, but I can’t say for sure.”

There are many questions on the tip of Barry’s tongue, but Len is injured, bleeding rather heavily, and clearly in pain, so that this now is hardly the right time to try and find out more, no matter how concerned he is about the others.

“L-Let’s g-get y-you t-to th-the b-bathr-room, I n-need t-to t-take a l-look at th-the w-wound,” Barry hears himself say, sounding much calmer than he feels.

Len nods slightly and promptly grimaces, belying his earlier ridiculous statement about being fine
“You sure you’re not on the way of bleeding out?” Eddy asks as he grabs Len’s good arm, which still causes the criminal to hiss in pain, though he doesn’t protest. “Because you look like it.”

“Ed-dy,” Barry warns his friend, not in the mood for his particular sense of humour right now, and Eddy has the decency to at least shoot him an apologetic look.

While Barry hurriedly grabs a small stack of towels as well as a bedsheets and a white shirt from his bedroom cupboard, Eddy helps Len out of the bedroom and to the bathroom where he manoeuvres him to the toilet and helps him to sit down.

As soon as Barry joins them, Eddy moves back to give him space so that he can help Len out of his parka, which is a clearly painful undertaking for the other man despite how careful he tries to be. Len doesn’t make a noise during the whole thing, he only grimaces slightly when Barry helps him with getting his injured arm free.

“C-could y-you g-grab m-me th-the s-scissors f-from th-the k-kitchen, Ed-dy?” Barry asks, keeping his eyes on Len as he studies the spot the gun penetrated his friend’s shoulder, just below the joint.

“Sure,” Eddy agrees readily, already moving. “I’m on it.”

Barry nods, his gaze still on Len, and he steps a bit closer, carefully urging him to lean a little forward, so that he can see his back. Len relents wordlessly, giving in under his touch much more easily than he would have expected him to, which causes some of the tension in his guts to ease somewhat.

It is a relief to think that Len would not put up a fight, seeing how on edge he already is, and Barry can’t keep himself from cupping his friend’s cheek lightly, comfortably. Len doesn’t lift his gaze but leans into the touch, and Barry feels his throat close up in response. He presses his lips onto the top of the brunette crown of hair.

Forcing himself to pull back only after a second, Barry quickly brushes over his eyes and turns his attention to the back of Len’s shoulder. He is somewhat relieved to see that the bullet has passed right through. The bleeding is still strong, and must have been going for a while judging by how much blood he has lost so far, but it’s not like any main arteries were hit, which is an immense relief.

Eddy returns, handing Barry the scissors while studying Len with a frown. “He’s not going to die here, is he?” He quickly proceeds when he notices Barry’s upset look. “I mean, because having the corpse of one of the most notorious criminals of the Twins in your apartment is certainly not going to give you any plus points with the bitch of parole officer you have.”

When Barry’s expression only changes from worried to livid, Eddy quickly lifts both of his hands in an appeasing manner, grimacing. “Yeah, that wasn’t helpful, I’m sorry. I’ll be quiet now, I promise.”

“C-can y-you g-go and b-boil s-some w-water, p-please?” Barry asks him rather curtly, knowing that his friend didn’t mean to be tactless but still angry at him for it nonetheless. He isn’t in his most patient mood right now, it seems.

“Sure.” Eddy nods and swiftly retreats from the small bathroom again, visibly relieved to be able to get some distance between them.

“I n-need t-to c-cut th-the sh-shirt at th-the f-front and b-back t-to g-get it o-off m-more e-easily,” Barry explains to Len after he turned his attention back to him. “Th-that w-way I w-won’t c-cause y-you a-any un-necessary p-pain.”
Len nods, eyes closed once more and his lips pressed into a thin line. It is obvious that he is in harsh pain even though the bullet seems to have missed any bones.

“W-we n-need t-to ap-play p-pressure on th-the ent-trance and ex-xit w-wounds afterw-wards,” Barry goes on while he starts to cut the fabric of Len’s dark shirt. “I’ll n-need Ed-dy’s h-help t-to m-make a p-pressure b-b-bandage.”

The urge to shiver overcomes him, but Barry fights it down. He walks around Len, squeezing himself between the small space between his toilet and shower, and starts to cut the back of the shirt as well.

“Th-the b-bullet s-seems t-to h-have g-gone s-straight th-through.” Barry carefully starts to pull the sleeve off Len’s arm, and he isn’t sure whether he is grateful or more worried that his friend keeps completely still despite how much this has to hurt him.

“Yeah,” Len agrees, his voice low and coarse, but still firm. “I’m lucky; it seems to have missed any life-threatening spots.”

“You’re s-still b-bleeding a l-lot.” Barry points out as he walks to the sink, noticing how oddly detached he starts to feel from this whole situation, how calm. Maybe it is his training from years ago kicking in… He hopes so at least, because him having nervous breakdown is certainly not something anybody can need right now.

“I’ll be fine,” Len assures him as he meets his eyes firmly. Despite the pain that is visible in them, it is obvious that he is still very much thinking clearly. “I’ve been injured worse before, this will heal up in no time.”

These words do nothing to calm Barry’s worries. Even with how aware he is that the life of a criminal is full of danger and involves being hurt on a rather regular basis, it is still upsetting to be reminded of that in such a way.

Barry has seen Len’s scars already, of course, even the two that stem from gunshots as it is hard to overlook them with how they are placed on his left lower arm and right calf, areas that are generally visible when the other man only wears shorts and a wife beater. Usually, it is easy for him not to think too much about them, or the other ugly looking ones on his back that look much, much older.

“Yeah,” Barry agrees and tires to smile despite how nauseated he feels. Judging by Len’s frown, he is failing miserably at it. Len is about to try and reassure him once again about how him being shot is no big deal, but Barry cuts him off by calling over his shoulder for Eddy.

Eddy turns up at the entrance to the bathroom within a second. “Yeah?”

“I n-need y-your h-help t-to ap-ply a p-pressure b-bandage.” Barry walks over to the stack of towels on the sink. “C-can y-you c-cut t-two h-hand s-sized p-patches off th-the wh-white sh-shirt? And c-cut a l-long s-stripe off th-the b-bedsh-sheet s-so th-that w-we c-can u-use it t-to f-fix th-the t-towels in p-place?”

Eddy nods and reaches for the shirt while he accepts the scissors Barry hands him. He shoots him a curious look as he starts to cut the white fabric. “You’ve watched a lot of Emergency Room as a kid?”

Barry smiles slightly and shakes his head. “I w-worked f-for th-the p-police o-once, r-remember? W-we h-had t-to t-take a c-couple of f-first aid c-classes f-for th-that.” That he also collected quite an abt knowledge about dealing with various forms of injuries while growing up and widened his horizon
on this topic even more after he became the Flash, stays unsaid of course.

“Right, my buddy was a wannabe-cop once, I nearly forgot,” Eddy snarks, and Barry, who isn’t bothered by it, doesn’t miss the dark look his friend gets from Len for it. Thankfully, Eddy doesn’t notice, and instead swiftly cuts the shirt in the asked pieces. He hands them Barry and moves on to the bedsheet.

Like earlier, Len keeps a cool, unemotional expression while they put the bandage on, but even with him keeping a straight face during the whole procedure, Barry knows that he is in bad pain by how rigid his whole body is. He is pretty sure the reason why Len tries to not show how badly he is injured, is because of Eddy being around, as they both don’t really know each other very well, and neither of them seems to think much of the other man as it is.

When the bandage is finally in place, Len’s whole face is covered in sweat, and he looks even paler than a few minutes ago, close to passing out. He doesn’t protest when Barry asks Eddy to help him to his bedroom, probably because it is visibly difficult for him to stand on his own two feet right now.

Thankfully, Eddy keeps quiet for the most part, probably feeling how nervous and worried Barry is, who watches them attentively all the way.

Len grunts when Eddy assists him with sitting down onto the bed but otherwise tries to hide his pain. Barry takes Eddy’s place a moment later and helps Len to adjust his position. He puts a folded blanket and an additional pillow behind Len so that his upper body is mostly upright.

“Y-your w-wound sh-should b-be p-placed ab-ove y-your h-heart f-for n-now,” Barry explains as he notices with concern how Len’s expression grows even tighter. “It w-will h-help t-to s-stop th-the b-bleeding.” This is hardly going to make this into an any less miserable experience for his friend, and he knows that it isn’t his fault that he is in pain, but he still feels a familiar guilt dig its sharp teeth into him.

“I know,” Len grits out, and presses his eyes shut, groaning softly. “You’ve any pain meds?”

“J-just s-some asp-pirin,” Barry says, hating how much in pain Len sounds and the fact that he doesn’t have any of the meds he had got prior to being released from prison. Though they would already be more than a year past their expiry date by now in any case.

“I’ve Ibuprofen at my place,” Eddy says, meeting Barry’s surprised and hopeful look with a thin smile. “It’s not as good as morphine but it’s better than aspirin any day. I’ll grab it.”

With that, the other man jogs out of the bedroom, leaving Barry alone with Len, whose entire focus seems to be on his shoulder, or more precisely the pain oozing from the bullet wound, as it looks like he hasn’t even noticed what Eddy has said or that he is gone.

“We’ll g-get y-you s-someth-thing f-for y-your p-pain,” Barry assures Len, reaching for him and brushing his bangs away from his forehead. “Y-you’ll b-be d-doing b-better in a b-bit, I p-promise.”

“Lisa…” Len grits through his teeth, eyes squeezed shut and his face now very much a mask of agony. “They were waiting for us there, it was an ambush, and I don’t know whether she or any of the others got away.” He hisses and punches the mattress next to him with his good hand. “Scudder, that dumb fuck shouldn’t have dragged me away while they others were still there.”

“You w-were injured, L-Len,” Barry reminds him, understanding where his friend’s frustration comes from as Len sees it as his responsibility to make sure that the others get out of a job with their
heads still attached. The Rogues are not only partners of convenience anymore, they do care for each other, even if most of them would prefer to bite their own tongues off rather than admit that.

“I’ve had worse,” Len insists stubbornly, his left hand clenched into a fist tightly enough that his knuckles have turned white. “And if they die because of that idiot, I’ll make sure to send him to hell after them if he is unlucky enough to still be around.”

Barry knows better than to point out that he doubts that very much, and instead cups Len’s neck, similar to how the other man usually does when he tries to comfort him. “Th-they’re f-fine, Len. Th-they’re as t-tough as n-nails, es-specially Lisa.”

All of the Rogues are, really, and while a small part of him worries that this could be the heist that ends in worse consequences than them being hurt and put into prison, he tries to ignore it and focus on his partner instead.

“If anything happens to them…” Len breaks off and grimaces, and it worries Barry when he picks up on how the other man has started to tremble lightly. Probably due to the blood loss, as well as the pain.

It is a relief when Eddy finally returns, a bottle of Ibuprofen in his hand, as well as a glass of water. Barry shoots him a grateful look as he accepts the drug and the water from his friend. He grabs one of the 500mg pills and turns to Len, who is watching him through squinted eyes, his face as white as a sheet and covered in sweat.

“Here.” Barry gives him the medication which he gratefully accepts. It worries him how slow and sluggishly Len is moving, and he assists him with the water, holding the glass for him, and it a sign that the injury is starting to take a toll on him when he doesn’t protest at all.

“I’ll make some tea,” Eddy tells him, and he nods absentmindedly, not taking his eyes off Len.

“Y-you’ll f-feel b-better s-soon,” Barry assures Len. “Th-the I-bupro-fen w-will k-kick in in n-no t-time, and y-you’ll b-be able t-to r-rest.”

Len nods, eyes squeezed shut. “Yeah, I know.” The agony he is still experiencing is nearly palpable, it seems to thicken the air between them.

“Y-you’ll b-be f-fine,” Barry repeats, tentatively brushing his fingers through the other man’s hair. He isn’t sure who he is trying to comfort, Len or himself. Fact is, he hasn’t felt this worried and helpless in a long time, and seeing Len in so much pain is just an utterly awful experience.

“I’m sorry Sam brought me here,” Len suddenly says, turning his head slightly so that he can meet Barry’s eyes. “That idiot shouldn’t have put you in this situation.”

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat as his eyes start to itch, and he is very much aware that Len has a point, that this could get him into so much trouble should the wrong person decide to pass by now, but even so he is grateful to Sam for having made this decision.

“I’m n-not,” Barry says quietly and grabs Len’s left hand, taking it in a loose hold. He leans closer to his friend, resting his forehead lightly on his uninjured shoulder. The need to be close to him, to feel him, is nearly oppressive, and he knows he would never be able to express to Len how glad he is that he is here, that Sam got him here.

There is no way for him to change Len or what the other man picked as a living, and he doesn’t want to, not anymore, not really, at least. He made his peace with the fact that Len chose this dangerous life for himself.
That doesn’t mean that he doesn’t hate it at times, the danger that comes with it, and even though the Rogues prefer to ignore the fact that the danger to be killed during a job is very much part of their lives, this still is very much a reality.

“I-I’m g-glad y-you’re here,” Barry utters coarsely, ignoring the couple of warm tears start to run down his cheeks.

The notion that he could have lost Len just like that causes a coldness to settle in his chest that makes it hard to breath.

“Barry, it’s okay.” Len speaks in low, soothing tone, and Barry feels like such a jerk for making the other man think that he needs to console him even though he is the one who was shot. “I’ll be fine in no time; I’ve been shot before. As long as nothing vital was hit and the bleeding is stopped, it will hurt like a bitch, but I’ll live.”

“I kn-know,” Barry mutters, swallowing thickly and forces himself to pull back so that he can meet Len’s eyes. “I’m s-sorry. Y-you’re h-hurt, and I’m n-not h-helping l-like th-this.”

“You made me a compression bandage that stops me from bleeding out, I’d call that helping,” Len reminds him, a tired but kind smile on his lips, and it is then that Barry notices, that he appears a little bit more relaxed. It seems that the Ibuprofen has started to kick in.

“I th-think y-you sh-should t-try and g-get s-some s-sleep.” Barry gives Len’s hand a comforting squeeze. “Y-you n-need r-rest.”

Len snorts, looking tired, with dark circles under his eyes that are a stark contrast to his otherwise nearly ghostly pale skin. “I’d prefer a beer.”

“N-not wh-while y-you’re m-missing ab-bout a qu-quart of y-your b-blood,” Barry retorts drily. He then thinks of something and asks. “Is th-there a w-way th-that I c-can c-cont-tact d-doctor S-Simmons?”

“We’re out of luck there,” Len says and let his head sink back so that it rests on the pillow as he closes his eyes again. “The old bastard went underground a couple of months ago… seems to have a problem with the mob.”

That isn’t what Barry had hoped for, and he studies the other man’s exhausted and sick looking face with concern as he presses on. “Wh-what ab-bout an-others d-doctor? Y-you’ve l-lost a l-lot of b-blood, L-Len, a-and wh-while lb-buprof-fen is g-good f-for n-now, it’s h-hardly th-the r-right m-medication y-you n-need.”

Len’s only response is a hum while his body goes lax, and Barry’s heart nearly jumps up his throat in fear as he watches this. It is when he notices that the other man is still breathing, and slightly trembling, that he realizes that Len only fell asleep, which probably says even more about the amount of blood he had to have lost than his ghostly appearance.

Reluctantly, as Barry is worried about leaving Len’s side with how bad of a shape he is in, he gets up and walks over to the bedroom door. He tries to be quiet as he calls out for Eddy, even though he is sure that Len wouldn’t wake up very soon again.

His friend appears within his sight just a moment later, a cup of what Barry guesses has to be coffee in hand.

“How is he?” Eddy asks as he joins him, looking past him to the inside of the bedroom.
“As g-good a-as c-can b-be exp-ected u-under th-these c-circums-stances,” Barry says, glancing back himself.

“He’s lost quite some blood by the looks of it.”

“I kn-know…”

“Hospital isn’t an option, is it?”

“…” Barry is well aware that the sensible thing would be to call an ambulance, but he still remembers more than clearly what a miserable place the hospital ward in the Heights is. Director Wolfe would likely make sure that his guards show Captain Cold what he thinks of the criminal making him look like an idiot by breaking out within a couple of months or even just weeks whenever he is put in there, and Len wouldn’t be able to put up a fight, hurt as he is.

“Right.” Eddy nods and gives him a sympathetic look. “I wouldn’t want to be send back to that shithole of a place either if it could be avoided.”

“W-we n-need t-to m-make h-him a h-hypertonic s-saline s-sol-lution,” Barry tells the other man, who lifts an eyebrow at that. “A what?”

“It’s a s-solution w-with w-which w-we c-can c-compens-sate L-Len’s b-blood l-loss,” Barry explains, already on his way to the living room, his friend following close behind.

“You can make such stuff?” Eddy asks with a mixture of amusement and incredulity.

“It’s n-not th-that d-diffic-cult.” Barry hurries over to the entrance, grabbing his coat. “I d-don’t h-have all th-the ing-gridients I n-need, though. I’ve t-to g-go t-to th-the d-drugs-store t-to g-get s-some d-dest-tilled w-water a-and d-dextrose.” He turns to his friend and gives him a pleading look. “C-can y-you k-keep an eye on h-him wh-while I’m g-gone, p-please?”

Eddy seems to consider it and eventually shakes his head. “Stay here, I’ll get you what you need, Bar. Just write the stuff down, and you’ll have it within the next ten minutes.”

The offer causes Barry to pause and give the other man a surprised look that quickly is replaced by open gratefulness. Eddy would be back much faster than he ever could, and the notion of carrying a gallon canister of distilled water all the way from the next pharmacy back home alone already causes his joints to ache.

“I w-would r-really ap-preciate th-that, Eddy,” Barry tells him earnestly, but his friend only waves him off. “No biggie, just tell me what you need, and your boyfriend will get his blood-substitute cocktail in no time.”

Barry nods, more than thankful for his friend’s help, and makes his way back to the couch, where he rips a sheet off his sketching pad that rest on the little table in front of it. He also grabs a pen and starts to scribble down what he requires for the volume expander. After listing the distilled water and the dextrose he pauses, and his stomach sinks when he realizes that he doesn’t have any winged infusion set or any containers, and he isn’t sure whether the pharmacy has them. What he wouldn’t get without a prescription are the antibiotics he needs to make sure that Len’s wound doesn’t get inflamed, and those are essential.

Worriedly, Barry starts to gnaw his bottom lip as he studies the short list in front of him.

“Something the matter?” Eddy, who is standing next to the couch table, eyes him curiously. “You look worried again. You need me to get you some illegal stuff for that?”
Barry’s frown deepens as he turns to the other man. A heavy, biting guilt nestles into his guts as he realizes that he would have to ask his friend to get these things for him, even though it would be stealing.

The only other option to get Len the necessary treatment is by calling an ambulance, and while a part of Barry considers it, a far bigger one knows that he doesn’t want to put the other man back into that miserable place while injured like that.

“Eddy,” Barry says quietly, reluctantly, as he watches his friend. “I w-would n-need y-you t-to g-get m-me s-some th-things y-you c-can’t g-get in a-a ph-pharmac-cy.” He swallows and starts to nervously rub his right palm on his thigh. “Y-you w-would n-need t-to g-get i-into a h-hospital s-storer-room… b-but it’s ok-kay if y-you d-don’t w-want-”

“It’s fine,” Eddy cuts him off, a surprisingly serious expression on his face. “I’ve committed far pettier crimes in my life so far, and none for a reason as good as this one. I’ll get you the stuff you need, just tell me what it is.”

It catches Barry a bit off-guard that Eddy tells him so outright about that, even though he is certain by now that the other man is a crook, probably not to the same extent as the Rogues, and he is clearly intent to keep himself out of limelight contrary to them, but still a criminal.

Barry swallows, nervous and guilty, and finally nods. “Ok-kay.” He turns back to the paper and starts to write the rest down while explaining to Eddy what it is and what it looks like, so that he would be able to find it.

“I d-don’t kn-know wh-what th-the p-packages of th-the A-Ampiz-zillin, C-Cefaz-zolin, or F- Fentanyl l-look l-like,” Barry says apologetic after he handed Eddy the list, and they walk over to the entrance of the apartment. “Y-you’ll h-have t-to l-look f-for th-them.”

“Those are antibiotics?” Eddy clarifies.

“Th-the f-first t-wo are, th-the F-Fentan-nyl is a n-narcotic,” Barry explains. “Th-they g-gave m-me th-those wh-when I w-was sh-shot. It sh-should b-be en-nough t-to p-prevent any k-kind of inf- flamation a-and h-help w-with th-the p-pain.”

Eddy whistle lowly and shakes his head, shooting Barry an amused look. “You should have become a doctor. How the heck do you still remember the stuff they gave you back then? Weren’t you sky-high on drugs during most of your stay there?”

Barry gives him an embarrassed smile as he shrugs. “I’m j-just g-good w-with r-rememb-bering th- that s-sorts of th-things.”

“Well, I take your word for that.” Eddy grins and nods to the sheet of paper Barry handed him. “As long as you’ve written the names right, I’ll make sure to get everything.”

“Th-thank y-you,” Barry says, meaning it, but his friend waves him off once more. “It’s nothing.”

“N-no,” Barry disagrees firmly. “It’s n-not n-nothing. Y-you’re r-really h-helping m-me h-here, a- and I w-won’t f-forget th-that.”

For a second, Eddy seems taken aback by how heartfelt Barry’s words are, then, he chuckles. “You’re welcome.” He turns to open the door but pauses, doorknob in hand, and looks back to Barry, a surprisingly serious expression on his face. “This is probably the first time I’m using my powers for something other than doing petty little thefts or Dr Elias’ research…” A small, nearly sheepish grin spreads over his lips. “I think I caught myself that decency-bug from you.” He snorts.
“Mary is going to be ecstatic.”

Barry smiles, amused but also relieved that he will be able to help Len and grateful that Eddy is doing this for him and not holding it against him. “Y-you’re th-the b-best.”

Eddy rolls his eyes. “Sure, I make nuns swoon and fall in front of my feet because of what an awesome guy I’m.” He smirks. “But if you really wanna show me your gratitude, you can always give me a free pass for your cooking whenever I’m over.”

“Y-you c-can even ask f-for w-whatever y-you w-want,” Barry agrees, well aware that Eddy isn’t actually asking for anything in return, since they tend to share meals whenever he is around as it is.

When Eddy is gone, Barry walks back to his bedroom to check up on Len, feeling already much more relaxed than just mere minutes ago.

Len is still sleeping, his face even paler than earlier which worries Barry quite a lot. Being shot isn’t something to be taken lightly, no matter what movies want to make you believe. The chance to die is high, even if no essential organs or arteries have been hit, and there is always the possibility that there are lasting repercussions for the person who has been shot. He himself was more than lucky that there weren’t any lasting consequences from being shot in the abdomen, other than feeling the area tingle and pinch uncomfortably whenever they’ve a change in weather.

The notion that Len could be in pain for the rest of his life because of this is unsettling, and Barry, who sat down gingerly next to him, careful not to wake him, gives into the need to touch him. Careful not to disturb his rest, he lightly cups the side of Len’s face, feeling the clammy skin that is much too cold.

Despite being very much aware that there is always a possibility for Len or the others to die during one of their heists, it is something he prefers to push into the corner of his mind, ignoring it because otherwise he would get sick with worry.

Over the years, the Rogues have become dear to him like a family, and he doesn’t want to see them hurt or die, especially Len.

It is a stupid thing to be afraid of, for Barry more so than for most, everything considered. Not only because his friends are criminals who enjoy their dangerous line of work way too much, but because he tends to lose people that mean something to him. This always happens, and a part of Barry is just counting the days till the Rogues will join the row of losses that followed him from his early childhood on.

When Barry was younger, he was certain that he was cursed, that there had to be a reason why everything good tended to be taken away from him sooner or later…

Now he knows that this is just life, and for some it is harder than for others.

He swallows and closes his eyes as an old pain blooms in his chest.

His parents cross his mind, two people he can’t even remember the faces of anymore, Albert, Simon, Bruce, Jay, Hal, and all the other friends that came and went.

… Iris and Wally…

Barry takes in a shuddered breath, eyes clenched shut, and forces himself to push these memories of his former friends and family away. They are nothing more than shards of glass anymore, something to cut deep into his flesh, leaving nothing but pain and regret behind.
“Len…” Barry swallows and opens his eyes again, turning his gaze back to Len. The other man looks so pale, so sick and exhausted, and it scares him.

“L-Lenny,” Barry speaks softly, low, hardly more than a whisper in the silent room. “P-please d-don’t l-leave m-me t-too…”

He doesn’t want to lose them again. For once, he wants the people that make this damn existence bearable to stay with him…

A couple of tears run down his cheeks, leaving back warm traces, and he hopes with everything he has that Len would be okay, that the others are still alive and well.

Barry doesn’t want to see his family hurt again.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! Hope you enjoyed the chapter! :)

Hmm, it will be interesting to see who exactly had it out for our dear Rogues this time, but whoever it was, they did a number on poor Len. Well, poor Barry too, seeing that he isn’t taking Len being hurt too well, but who is surprised by that?

This is leading into the first part of a two-part conflict the Rogues are about to face that initially started out as one, but thanks to my rewrites, I reconsidered how to go about it, and now you’ll have more story… which I hope is a good thing, despite how much story there already is! xD

In any case, this chapter did hopefully give some insight in Barry’s mind and not only in how he is taking that Len had been shot, but also everything else that is going on.

I’m pretty sure that Barry is going to cook Eddy anything he asks for in the near future, and it has been proven again that having a speedster friend is really incredibly useful. I like Eddy’s and Barry’s interaction in this chapter, it does show how far their friendship has come by now, and how big the trust between both is.

Next chapter will be a continuation of this one, which will hopefully offer more answers, and we will see Mary again. :)

Till in two weeks!
“Hey,” Lisa says, joining Barry at the kitchen sink where he has been staring absentmindedly out of the window. She looks tired and the ugly bruise that is covering her right cheek seems to have gotten darker since she went to check up on Len about five minutes ago. Even so, she gives him a small but warm smile, touching his left elbow lightly. “You’re doing okay?”

It is an odd question for her to ask, considering that it wasn’t him who had just fought his way out of an ambush. He appreciates her concern, though, and is once again flooded with relief and gratefulness that she and the others are okay for the most part.

“Y-yeah,” Barry agrees. “I’m f-fine, j-just…” He shrugs helplessly, not sure how to express what he feels as he doesn’t even really understand it himself.

Having Len resting in his bedroom after being shot and not knowing for hours whether the other Rogues are still alive did leave him pretty emotionally exhausted.

“That is a rather terrific description, Barry thinks, and he can’t help but chuckle. “Y-yeah…”

Lisa glances back to Barry’s couch where Hartley is currently talking to Eddy, whose expression seems to grow grimmer by the minute. Barry wonders what they are discussing, but doesn’t want to go over and join them just yet. He feels tired, and any more bad news can wait.

“He’s going to be fine.” Lisa’s words cause him to look back at her. She watches him with a concerned expression, her lips slightly tilted down, and a grim, dangerous glint in her eyes. “Len’s not that easy to get rid of, especially not by some bastards like that.”

It was supposed to be an easy job. Just a quick break in without any real risk attached since it was a favor for Gael, and Len told Barry that that man knew a guy who would hack into the surveillance system of the private collector, to keep the alarms from going off and the security and cops off their back, so to speak, at least if they stuck to the time window in between rounds of the guards. This
information came also from Gael, who seems to know someone who knows someone who works there, and after paying the right price, it was rather easy to acquire.

The whole plan sounded like something that would be over in less than fifteen minutes, and give the Rogues enough time to grab whatever they wanted after they secured the picture that caught Gael’s eye.

Unfortunately, things didn’t work out like that.

“You did a great job, patching him up,” Lisa remarks, pulling Barry’s mind back to the present. She gives him another smile, still tired but nonetheless grateful. “I know that this put you in danger, but Sam really couldn’t have picked a better place to drop Len off. Thank you.”

“Of c-curse.” Barry nods. “B-but th-there’s r-really n-no n-need t-to th-thank m-me. I kn-know h-he w-would h-have d-done th-the s-same th-thing. H-he a-actually has already, m-more th-than o-once.”

“Helping you won’t get him in prison, though,” Lisa points out. “He has more than enough skeletons in his closet for that.”

“S-still.” Barry turns to look towards the direction of his bedroom, where Len is currently sleeping, connected to a cocktail of pain meds and antibiotics, and with a freshly stitched shoulder to boot. “H-he d-didn’t h-have t-to, b-but h-he d-did it anyw-way, d-despite wh-who I w-was once.”

“You were one of the good guys, Barry.” Lisa meets his surprised look firmly as she goes on. “You don’t have to feel guilty about that. We know what we are, we know what our choice of making a living turns us into, and we’re okay with that. You were on the other side of the law back then, and that made you into a pest for us, but that doesn’t mean that we still hold it against you. Any grudges we have ever had because of who you were, are long gone. You’re our friend now, the past doesn’t matter, you’ve proven that more than enough.”

Hearing Lisa say that is unexpected and touching.

Barry kind of made his peace with who he had been and the relationship he and the Rogues once had. He worried about it a lot in the beginning, and it caused him extreme guilt, but after a while he realized that he would go crazy if he kept doing that. In the end, it wasn’t his choice to be turned into a criminal, and having Len and the others around made the last couple of years much easier for him.

Learning that they don’t only care about him but also accept who he once was, lifts a weigh off his shoulders he hasn’t even realized rested there.

Despite that, he can hear a quiet voice whispering in the back of his mind about whether the Rogues would still consider him their friend if they knew that he wasn’t only the forensic scientist whose work helped to get them into prison more than once, but the person who actually took them down. Lisa wasn’t a criminal herself back then, but he doubts that she would take kindly to the fact that he put her brother in a place like Iron Heights on a regular basis.

It is still hard for him to believe that Len let it go just like that. At times, he wonders whether the other man would eventually realize that he can’t simply let bygone be bygone and decide that Barry isn’t worth it.

“My words didn’t exactly have the effect I wanted them to, did they?” Lisa asks, frowning. Her expression softens then, and she goes on in an understanding, comforting tone. “You’d a rough life, so I get it. That can make you question anything good that happens to you, because you know how easily it can be taken away, but Len won’t turn his back on you, Barry. Nor will I or any of the
“others, you’re one of us now.”

Something constricts painfully in Barry’s chest at these words, and he has to avert his eyes.

“What if you what?” Eddy asks out of the blue, startling both Lisa and Barry by suddenly appearing next to them.

“Jeez,” Lisa swears, shooting the man a glare. “You ever heard of not sneaking up on someone, jackass?”

“Hey, pretty lady, I object to that. I didn’t sneak up on you, you two were just too absorbed into your little conversation here,” Eddy explains and shoots both of them a curious look. “Mind sharing what had you so occupied?”

“It was nothing,” Barry swiftly answers before Lisa can open her mouth, and judging by the look she shoots Eddy, not letting her talk probably was a good thing.

His friend lifts an eyebrow, clearly not buying it, but he too seems to notice that he is currently wandering on thin ice when it comes to Lisa’s patience, thus he nods. “Riiight, clearly nothing.”

Eddy then focuses back on Barry and grins, spreading his arms. “Guess who’s your new shadow?”

“Wh-what?” Barry asks, already having an inkling where this is going and not liking it one bit.

Hartley, who joins them, replies in Eddy’s stead, after giving the other man a brief, annoyed look. “It’s just a precaution, Barry. These wannabe Rogues are either working for Blacksmith or the Blue Velvet, and they’re probably not happy that we were able to get away from them with our heads still attached. They’ve already tried to use you as a means to get to us in the past, and now that they seem to have decided to come after us again, it is likely that they will do so once more.”

Hearing that causes an unease to settle over Barry, and he shudders as he remembers the time he was in Cameron’s hands and how disturbing that experience was.

“They won’t get you again,” Lisa assures him since she must have noticed his reaction to Hartley’s words.

“Yeah,” Eddy agrees easily, a nasty smirk on his lips. “Let them try, and I’ll make sure that they’ll regret it.”

Both, Hartley and Lisa eye the speedster with a slightly disturbed expression, probably because they experienced firsthand what he is able and willing to do, but they don’t protest.

“Wh-why h-haven’t th-they t-turned up ag-gain earlier?” Barry asks and crosses his arms in front of his chest, fidgeting nervously. “Wh-why n-now?”

“We don’t really know why they’re suddenly interested in us again,” Lisa replies honestly. “Though, a possible reason is that they had their hands full trying to get rid of each other.”

Barry’s eyebrows ache at that piece of information, seeing that he hasn’t heard anything about a gang war going on in the Gems. Usually, when two big fish like Blacksmith’s Network and the BV clash, is a lot of collateral damage as a consequence, and the news never lets a story like that slip through their fingers.
“They kept a low profile,” Hartley explains, noticing his surprise. “While Blacksmith is a big name among Gems’ criminals, the Blue Velvet isn’t. They’re rather powerful in other parts of the Northwest, but the Twins are Candyman’s territory, and they are careful about stepping on his toes. At least for now. Causing a lot of ruckus would only get the police’s attention, and that’s something Montelone certainly won’t tolerate.”

“He doesn’t like that bitch either,” Lisa remarks, an expression of open hostility and disgust on her face. “Amunet is only able to keep her black-market empire going because Montelone gets a piece of the cake, but he too knows what a backstabbing little cunt she really is.”

“What a rude language.” Eddy huffs a chuckle and eyes Lisa amused. “You really don’t like that lady, do you? What did she do, throw herself at your boyfriend?”

“B-Blacks-smith w-was th-the B-Blue V-Velvet’s init-tial w-way in,” Barry concludes quickly, rushing in to prevent Lisa from replying with what probably would have been something rather nasty judging by her angry expression. He really doesn’t need his friend to start a fight just now, not with everything else that is going on.

“Yes,” Hartley agrees, giving Barry a grateful smile. He has clearly had enough aggression for one day as well. His face turns grimmer when he goes on, though. “But now they aren’t on good terms with each other anymore, which is likely the reason why they took their time to try their luck with us again.”

“Really?” Eddy quips, arching an eyebrow. “I thought the reason was that I scared the living crap out of them.”

“You clearly have no idea who you’re dealing with if you think that that will keep nutcases like Blacksmith or Cameron away,” Lisa tells him darkly.

Eddy narrows his eyes and his smirk turns a little uncomfortable. “Aw, nuts, and I thought me phasing that one guy’s lower arm bones out of him did the trick.” He immediately seems to regret his words when Barry inhales sharply after hearing this and quickly points out. “Uh, it wasn’t anything vital.”

Both Lisa and Hartley seems much more ill at ease around the speedster all of a sudden, and Barry, who hasn’t known any details so far, can understand why.

“Don’t look like that.” Eddy huffs and glares at both Rogues as if his slip of tongue was somehow their fault. “I promised I wouldn’t do that again.”

“That joyful memory aside,” Lisa proceeds, turning her gaze back on Barry, apparently intending to pretend like Eddy wasn’t there. “It seems that their little feud is no longer doing the trick, and after last night’s heist we have to assume that they now want to get back at us after all.”

“C-could th-they’ve p-put th-their d-differenc-ces p-past th-them?” Barry wonders aloud, not liking what this could mean for him and his friends. Having both of these criminal parties working against them as a unity again would put all of them in a lot of danger, and he doesn’t doubt that both Blacksmith and Cameron are people who don’t just let go of a grudge.

“No,” Lisa disagrees much to his surprise and relief. “I know from Charlie that Cameron caused one of Blacksmith’s warehouses to burn down to the ground just last week. They doubtlessly still hate each other’s guts.”

“Ch-Charlie?” Barry asks, not knowing whom his friend is referring to, though the name sounds
familiar.

“The owner of the Saloon,” Hartley explain. “He’s the barman and always well informed when it comes to what is going on with Gem’s most notorious.”

“He is also a cranky ass like you wouldn’t believe,” Lisa adds fondly, but her mood quickly takes a dive for the worse as she proceeds. “I think we have to deal with either Cameron or Blacksmith, not both.” She crosses her arms and heaves a weary sigh. “Which is already more trouble than we need.”

Barry watches his friends quietly, knowing that this is going to put a lot of stress on all of them, and while her explanation does make an unsettling kind of sense when it comes to why they didn’t hear nor see anything from either the Network nor the Blue Velvet for so long, he can’t help but feel like they aren’t telling him everything. It is just an inkling, and he doesn’t understand where it comes from which is why he doesn’t want to try and dig for more information right now. Not with Len being injured and resting in the other room, not with how understandably on edge both Lisa and Hartley seem, and certainly not with how bone-tired he feels.

“So, you think they will try and go after me to get to you?” Barry asks, getting them to focus on the problem at hand. He likes neither the thought of having to be on the lookout for some crazy assassins once more nor the idea of being shadowed around the clock.

“Yes.” Hartley nods and gives him a sympathetic look. “That’s why we think it would be best if Eddy kept an eye on you, at least till Scudder’s legs healed enough that he can take things over again.”

Barry doesn’t like what the last part implies. He suddenly wonders whether Sam has been keeping tap on him over the last year, at least more than Len let him know about. He has troubles believing that, seeing that Len knows that he was the former Flash, and should Sam keep an eye on him aside from work or when he is not at home, it is more than likely that his friend might hear something that he really isn’t meant to. The conversations he usually has with Jay and Max would easily give away his past as the Germs’ protector, and Len has to be aware of that…

But Barry also learned by now that Len can also be extremely paranoid and patronizing when he wants to protect him and sees himself in the right, which makes the possibility that Sam has been spying on him not as hard to believe as he wishes it to be.

“It’s only temporary,” Lisa assures him again. At his sceptic look, she elaborates. “We’ll take care of whoever of them decided to start trouble with us, this will be over quicker than you think.”

Her well-meant words don’t help to settle his worries at all, but the opportunity to try and inquire about what exactly she means by that is taken from Barry when a knock at his door causes all of them to freeze.

“I'll check,” Eddy tells them and is suddenly gone for a split-second, like he blinked out of existence for a moment, and Barry can’t help but shiver in response when his skin starts to tingle out of nowhere. Then, his friend is standing next to him again as if he hadn’t left at all, informing them with a relieved smile. “It’s just Mary.”

The tension eases from Barry, and he exhales the breath he hasn’t even realized he was holding.

“You want us to stay out of sight?” Hartley asks, eyeing the still closed entrance with slight concern.

“N-no, M-Mary w-won’t c-cause us a-any p-problem, a-and, l-like Eddy, sh-she kn-knows th-that I’m f-friends w-with y-you,” Barry explains as he starts to move to let his friend in.
As expected, Mary greets him with a wide, warm smile as he opens the door, in her hands a small basket with what looks and smells like freshly made banana and walnut muffins. “Hey, Barry, I got bitten by the baking bug last night, and I was wondering whether you’d like to share breakfast with me. That is, if you haven’t already eaten, of course.”

“What?” Eddy appears next to Barry, pushing him aside and taking in the baked goods in Mary’s hands. He narrows his eyes and glares at her. “You make muffins, and you don’t share them with me? Seriously? I thought we’re friends!”

Mary rolls her eyes, but her attempts to give Eddy a scowl are ruined by the grin that is tugging at her lips. “Because you wouldn’t have found your way over here in like five minutes as it is?” She shakes her head in amusement. “It’s like you’ve a built-in food radar.”

“You’re calling me a glutton, Missy?” Eddy asks in fake indignation but his smirk slips off his face and his expression becomes more serious. “Maybe now isn’t the best time for having a together-breakfast.” He turns to Barry, giving him a questioning look.

Mary notices the sudden change in his friend’s demeanor, and looks past them inside Barry’s apartment. Barry doesn’t doubt that she immediately spotted both of the currently present Rogues standing in his kitchen, seeing that they are still wearing their rather colorful and visibly put through the ringer outfits.

“M-Mary-”

His friend turns back to him, looking very concerned as she asks. “What happened?”

Barry steps aside, making her space to enter, which she immediately does, understanding that nothing of this should be talked about outside the privacy of his four walls.

“Barry’s boyfriend got shot,” Eddy informs her the instant the door is shut, causing Mary to inhale sharply in obvious horror. She turns to Barry, worriedly, and takes a light hold of his hand. “I’m so sorry. How is he? He isn’t…”

“N-no,” Barry quickly assures her and shoots Eddy an annoyed look for having to blurt this piece of information out like that. He goes on explaining to Mary with a tired smile. “H-He’s r-resting i-in m-my b-bedr-room, h-he g-got sh-shot in th-the sh-shoulder a-nd l-lost a l-lot of b-blood, b-but w-we w-were ab-ble t-to h-help h-him.”

“You mean you and your MacGyver-skills were able to help him.” Eddy snorts and ignore the frown Barry shoots him in response. “He made some substitute for the guy’s blood with nothing more than distilled water, salt and sugar.”

“Th-that’s n-not…” Barry huffs and decides to ignore the other man, instead bringing their conversation back to what actually happened. “L-Len a-and th-the oth-thers w-were amb-bushed, and h-he n-needs a p-place t-to r-recover en-nough t-till h-he c-can b-be m-moved.” He bites his lower lip, hating the notion of leaving Len out of his sight at all, but he understands that the other man can not stay here till he is fully recovered, seeing that Jay can turn up any time, and Len’s presence can get both of them back to the Heights within hours.

“Barry,” Mary says his name in a soft, concerned voice and squeezes his hand reassuringly. “I am sure he’s going to be fine.” She chuckles quietly and studies him with amused astonishment. “You’re such a smart person, he was lucky that you were around.”

“It r-really w-wasn’t-t” Barry tries to object, not liking at all how everybody is making such a big deal
out of this. He tends to read a lot, and he is able to memorize information easily, even now. He is just lucky in that regard.

“It wasn’t nothing,” Lisa interrupts as she makes her way over to them, shooting Barry a disapproving look. “You saved his life.”

Wanting this topic to be dropped, he stays quiet, which in turn seems to irk Lisa judging by her exasperated sigh. Thankfully, she let him be and instead turns to Mary to introduce herself. “I’m Lisa Snart, the sister of our Mr. Humble’s boyfriend here.”

“L-Lisa,” Barry protests, his cheeks growing warm, and he isn’t sure whether he is more embarrassed about her pointing out his obvious dislike of taking praise for helping Len or that she too has called Len his boyfriend, a term neither of them is particularly fond of.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Snart,” Mary replies fondly. “My name is Maria Nicolescu, but everybody calls me Mary.”

“Because her last name is weird,” Eddy throws in with a lopsided grin as he steps closer to Mary, clearly aiming for one of the muffins. Unfortunately for him, Mary knows him well enough by now to easily shifts the basket out of his reach before he can get one, causing him to grunt in annoyance.

“People who call my name weird don’t get any muffins,” Mary informs him and adds with an amused wink towards Barry. “Which means we’ve now enough muffins for your other friends as well.”

“How is that fair? You’ve known me forever by now, and you’d let me starve?” Eddy asks in fake indignation.

“Y-you re-member Hartley?” Barry asks, ignoring Eddy, and nods to the other man in the infamous Pied Piper get-up.

“Yes,” Mary agrees and gives Hartley a smile. “It is nice to meet you again, Mr. Rathaway.”


“Please, you can call me Mary-”

“Great, now that the introductions are out of the way,” Eddy interrupts his friend with the same lack of tact he usually displays when he gets impatient or bored with a conversation, “what do you think of breakfast?”

Ignoring Mary’s annoyed frown, he swiftly steps around her and grabs one of the muffins prior to proceeding over to the kitchen table. “Mary did come all the way over from her apartment to share the fruits of her hard labor, after all.” He takes a seat and shoots Barry a feigned disapproving look. “Don’t you want to offer her some coffee, at least?”

“Eddy…” Mary sighs, shaking her head in a familiar display of exasperation, and turns to Barry. “You look tired, you’ve probably been up all night, haven’t you? Take a seat and eat one of my muffins, I’ll make you some tea.”

“It’s ok-kay. I’m n-not h-hungry,” Barry points out. Right now, he doesn’t feel like he could stomach anything. He is exhausted but at the same time still wrought up from everything that happened last night, and he doesn’t feel like sitting or keeping still.

A nervous energy has overcome him which is a stark contrast to the fatigue that has also latched onto
him, and the only thing he wants to do is to go and see how Len is doing.

“I th-think I’ll ch-checkup o-on L-Len,” Barry tells the others as he turns to Lisa and Hartley. “Y-you c-can s-stay as l-long as y-you w-want, a-and f-feel f-free t-to h-help y-yourself t-to m-my f-fridge.”

Lisa gives him a thankful smile. “Thanks, Bar, I’d like to stay over for a bit longer.”

“Of c-course,” Barry agrees. “I’ll m-make y-you s-someth-thing t-to eat l-later o-on.”

“Nonsense,” Mary interjects firmly. “I will make a hearty soup for you all. You really don’t need to worry about cooking right now.” She reaches for his hand again, taking a tentative hold of it as she meets his eyes. “Go look after your friend.”

Barry squeezes her hand in return, very glad that she decided to come over just then.

His bedroom is dimly lit when he enters it a minute later. He pulled the curtains of the window above his bed closed to make it easier for Len to rest and to make sure that no unwanted eyes could spot his friend’s presence.

Quietly, he walks over to him, noticing that he is still out cold and thankfully seems to have regained some color.

After briefly checking on the infusion bag he changed just about half an hour ago, Barry sits down on the edge of the bed next to the other man, resting a hand lightly on his slowly lifting and falling chest.

The sound of the street below reaches him through the tilted window, of cars and of people who are already up on this early Sunday morning, and he absentmindedly listens to them for a while as he studies Len’s relaxed face.

It has been a long night, and everything considered, Barry knows that he can be very happy with how things have turned out. Len could have died, so could have the others, and while they didn’t get away from the ambush without a scratch, this turn-out is by far the smaller evil.

“I’m s-so g-glad y-you’re ok-kay,” Barry whispers as he feels the movement of Len’s chest, a reassuring proof that he is still alive. He swallows and closes his eyes for a moment, nearly smothered by the emotions that suddenly overcome him now that things have finally calmed down somewhat.

The notion that Len could really have died hits him, and it isn’t as if he wasn’t confronted with this possibility every time the others went out to pull one of their heist, but now the danger of this happening seems so much more intense.

“I-I c-can’t l-lose y-you…” Barry’s voice is trembling, weak, and he wonders whether Len knows how much he means to him.

… and whether he could mean this much to the other man.

Barry rubs his eyes with his free hand, and sighs weary.

Things between Len and him… it probably would be an understatement to say that they are complicated.

They both know that there are too many feelings involved for it to be a platonic relationship, but they
are both still unsure how to act on them and unwilling to even just discuss this topic.

Both of them are afraid of…

He isn’t even sure what it is they are so scared of, to be honest. It’s like a wall is standing between them, made up of different bricks that contain both their fears and their insecurities. They are both scarred from their past, but Barry knows that he is probably posing the biggest hurdle with how… *inadequate* he is.

Len means so much to him that it is nearly frightening at times when he thinks about it too long. This doesn’t change the fact that he is afraid of him in a way too, though.

It is so damn disconcerting.

He doesn’t want to be afraid of Len, but while he trusts him probably more than anybody, he is also always aware of what he is.

Another man… Someone who is stronger than him, who can have a rash temper and lash out if he feels cornered or hurt.

And Barry… he is weak, he knows that.

As a child, as a teen, as a prisoner, without his powers, he was never able to keep others from using him, from hurting him, and he is terrified by the notion that Len could do something like that to him. It is a fear he hates himself for, because he *knows* that the other man would never do such a thing, never hurt him like that, never *rape* him.

… but he is afraid of it all the same.

Barry exhales a frustrated huff and grits his teeth, confused and angry with how he wants – *needs* – to be close to Len and, at the same time, is so damn scared of it.

There is always this horrible little voice in the back of his mind, whenever he is around other men, that keeps telling him to be wary, to stay alert, and to expect the worst.

It is exhausting, and he wishes he could just tune it out.

He has grown to trust his friends over the years, but at times he feels like he will never be able to entirely overcome what happened to him, and it makes him feel like such a horrible person, like he is failing them and himself.

His inability to overcome his trauma is also the reason why Len still needs Izzy in his life, because Barry can never fulfill that kind of need, and he hates himself for it since he knows that it will inevitably lead to them growing more and more apart. Len is going to have a child with Izzy, and while Barry wants to believe it when Len tells him that this won’t change anything between them, he knows that this won’t stay true.

His friend already started to pull away from him again…

And now Len got shot, and if he had lost him, things between them would have stayed like this forever, tense and confused, and it would have been mostly his fault…

“I’m s-sorry…” Barry whispers, and he doesn’t try to fight the tears when they start to run down his cheeks, feeling just too exhausted to care.
I love him.

The thought comes out of nowhere, catching Barry utterly off-guard, and it is like a revelation, like someone pulled a blindfold off his eyes, and he can suddenly see clearly for the first time. It leaves him breathless as he grasps what this means which causes a pang in his chest.

Suddenly, the air in in the room seems much too stuffy, and he nearly scrambles up to his feet, the need to get away from Len nearly smothering him.

Barry doesn’t move.

He studies his friend’s face while emotions war for dominance inside him.

It has been a long time since he felt like this, and the enormity of the feeling is paralyzing.

In a way, it is surreal, as Barry was sure he would never again be able to fall in love with another person after Iris was taken from him. She was the love of his life, even in the end, when they hardly spoke to each other anymore…

Life is an odd thing.

Barry smiles tiredly, humorlessly, tears still running down his cheeks, and he gets up slowly, his body aching all over.

Quietly, he walks around the bed to the other side where he usually rests when he shares it with Len, and lays down carefully, mindful of not waking the other man by accident.

Being this close to Len, with his chest still feeling like something has just ripped it open, Barry reaches for his friend’s hand and takes hold of it.

He feels lost and helpless, and briefly he wishes that they could stay here, in this moment, just the two of them, like a bubble in the stream of time.

It is a selfish wish, but the idea of losing Len has never been so scary.

Barry closes his eyes and listens to the other man’s slow, deep breathes.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, it does hint of things that are going to come, and I’m quite happy that the Blue Velvet and Blacksmith finally got mentioned again. The question who of those two parties decided to go after the Rogues remains, of course, but whoever tried to get rid of them is clearly not about to give up after one failed attempt. Barry, that unfortunate sod, now has to make his peace with having Eddy shadow him for the near future, but maybe his friend will be able to cheer him up along the way after everything that happened – or drive him nuts, Eddy is good at both, after all.

Barry also, for the first time, allowed himself to face what the feelings he has for Len really mean, and this is a huge step for him. It will show itself in how their relationship is going to progress over the following chapters, though next one will take a little break from that, and we will instead see a familiar face again paying Barry a visit. Axel will be around too, and he may not be all too happy with said visitor. ;)

I love him.
Thank you all for taking the time to leave me feedback, it never fails to motivate me working on this story. <3

This isn’t really concerning my story, but I know that after the event of last week, many readers on ao3 – and all over the world in general - are probably not feeling that well, and I think at such times it is especially important to remind yourself that you are precious and amazing for being who you are. It doesn’t matter what others may think, it counts how you see yourself and that you love yourself. I wish I could hand out hugs, if it was possible I would attach a basket to this chapter with ones that were free to take. Things seem a little scary right now, but the truth is, that you all will move on and get through it. You are strong and tough, and not alone. There are so many likeminded people you can reach out to on the internet if nowhere else, and the marvelous thing is that, despite everything, you can choose to see the good in things, to find good moments in every single day, no matter whether others want you to or not.

I hope all of you are okay, and I want you to remember how valuable you really are, and, as long as you can see that, as long as you realize what a gift you are to this world, you will be able make your way.

I’ll have the next chapter up in two weeks!
It is when Barry watches his last customer leave – a young mother with two kids who tend to pass by once a week – that Mrs. Ming joins him with a plate of sweet potato chips. They are freshly made and spread a wonderful, sweet smell, causing his mouth to water as soon as he notices them. He hasn’t eaten lunch yet due to an unexpected high number of customers who has been keeping him occupied for the last two hours, and a small snack would be quite welcome.

Axel, who is over at the shelve with the canned goods, doing restocking, looks excited when he sees that they are being supplied with something edible, and promptly decides to take a break to join them at the counter.

“I thought you could need a small refreshment after how busy you two have been this morning,” Mrs. Ming tells Barry with a kind smile as she puts the plate down.

“Thanks, Mrs. Ming.” Axel shoots the elderly woman a grin and grabs one of the chips. “They look great, and I’ve been close to starving as it is.”

Barry chuckles and watches the boy in amusement as he pushes the snack in his mouth, not in the least surprised when he starts to huff and fan at himself due to how hot the little treat still has to be.

“Y-you ate a S-Snickers j-just h-half an h-hour ag-go b-because y-you k-kept b-bothering th-the c-cust-tomers w-with y-your m-moaning ab-bout h-how h-hungry y-you w-were,” Barry reminds his younger friend, who has finally succeeded in swallowing the piece of sweet potato.

Axel shrugs, smirking, and already reaches for the next slice. “I’m a teenager, I’m growing and need to eat a lot, it’s just natural.” He then says to Mrs. Ming. “I usually don’t like sweet potatoes but these are awesome.”

The older woman smiles fondly in response.

“These are hongshupian, I’m quite fond of them myself. It’s a traditional snack to eat during the cold time of the year in the area where I grew up, and James has always enjoyed them greatly since he was a little boy,” Mrs. Ming explains. “I’m very happy you like them, Axel.” She then turns to Barry. “And he isn’t the only one who should be hungry by now, my dear. It has been quite a busy morning so far.”
“True,” Axel agrees, snatching his third chip and pointing it at Barry. “And this stuff is healthy, aren’t you always going on about eating veggies and all?”

Barry thinks about pointing out that chips in general shouldn’t be considered healthy, especially as Axel tends to eat too much junk food as it is. He is pretty sure that this version of the snack isn’t as bad as what people usually tend to get, though, and Mrs. Ming is very aware of the teen’s fondness of anything sugary and fat as it is. This is why she usually tries to offer him healthier alternatives much to the teen’s annoyance.

The chip is still hot when Barry picks it up, not that he is surprised considering Axel’s earlier reaction, so he ends up blowing on it before he takes a small bite.

He hums in delight, liking the mixture of sweet and salty, and nods. “It’s very good.”

Again, Mrs. Ming appears pleased with the reaction and informs them. “I actually have more of them upstairs.” She looks to Axel, who is munching on his fourth slice by now, and adds with a smile. “I can get them for you if you want. They were meant for James, but he just called me and said he won’t be able to come by till later this evening because the poor boy is stuck in another of his meetings.” She sighs and shakes her head, touching her right cheek in a gesture of worry. “He is working too much.” For a moment, she purses her lips in visible dissatisfaction. She exhales a soft sigh, then, and shakes her head. “He is just like his mother in that regard.”

When she turns her focus back to Barry and Axel, she is smiling again, though a slight sadness lingers in her gaze. “Well, anyway, hongshupian taste best when they are freshly made, so I’ll make him another batch when he arrives.”

“That’s great, thank you.” Axel too seems to have noticed the odd shift in Mrs. Ming mood as he looks a little uncomfortable now, unsure how to react to her sadness.

“I’m sure J-James is j-just as d-dissap-pointed as y-you are th-that he c-can’t m-make it,” Barry assures her, feeling bad for her as he knows how much she misses her grandson at times since he is quite a busy person who tends to be out of the country for weeks if not months at a time. “H-he’s alw-ways h-happy wh-when he’s able t-to s-spent t-time w-with y-you.”

Mrs. Ming gives him a thankful smile and nods. “I know, my dear, I’m just getting a bit clingy in my old days. You tend to realize more and more how important family really is when you get to my age.”

“What are you talking about?” Axel throws in, frowning. “You’re not that old.”

Mrs. Ming gives the boy a surprised look in return and starts to chuckle as she eyes him fondly. “Thank you, Axel, that is very kind of you.”

“It’s not.” Axel huffs, cheeks growing bright as he crosses his arms and fidgets uncomfortably. “Just saying how it is.”

When Axel notices Barry’s amused smile, he narrows his eyes and points at him. “That guy, for example, is half your age and radiates old way worse than you do.”

“H-hey,” Barry protests but can’t help but laugh. “I’m n-not th-that old, either.”

“Yeah.” Axel sniffs. “I’m just saying old-man-pants.”

Barry gives the boy a fake frown, slightly bemused by his words and well aware that the teen only tries to get a rise out of him, as he seems to find it hilarious when he gets flustered over things. Still, a
part of him can’t help but feel a little irritated, as his pants don’t look anything like the ones old people would wear.

“Axel,” Mrs. Ming says in a chiding tone. “That is not nice.” Then she addresses Barry, smiling warmly. “I think you have a very good taste when it comes to your clothing.”

“For someone in their late eighties,” Axel agrees solemnly but he cracks a smile when both Barry and Mrs. Ming shoot him an exasperated and disproving look respectively in return.

“W-wait t-till y-you r-reach th-the anc-cient age of t-twenty, y-you’ll s-start t-to r-realize th-that th- there is m-more t-to l-life th-than b-baggy j-jeans a-and overs-sized t-shirts,” Barry tells him drily, causing the teen to snort.

“I wouldn’t bet on it, old man,” Axel replies cheeky and reaches for another chip. “And baggy jeans are way cooler than grandpa-pants any time of the day, just so you know.”

“You will be Barry’s age far quicker than you think,” Mrs. Ming assures him bemused. “I still can remember when James was no older than you like it was yesterday, and now he is already past his mid-thirties as well. Time flies by so quickly.”

Axel frowns, looking very much like he doubts the validity of her statement. “I’m fourteen and getting here took forever.”

“That is because you are still a child, my dear,” Mrs. Ming reminds him warmly, and Barry doesn’t miss how Axel’s right eye twitches slightly at being called a child, but unlike with most other people, he takes the unintentional barb from her in silence.

After the first plate of potato chips is emptied, Axel offers to go up to fetch the second one, which Mrs. Ming accepts gladly.

While Axel is upstairs, two customers pass by, two young siblings, a boy and a girl who seem both around ten and buy some chocolate, cookies, and two cokes. Barry is more than grateful that his employer is around so that he isn’t forced into a situation that could get him in trouble, but even so he is relieved when the children are gone again just a few minutes after they entered the store.

“Stop looking so guilty,” Axel remarks annoyed. The boy returned shortly after the kids arrived at the counter, and is now studying Barry with a grim frown. “You didn’t do anything.”

“I kn-know,” Barry agrees, tiredly, and hopes that his younger friend would leave it at that. He doesn’t want to discuss his alleged pedophilia, and he doesn’t want his mind to go places where he would rather not go, especially after he has been successful not to let it wander nearly all day so far.

“Christmas is coming up,” Mrs. Ming states just as Axel seems about to press on, catching both Barry and the boy off-guard by that. At their surprised expressions, she explains. “Usually, my great-niece Tamara is having a Christmas party every year in December where nearly the whole family is attending, but I thought that I’d like to host it this year, and I’d love for both of you to come as well.”

“A Christmas Party?” Axel asks astonished. “Like with food, music, and stuff?”

Mrs. Ming smiles and agrees. “Yes, with food and music, and I hope a lot of merry togetherness. There will be quite a number of teenagers around your age as well, so I think you’ll have enough company not to get bored with the rest of us old people around.” She says the last part kindly and in humor, but Axel looks a little bit embarrassed for his words from before.

Barry, who watches them, isn’t really sure how to feel about the invitation, even though he is very
much aware of what a generous gesture it is.

The problem is only that he doubts that it is such a good idea for Mrs. Ming to invite him too, seeing who he is, and even though the chance that his status as an ex-con would come up is rather slim, he still fears how it could influence the party if it does. He doubts that everybody would be okay about him working for the nice old woman like her grandson is, and people usually tend to feel uncomfortable around alleged murderers and rapists.

A shiver overcomes him out of nowhere, and he notices how his arms start to itch badly enough that he nearly gives in to the need to scratch them.

The notion of being among a sea of people he doesn’t know isn’t that much more alluring either, he has never been fond of get-togethers like those, and even during his time as a CSI he only went to the yearly Christmas parties because Iris wanted to go as he himself never connected to many people other than Patty and Forrest. He didn’t mind people back then like he does now, crowds didn’t scare him or make him nervous, but he just didn’t really enjoy them either.

Hal always complained about him being a spoilsport, only joining him and the other heroes on celebrating after saving the earth once again when he was more or less dragged along…

A tense knot of coiled up sadness settles into the pit of Barry’s stomach as he remembers his former friend, and he quickly let go of that thought and any other memory involving Hal, Bruce, Dinah, or any of the others.

“You don’t have to attend, my dear boy,” Mrs. Ming tells him, and her soft, concerned voice causes him to snap out of his own mind and turn his attention back to her. Both Axel and she are studying him with plain concern, and he could kick himself for reacting like this to a very sweet gesture of the elderly woman.

“N-no, I’d l-like t-to,” Barry lies and nervously shifts his weight. “I-I’m j-just n-not s-sure th-that th-th-this is s-such a-a g-good i-idea, c-cons-sidering…” He purses his lips unhappily and averts his eyes. Mrs. Ming would undoubtedly understand what he means.

“Nobody of these guys knows who you are,” Axel protests,” and I doubt that Mrs. Ming or James are going to make a big deal about it.” He crosses his arms. “And you having to worry about that to begin with is total bull.” He grimaces slightly when he finished speaking and shoots the elderly woman an apologetic look for his language, but she doesn’t seem upset about it as she still has her eyes on Barry.

“Axel is right,” Mrs. Ming says as she watches Barry sadly. “My family only knows that you work for me and that you are a kind and hardworking man.” She reaches for his arm and cups it very lightly. “I understand if you would prefer not to come, but please don’t do so because you are afraid that you could experience any hostility by anybody who is going to be there. You will be just a friend of mine whom I’ve invited because you are very dear to me, Barry, nothing more and nothing less.”

The words cause Barry’s throat to close up and his eyes to burn, and even though he knows that it should not keep surprising him how welcoming and kind Mrs. Ming is toward him, it is still hard for him to fathom at times.

James is his grandmother’s mirror image in that regard, and Barry’s mind briefly wanders to Sunday, when the other man passed by to see how he was doing. Due to the fact that Len, Lisa, and Hartley were still around, he wasn’t able to invite him in, and due to how exhausted and worried he felt, he probably came over rather standoffish and like he just wanted to get rid of him. James didn’t appear
irked or put off by it, instead he asked whether he could drive him to work the next day and, pretty much just to get him to finally leave, Barry agreed.

He felt really bad for it afterwards, but Mary assured him that James would understand.

This morning, shortly after half past five, James knocked at his door and a huge weighed lifted off Barry’s shoulders when he realized that his friend didn’t seem to have taken his earlier behavior the wrong way. Instead, James was still clearly worried about him and even brought some tea along for him.

It was such a nice gesture that Barry, who had felt still immensely guilty, nearly started to cry, going on too little sleep and worried sick about leaving Len alone, even though Lisa, Mary, and Mick are currently over to keep an eye on him.

Maybe, him coming to this party would be a nice way to show his gratitude for them being part of his life. He really doesn’t like the idea of attending, but it is also nice to think that Mrs. Ming and James really want him to be there.

Glancing over to Axel, who is watching him expectantly, obviously hoping that he would agree, he makes his mind up.

“I’d l-like t-to c-come,” Barry finally states as he meets his employer’s eyes. He still can’t keep the uncertainty out of his voice, though, mostly because the paranoia in his head keeps insisting that this would likely end in another mess not only for him but for these amazing people as well.

… like his visit to Gilbert’s.

“That’s wonderful,” Mrs. Ming says warmly, giving his arm a light squeeze. “I’m sure you’ll have an enjoyable evening there. James will make sure that you get to know the family, and I’m sure you’ll be just comfortable, my dear.”

Barry agrees with a silent smile, and hopes that it doesn’t looks as doubtful as it feels.

The elderly woman goes back up to her apartment not too long afterwards, leaving Barry and Axel to their work which proceeds to be about as quiet and uneventful as usual, with only a couple of customers passing by in the early afternoon.

It is close to half past one when the doorbell rings again, and Barry, who is organizing the magazines next to the entrance, looks over to spot Bart standing there with a huge grin on his face.

“Grandpa!” Bart cries out excitedly and runs over to him to give him another enthusiastic bear-hug. Barry winces slightly due to the pain the gushing greeting causes to shoot up his spine, but even so he can’t help but chuckle in surprise as he returns the embrace.

The happiness about seeing Bart again is mostly overshadowed by the worry about what his sudden appearance could mean, though. When he glances up towards the door, he notices that Max is nowhere to be seen, and he wonders whether the boy took the day off from school again without informing his guardian.

“It’s so good to see you again!” Bart tells him, and Barry feels a slight pang in his chest in response to how heartfelt he sounds.

It has been a little over a month since he joined Bart and Max to have dinner at the Garrick’s.

Since then, he hasn’t heard anything from either of the older speedsters and assumed that the clearly
odd behavior he displayed that day probably put them off. He still cringes whenever he thinks back to how badly he took being among them, especially with Bart around. To him, it was like he was under constant observation by the other men to make sure he wouldn’t do anything to the boy.

Though now, retrospectively, he realizes that it was probably all in his head, or most of it, in any case.

Seeing Joan and the Garricks’ home again had been an honestly nice experience, but he doubts that this would happen again anytime soon, and he could kick himself for how he let his fear get the better of him again and how ridiculous it made him look.

“Is everything okay, grandpa?” Bart asks concerned and causes Barry to snap out of the memories of that day. The boy studies him with a frown, a searching look on his face as if he was trying to find the reason for his once again glum mood.

“Everyth-thing is f-fine,” Barry agrees with a reassuring smile, and pats the boy’s shoulder. It occurs to him then that he is standing next to the store window in full view of everybody, holding the young kid in his arms, and quickly makes a step back, forcing Bart to let go of him as well.

Bart frowns in confusion, but before he can ask about it, Barry interrupts with a stern look. “Y-you d-didn’t s-skip y-your c-class again, d-did y-you?”

“No, I didn’t;” Bart assures him and shakes his head. “I promise.” A grin spreads over his lips as he goes on. “School is over for today, and Max is busy because of his work, you know?” At that, the kid winks at Barry, and he clearly tries to be unobtrusive about it but fails tremendously, which is amusing and endearing to watch at the same time.

Bart puts his hands behind his back, and his grin grows even wider, causing his eyes to squint as he proceeds. “And he told me this morning that I can do whatever I want after school as long as I don’t cause any trouble, and I wanted to visit you.”

Somehow, Barry very much doubts that Max meant by that that his ward could run all the way from Alabama to the Twins. Briefly, he wonders how long the boy actually needed for that journey, seeing that the distance between their cities is more than eight hundred miles.

“D-did y-you eat b-before y-you l-left?” Barry asks, a little concerned that Bart could have come here straight from his school. Speedsters, especially ones that are still growing, need a lot of nourishment when they run such long distances. It is a problem Wally had to deal with a lot when he was younger, and still does as does Jay to an extent. In that respect Barry had been rather lucky, as he got all the energy he needed directly from the speed force itself. He had been the odd one out there, and he isn’t sure whether Bart is like him in that regard or whether he has to worry about the boy growing sick if he didn’t get enough food.

“Sure;” Bart agrees as he starts to look around curiously. “I passed by Max’ home in Central and grabbed some of the food in the pantry there.” He grimaces slightly at that and shoots Barry an embarrassed, somewhat guilty smile. “Could be that I cleaned it out.”

Barry smiles, relieved that the boy is alright and that he doesn’t have to worry about getting enough food for him to make up for the energy he just used on his way here. He could buy him some snacks, and he doesn’t doubt that Mrs. Ming wouldn’t mind to make Bart something to eat, but it probably wouldn’t be enough for the young speedster. He feels a little bad for Max who has to restock all of his supplies now, though.

Again, Barry wonders about the odd living arrangement of the older man and his ward, seeing that
they tend to stay in Central City nearly every other weekend and over the holidays as far as he knows, which makes their move to another state appear rather odd.

Max informed him during one of the few times he came by to visit Barry that he still owns a house in the outskirts of Central City, even though he decided to relocate after becoming Bart’s guardian so that the boy is now going to a school in Manchester, Alabama.

What exactly caused this decision Barry doesn’t know, and Max didn’t tell him, so that it is still a mystery to him.

“Who’s that?” Bart’s question pulls Barry out of his musing, and he turns to see who the kid is talking about.

Axel stands next to the shelves with the cans he restocked, the empty cartons are on the ground next to him, and he eyes Bart with a narrowed, suspicious look that causes Barry to worry about what the teen’s reaction to their visitor will be.

“Axel,” Barry calls out to the boy, signalizing him to come over. “Look, I want you to meet my…” Suddenly, it occurs to him that he isn’t sure how to introduce Bart.

Bart seem to be prepared for this, though, as he quickly assists with. “I’m his cousin!”

“His cousin?” Axel repeats incredulously as he joins them, arching an eyebrow. He turns to Barry. “Didn’t know you’ve any cousins.”

“I didn’t know about him till a while ago either,” Barry explains and nods to Bart. “This is Bart, he’s here to visit me while his guardian is otherwise occupied.” Then he signs to Axel and introduces him to Bart. “And this is Axel, a good friend of mine.”

Bart smiles and lifts his hand to give a small wave. “Hi, nice-”

“He isn’t sticking around, is he?” Axel cuts him off rather gruffly.

“Axel,” Barry admonishes, annoyed. “Don’t be impolite like that.”

“I’m not being impolite, I’m just asking,” Axel argues and pushes his hands into the pocket of his hoodie, frowning. His eyes stay on Bart as he speaks, and Barry doesn’t miss how this clearly makes the younger boy uneasy.

“I’ve to go back to stockroom to get more cans,” Axel proceeds and finally turns to Barry, nearly glaring. “I’ve work to do; I’ll leave you to your cousin.”

Watching the teen stomp off in confusion, Barry isn’t sure how to react to the odd outburst. He has no idea what just happened or why Axel would behave like this. He turns back to Bart, who seems a little rattled now, and gives him an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, about that. Axel’s a really nice kid, I don’t know what’s gotten into him all of a sudden,” Barry explains and meets Bart’s uncertain look warmly.

“I don’t wanna cause you any trouble,” Bart tells him, glancing back to where Axel just vanished. He frowns and turns back to him. “I’m sorry… I shouldn’t have tuned up like this, Max always tells me that it isn’t okay…” Lowering his eyes to the ground, Bart goes on more quietly. “I just wanted to see you again because it has been forever since my birthday dinner.”
The boy is right, it has been a while since they saw each other, and Barry feels a familiar guilt settle over him as he is reminded of the fact that Bart actually wants to spent time with him. To him he is likely the only real family he has in this timeline, aside from Wally. The younger man doesn’t want to have anything to do with the kid, though, according to Jay and Max, and it seems that this hasn’t changed so far. This is saddening, as both Wally and Bart would clearly benefit from each other, but Barry is aware that his nephew’s scars are still too deep for that.

“D-don’t w-worry ab-bout th-that,” Barry tells the crestfallen young boy and gives his shoulder a squeeze. “I-I’m g-glad y-you’ve p-passed b-by, I’ve m-missed y-you t-too.”

Hearing his words, Bart’s eyes grow wide for a second, and he looks very much surprised, nearly hopeful. It is a reaction that causes another pang in Barry’s chest, and he feels miserable once again for not keeping more in touch with the kid, even though his circumstances don’t really allow it.

“B-but y-you have t-to inf-form M-Max th-the n-next t-time y-you p-pass by, ok-kay? B-because h-he n-needs t-to kn-know if y-you t-travel th-this f-far, in c-case s-someth-thing h-happens t-to y-you,” Barry proceeds sternly as Bart really needs to be more mindful when it comes to things like that. He is a superhero, after all, and while some may think that this makes it less likely for him to get in danger due to his power set, Barry knows that there is a lot of down sides that come with working in that field as well, especially for Sidekicks.

“I promise, grandpa!” Bart immediately agrees, beaming up at him. “I’ve really missed you too!”

At that, the boy gives him another tight hug, but this time it only lasts for a moment. He steps back again, grinning. “You wanna know what I got on my chemistry test last week?”

Barry smiles, seeing how pleased with himself Bart appears, he kind of has an inkling what the score could be. “Of c-c-course.”

“I got a straight A!” Bart informs him excitedly. “I had the highest score in my whole class! And my teacher said she’s impressed by how well I did!”

“Th-that’s g-great,” Barry says, happy for the boy as he knows from Max that Bart does have difficulties to fit in with the others at school which does affect his marks. Seeing that he does well in a difficult subject like chemistry is clearly good for his self-esteem and may even encourage him to try and improve his marks in general. “I’m r-really h-happy f-for y-you.”

“Me too!” Bart laughs and starts to bob up and down on his heels, exuding excitement. “Jay said he’ll take me to his company during Christmas break so that I can see what it’s like in a laboratory! I want to get really good at it so that I can become a criminal investigator like you one day!” His smile vanes all of a sudden and his expression becomes unusually serious as he proceeds. “And then I’ll prove that you’re innocent, grandpa.”

Barry nearly flinches at this statement, and he is reminded of the dinner about a month ago, where Bart told him about his plan to become a scientific investigator like him, which seems to be something he really set his mind on.

It is a good thing, of course, that the young boy wants to work for the police. Helping people by solving crimes is a worthwhile goal, after all.

Even so, a part of Barry worries about what Bart’s wish to be like him and proof his innocence could mean for the kid.

Not only does Barry doubt that he is someone anybody should strive to be like, but Bart’s conviction
of his innocence could get him in serious trouble with other people one day. Right now, he is still just a kid, not even a teen, but when he grows older, other heroes could start to have a problem with his view of him. The same goes for the cops at the CCPD; should Bart really achieve to become a CSI and start working there, they certainly wouldn’t appreciate one of their own trying to prove the innocence of a disgraced former colleague.

An endeavor like that can quickly turn ugly, and Barry really doesn’t want Bart to experience what it is like to be shunned by others like that because of him.

Then again, Barry tries to reassure himself, Bart is just a kid and there is still a long way ahead of him before he really has to make a choice about what he wants to do later on. It is more than likely that Bart will realize that trying to clear his grandfather’s name is not worth all the trouble that comes along with it, or that working as a CSI is really not what he wants to do after all.

“B-Bart,” Barry starts slowly, meeting the determined look of his grandson with a small, uncertain smile. “I’m s-sure y-you’ll b-be a g-great ad-dition t-to th-the p-precinct if y-you ch-chose t-to b-become a c-criminal inv-vestig-gator, b-but y-you sh-should w-want t-to d-do s-so b-because y-you enj-joy th-that k-kind of w-work, n-not b-because of wh-what h-happened t-to m-me.”

A confused frown settles on Bart’s face in response, and it is quickly replaced by a mulish expression. “I want to become a criminal investigator because you were one, and I don’t care what the others say, I know that you’re a hero. They are all stupid for believing that you would hurt grandma Iris or Wally, and I’ll proof it to them one day.”

“Y-you d-don’t n-need t-to p-prove anyth-thing…” Barry breaks off, not wanting to have this discussion in the middle of a store, or really at all. Bart is just a child, he is sure that Max and the others would eventually make him understand that trying to proof his innocence isn’t going to help anybody.

To his surprise and dismay, Bart doesn’t seem ready to let this topic drop again just yet. The boy suddenly looks honestly upset, his hands clenched into fists, and for a moment Barry worries that he would start to vibrate as well.

“You didn’t do it! You’re a good man, you would’ve never done those horrible things, but they still punished you! Stop behaving as if that’s okay!” Bart sounds utterly livid, like he is close to grabbing something within his reach and breaking it. It is such a sudden change in mood from just a minute ago, that Barry finds himself utterly speechless.

“You don’t deserve that, grandpa! You’re a hero! They’re telling me all the time that I’m wrong but I’m not! I’m not stupid or delusional, or lying to myself! I know who you are, I know that you’re one of the good guys! They know nothing, they’re all wrong, and you mustn’t listen to them! They shouldn’t treat you like this! You can’t let them keep hurting you, you’re no criminal! You’re my grandpa, and he’s a hero, one of the biggest there’ve ever been!” Bart’s eyes glint with unshed tears, and there is so much anger, frustration, and pain in his gaze that Barry feels himself choke up.

The kid is hurting, a lot. He knew so, but he didn’t know to what an extent, and it breaks his heart to imagine what it has to be like for him to never be taken seriously, to always be looked down upon for believing in someone you love even though everybody else tells you to just let it go.

“I will proof it to them, and you if I’ve to!” Bart insists angrily, his body tenses up, and he squeezes his eyes shut, his face a grimace of rage and hurt. “You may not even believe it anymore, but I do, and I’ll proof it! You’re no murderer, you’re a hero, and what is happening to you is just wrong…”

Tears start to fall, running down Bart’s cheeks that are as crimson as the rest of his face due to how
worked up he has himself gotten, and Barry throws his caution to the wind, because right then and there he just wants to comfort the upset child. He pulls the boy into his arms, and starts to rub his back in soothing circles, trying to offer him some comfort.

“I-it’s alr-right, B-Bart,” Barry assures the boy, feeling him shake as he cries silently, face pressed against his chest. “I’m h-here, I h-have y-you.” He brushes his fingers through the kid’s hair and lets his second hand rest on his neck, feeling the tension nearly ooze off him.

Out of the corner of his eyes he notices movement and looks over to his right to spot Axel who stands close to the shelve he worked on prior and is watching them now with a worried, uneasy expression. Barry nearly forgot about the teen, and gives him a small, apologetic smile, seeing that he knows that this is probably quite uncomfortable for his young friend to watch.

They are lucky as over the next couple of minutes as Bart cries himself out in Barry’s arms, no customers pass by. This would have turned into a really awkward situation otherwise, and he is glad that the boy is able to get some of the pent-up emotions out for once. He probably doesn’t allow himself to do so too often.

Eventually, after what feels like a small eternity, Bart starts to calm down, and his body stops to tremble. He doesn’t pull back or move otherwise, though, he keeps leaning heavily against Barry, as if he has just no energy left to do anything else. Barry let him, he is aware that the boy probably just wants to be close to him, and for once he welcomes the contact too.

“But you haven’t had it easy because of me,” Barry speaks quietly, his tone low and soothing. “And I’d change it i-f I c-could, B-Bart, b-but I c-can’t. I c-can’t m-make p-people s-see m-me in an-nother w-way, I c-can’t ch-change th-their op-pinio-n of m-me o-or wh-what th-they b-believe. I c-can only m-move on, a-and t-try t-to b-be h-happy a-and l-lead a g-good l-life.”

He cups Bart’s cheek and gives him a sad smile. “I’m n-not ok-kay w-with wh-what h-happened t-to m-me, b-but I c-can’t k-keep t-trying t-to h-hold on t-to a p-past th-that n-no l-longer exists. Th-things ch-changed, a-and I h-had t-to ad-dapt, a-and d-despite wh-what y-you m-may th-think, I d-do h-have a g-good l-life n-now. I h-have f-friends a-and a j-job, a-and a r-roof ab-bove m-my head.” He bows down so that his forehead touches Bart as he proceeds. “And I’ve y-you, a w-wonderful p-person wh-who c-cares ab-bout m-me s-so m-much even th-though I h-haven’t r-really g-given y-you any r-reason t-to.”

“That’s not true!” Bart argues when Barry pulls back. “You’re super nice to me, and you’re never
annoyed when I’m around or asks questions, and you got me that awesome chemistry book for my birthday… and you’re my grandpa.”

Barry brushes over the young boy’s head again and gives him a warm smile, voice low as he replies as he is very much aware of Axel’s presence and what he must have heard so far is going to be hard enough to explain as it is. “And I’m v-very g-gratef-ful an-and p-proud th-that in an-nother l-life I’d h-have had s-such an am-mazing g-grands-son l-like y-you.”

Bart’s eyes tear up once more, but even so he smiles brightly. “I’m also glad I’ve you.”

It is strange to see Bart like that, and not for the first time, Barry can see Iris in him, in the way his cheeks dimple when he smiles, in how his whole face lights up when he is happy, how his eyes crinkle.

The idea of Iris and him having been lucky enough to become parents in another world is both painful and comforting, and while a small part of him is envious about that luck neither of them was allowed to experience in their lives, he isn’t really bitter because of it. He does have Bart in his life now, after all, and he knows that he can only be thankful for that.

“C-come, l-let’s g-get y-you c-cleaned up,” Barry tells Bart, who nods in agreement but gives him another quick hug before he eventually steps back.

After showing Bart to the small restroom in the back of the store, he tells the kid that he can pick himself a treat, which causes his already increased mood to brighten another two notches.

Around half past one, the number of customers start to pick up again, and Bart stays with Barry behind the counter, assisting him by bagging the groceries and telling him all about what he did over the last month and what he is hoping to get for Christmas this year. Barry listens attentively and shares a little bit about what he experienced over the past five weeks as well, which wasn’t much other than for the incident at the gallery, and he certainly isn’t going to mention that.

Briefly, his mind wanders back to Len, but he forces himself to turn his attention back to the presence, well aware that the other man is fine and just needs time to recover, and that him worrying himself sick is not going to help anybody.

After things have calmed down again, and Barry decided to take a small break to eat his packed lunch, he tells Bart to pick himself another snack, which the boy gladly does.

Axel joins them at the counter, looking way less hostile than earlier, but he stays rather tightlipped around Bart, who does the lion share of talking.

Much to Barry’s surprise, Axel turns to Bart after they are done with their break and asks. “You wanna help me with fixing one of the shelves in the stockroom?” He then glances over to Barry and adds with a smirk. “As some of us are just getting too old to be really of any use here.”

Barry takes the slight jab with a smile, knowing that the teen isn’t wrong as he does have difficulties grabbing a screwdriver tightly enough for fixing the screws these days.

“Uh…” Bart appears caught off-guard, as he clearly didn’t expect Axel to even just talk to him in the first place. He recovers quickly enough, though, and nods enthusiastically. “Yeah! Sure! I can totally do that!”

Axel arches an eyebrow at his eagerness before he snorts amused and shrugs. “Then come along, squirt.”
“Hey! I’m not a squirt, and I’m nearly as tall as you!”

“In your dreams, squirt.”

“Hey!”

Barry watches them walk to the shelve in question and can’t help but be pleased with the sudden change in Axel’s demeanor towards Bart. It is nice to see them warm up towards each other, especially because Bart doesn’t seem very lucky with making friends outside the superhero community.

The doorbell rings, and Barry turns to greet their next customer with a smile, feeling more relaxed and lighter than he has since Saturday.

Chapter End Notes

So, Bart came back for a little visit, and he got to know Axel. It seems that Barry’s boys did get off on a good start despite initial troubles. :

I think this chapter is like a little breather for Barry after the last two, as he deserves some downtime, and who is better at cheering him up than his grandson? It is crazy how long it is since we had seen Bart for the last time, and I’m happy to have the little energy bundle back, even if their reunion got a little tense and sad at one part. I hope their talk was able to shed more light on why Barry is dealing with his motivation as he is, as I can imagine that many of you are actually wondering why he isn’t more bitter or angry over what has been done to him. I always pictured Barry as the kind of person who would, instead of lingering on misery that happened to him, try to move on from it. Not that he didn’t experience his fair share of bitterness in the past, but that is something we will touch upon later.

Axel’s initial reaction to having Bart around may seem a little off, but Barry is pretty much someone he sees as his parent by now, even if he would probably not say so out loud, and seeing him interact with Bart did cause some envy to stir inside him. He’s still just a boy, after all, but he seems to have taken a liking to Bart nonetheless in the end.

Next chapter will actually have a special guest from Barry’s past as a superhero, and I’m really curious to see what you think of them, as I did write them with their comic equivalent in mind.

Also, the Christmas season has arrived, and while my updating schedule doesn’t allow for the chapters to line up well with it, they are still kind of overlapping with it, so yay! :D

Thank you so much, my dear readers, for the feedback you left me on my last chapter (and general), I love seeing that you guys enjoy Singularity, it really makes posting it so much more awesome!

I hope all of you are doing well, and you can enjoy the spirit of the Christmas season – damn, I love it with its Christmas markets, the music, the sweets, and just everything! xD
Next update will be in two weeks as usual!
Sometime, It Just Takes One Look

Chapter Summary

Barry does his Christmas shopping, with Lisa and Eddy tagging along to offer suggestions and moral support.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited by my amazing beta Quintessenzza! Thanks so much for your great work, my dear! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If you tense up any more, I can use you as a surfboard.” Barry turns back to Lisa who re-joined him after picking up a sugar glazed doughnut from the small coffee shop close-by. The mixture of amusement and exasperation with which she is studying him, makes it obvious that it isn’t lost on her how uneasy he really feels.

It is the second Saturday in December, and the huge mall they are currently visiting is packed full with people wanting to get some of their Christmas shopping done. Barry has nearly forgotten what it is like to be in such a big shopping centre during this time of the year, and he thinks that he would have preferred to keep it that way.

The amount of people that is currently flooding the mall makes it nearly impossible to move without bumping into somebody else, which has had him on edge since they entered just about five minutes ago. The air in here is warm and dry, a stark contrast to the ongoing snowfall outside, and while Barry’s joints prefer this temperature to the biting cold, he is starting to feel uncomfortably hot, probably due to the huge body of visitors.

All the noise doesn’t help either. His head hurts from how the murmur of the crowd that surrounds them mingles with the Christmas music that blears from every shop they pass and forms an uneasy cacophony.

Everything seems too full, too crowded, too bright, and he can feel how his heart beats against his ribs, filling him with a nervous, restless energy he can’t shake off even though he dreads the idea of moving through the sea of people.

“Here.” Lisa offers him one of the two white paper cups she also brought back. “Camomile tea for you.” She frowns and eyes him with some concern. “Because if you don’t try and calm down a little, I fear you’re going to have a nervous breakdown before we even reach the first level.”

“S-sorry,” Barry offers with a tight smile and shoots another anxious glance around the mall as he accepts the warm beverage.

The Beech Park Mall is the biggest shopping mall Central City has to offer, with more than 180 shops, a fitness studio, a Cinema, and other such things that draw people in. It hasn’t changed all that
much since Barry was her the last time, over a decade ago, at least structurally since there are several shops he doesn’t recognize.

“Just relax,” Lisa tells him. “We’re here to have a nice shopping afternoon, and I promise, you have nothing to worry about. I’m a professional when it comes to moving around in public without anybody recognizing me.”

That is easier said than done. Barry has to give it to his friend, though; she does look a lot different with an auburn, curly wig and big, thick-rimmed glasses. He is pretty sure that most people would not realize who she is, even up close, but he has still no idea how he allowed himself to be persuaded to do this trip.

Pushing the worry about possible consequences out of his head, he turns back to the coffee shop and spots Eddy just paying the nice barista for his own coffee and sandwich.

“What do you wanna do first?” Lisa asks, getting Barry to glance back to her.

“G-get s-someth-thing f-for th-the b-boys,” Barry decides.

It is clear to him that he can’t afford to get them anything too expensive, but he started to save up money for Christmas a couple of months ago, and was able to save up ninety dollars he can now spend on presents.

“What do you want to get for them?” Lisa inquires just as Eddy joins them, sipping on his coffee and taking a bite off his sandwich.

“‘etting phat pho phom?” Eddy asks while chewing, causing Lisa to wrinkle her nose.

“P-presents f-for Axel and B-Bart,” Barry explains as he lets his gaze wander around the big mall once more.

He spots a GameStop on the floor above them, which is where he intends to get them a fifteen-dollar gift certificate each. It’s not much, but he hopes that they would still like it since both of them seem very fond of video games, and while Axel has no gaming console of his own, he has access to one due to his friends.

“Video games?” Eddy asks, who followed his gaze and is now studying the store as well. “Good choice.”

Barry shoots his friend a smile, glad to hear that he thinks so too, and the three of them start to make their way over to the next escalators.

“Dude!” Eddy exclaims excited as Barry is just handing the clerk the money for the two certificates about ten minutes later. He turns to the other man, who is holding up a nearly twelve-inch sized collector’s figure of Batman, his expression speaking of utter excitement.

“Dude!” Eddy repeats, nearly bouncing up and down as he looks back down at the figure in his hands. “I’ve read about this one! It was supposed to come only with that new Justice League fighting game if you pre-order it!” He grins broadly at Barry and Lisa. “I didn’t think I would ever get to see this piece of master-craftsmanship in reality, and now here I am, holding it in my own two hands!”

Eddy’s enthusiasm gets a damper when Lisa remarks harshly. “It’s ugly.”

The other man actually gasps outright and throws the blond woman a nearly aghast look. “What?! It’s not!”
“It’s ugly,” Lisa insists and frowns down at the Batman Figure Eddy is now pressing against his chest, nearly looking like he tries to comfort it.

“Don’t listen to that woman,” Eddy whispers to the thing. “She’s the ugly one, inside and out, and stupid on top of that.”

Lisa huffs a laugh and shoots Barry an incredulous look but throws a hand up in defeat. “Whatever, get this ugly-ass toy if it makes you happy, I don’t care one way or another.”

“It’s not ugly!” Eddy grunts in annoyance as he watches Lisa walks over to the exit of the store and adds grumbling. “And it’s not a toy.”

He then turns back to Barry, shaking his head. “Can you believe that woman? She’s no taste whatsoever.” He then looks back down at the figure in his arms and smiles tenderly. “You’re coming home with me, my little treasure. Yes, you are.”

Barry isn’t sure what to say to that, mostly because he can’t say that he feels especially fond of this figure either, and decides to do the diplomatic thing and stay silent.

He joins Lisa while Eddy waits in row for the cashier, and the two of them talk a little about what he could get for the Rogues.

Or, he tries to talk about it, as Lisa thinks it’s a really stupid idea to waste any money on them at all.

“You don’t need to get us anything,” Lisa tells him firmly. “It’s not necessary. Use the money you’ve left to buy yourself something instead for once.”

“I d-didn’t s-save u-up th-the m-money t-to b-buy m-myself s-something,” Barry argues. “Ch-Christmas i-isn’t ab-bout g-getting y-yourself g-gifts b-but th-the p-people y-you c-care ab-bout.”

Lisa’s frown eases away and is replaced by a fond smile, though some of the exasperation lingers behind in the way she is watching him. “Barry, I know that you mean well, but you really don’t need to buy us stuff,” her expression turns a bit playful as she proceeds, “and you’re already our favorite as it is.”

Barry feels his cheeks heat up at these words and chuckles a bit awkwardly. “W-well, I’m g-good at c-cleaning.”

Lisa nods seriously, fighting to keep a smile off her face, and adds. “Don’t forget your cooking. Really, the only two reasons we keep a goody two-shoes like you around.”

“A moment ticks by before both share a grin.

“You’re a dork,” Lisa decides with a sigh and shakes her head.

“Y-you s-seem t-to l-like m-my d-dorkiness,” Barry points out.

His friend gives him an evaluating once over and shrugs. “It is one of your better qualities.”

“Y-you’re t-too k-kind,” Barry replies amused but sobers up again when he hesitantly points out. “Y-you g-guys r-really are. Y-you’re… y-you’ve b-become r-really d-dear t-to m-me, L-Lisa. Y-you l-let m-me s-stick ar-round ev-en th-though I’m h-hardly f-fun c-company m-most of th-the t-time… a-and d-despite th-the b-baggage I b-bring al-long.”
An uneasy silence settles between them, and Barry knows that she gets what he is talking about. That he isn’t only referring to the abuse and how it affected him, but also the Flash.

“We know that you don’t mean us any trouble, Bar,” Lisa finally says, her eyes meeting his firmly as she speaks.

“No,” Barry agrees quietly and averts his gaze to the ground. “I d-don’t, b-but… I s-still c-could end up b-being t-trouble, n-nonthel-less.”

Him being friends with the Rogues isn’t just a dangerous game for himself. He doesn’t doubt that Wally would go after the group of criminals with a newly found vengeance should he find out about their friendship.

“I-I d-don’t w-want t-to…” Barry breaks off and licks his lips nervously, glancing up to Lisa with an unhappy frown. “I’m s-sorry f-for… I c-can’t ch-change h-how th-things are, a-and I sh-should s-stop c-coming over a-and b-being a p-potential d-danger t-to y-you b-but…” He looks away, a shudder running through his body, causing him to hug himself without taking notice of it. “I l-like b-being w-with y-you all…”

It feels like home, he doesn’t say, and neither, It’s a little like having a family again.

There are Mary, Eddy, Axel, James, and Mrs. Ming, of course, and he would still have them should he pull away from the Rogues, cut them off because it becomes too dangerous for all of them, but…

The notion of losing Len has been awful and frightening for a long time now, even though he didn’t understand why at first. Over the years, as his connection to Len grew deeper and firmer, he started to bond with the rest of the Rogues as well, and while it took more time for some of them to warm up towards him, they all eventually turned from acquaintances to friends. They are important to him.

These days, Barry looks forward being around them, to spend time with them, no matter that they can be crass and rash at times, or that, occasionally, they drink too much and start fights that unsettle and frighten him. In a way, it is a little like being back in colleague. Back then, for the first time, he found people who were maybe different from him but still compatible enough in a way that allowed them to grow close, to accept each other.

Briefly, Simon comes to his mind. The memory of his former friend hurts, though, and Barry quickly pushes it away again, not wanting to think about him or how he lost another person that he held very dear.

“We like having you around too,” Lisa tells him as she meets his wary look with a soft smile. “We all have baggage we carry around with us and that makes it hard at times to be around each other, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t make it work.”

“Yes,” Barry agrees quietly, grateful for her reassuring words, as it is difficult for him to understand at times why the Rogues really allow him to join them again and again.

It’s his insecurity speaking, years and years of being told and shown that nobody wants him, and while he is no longer a child, that kind of stuff leaves scars that can never really heal all the way.

“Y-you th-think it w-would b-be a g-good idea t-to g-get th-them b-beer?” Barry asks, wanting to bring their conversation back to their initial topic.

Lisa aches an eyebrow and scoffs. “You really think they need any more booze?”

She has a point there.
Barry usually doesn’t tend to stay around when the other men start to down more alcohol than they can handle. He has done so once, and it was an experience he doesn’t want to repeat, as it caused them to behave a lot like the primitive assholes he used to think them to be.

It’s not really happening all that often that they decided to get that drunk, something that is an achievement in itself, considering their resistance towards alcohol they built up over the years. Len usually also makes sure that this doesn’t become a thing when Barry is around as it is, but it is still apparent that the idea of providing them with more beer than they already have is a rather stupid one.

“Y-yeah, p-probably n-not…” Barry agrees and notices the sign of a drugstore out of the corners of his eyes. He turns to it and studies it briefly. “M-maybe s-someth-thing f-for y-your f-first aid k-kits ins-stead?”

Lisa sighs in response and is just about to argue about his intention to buy them anything once more, when Eddy exclaims loudly and angrily. “You’ve to be shitting me! What do you mean it’s not up for sale?! Why do you have it on your damn shelve if it’s not for sale!!?”

Both, Lisa and Barry look back inside the store, where they spot Eddy, at the top of the line of customers waiting to check out, looking utterly livid and close to do bodily harm to the cashier who stands behind the counter. The young man looks clearly ill at ease and seem to try and calm Eddy down.

“Sir, it’s just decoration for-”

“You put it on a shelve!”

“O-on the top of the shelve, sir!”

“Don’t put it on a fucking shelve if you don’t wanna sell it!”

“S-Sir, I need you to calm down-”

“I AM FUCKING CALM!”

Barry groans inwardly and swiftly makes his way over to the cashier in distress, not wanting to get kicked out of the store by the security.

Or getting in any trouble with any kind of authorities at all.

Five minutes later, after getting his friend to calm down, they are finally leaving the store, without security having been notified and without the Batman Figure.

Eddy’s mood made a nosedive for the worse because of it, but Barry is certain that he would regain his initial spirit soon enough again.

“You’re such a dumbass,” Lisa remarks, audibly amused, and ignores the warning look Barry shoots her in return. “The thing wasn’t even in a box, this should have told you that it is probably not up for sale.”

“Shut it,” Eddy grouses, and if glares could kill, Lisa probably would have been evaporated right on the spot. “Fucking idiots put it on the shelf, you don’t put stuff on the shelves if you don’t wanna sell it in the first place.”

“Yes, you do, and it’s called decoration, my dear Watson,” Lisa replies with a smirk and follows Barry into the drugstore.
“Decoration my ass!” Eddy huffs annoyed but turns it down a bit when Barry asks him to behave as they aren’t the only people around.

It doesn’t take long for Barry to find what he had in mind, and while 30 dollars eat up most of his savings and Lisa keeps insisting that this isn’t necessary, he is happy with the medical kit the nice pharmacist suggested.

Now he has thirty dollars left, which he wants to spend on something else for the boys.

There is a clothing store nearby that sells t-shirts with funny prints on it, and Barry decides to look there for a nice little something he could add to the gift certificates he already got for them.

Being surrounded by hundreds of shirts with what Eddy tells him are meme-prints, he realizes quickly that this is a much more complicated task than he assumed.

“Wh-what’s th-that even s-supposed t-to b-be?” Barry asks his friend as he studies a red t-shirt with a print of a rather annoyed looking cat face on it.

“That’s grumpy cat,” Eddy informs him. “It’s a cat that has some genetic defect that makes it look all frowny all the time.”

Barry studies the picture of the cat and can’t help but feel bad for the thing.

“Are you really feeling sorry for that feline?” Eddy asks amused, not missing his expression. “Its owners make a ton of money off merchandising using its ugly mug. I’m sure they repay it with a ton of petting sessions and first class food.”

“I don’t understand why anybody finds that thing cute,” Lisa remarks next to them, eying the shirt critically. “It looks depressing.”

Eddy snorts and shakes his head. “If reincarnation is real, I wanna be reborn as this cat. It probably has its own pool.”

“C-cats d-don’t l-like w-water,” Barry points out absentmindedly as he moves on to the next rack of shirts, looking through the number of shirts with a growing sense of frustration. He understands the humour in some of the prints but most of them are just confusing to him.

“Stop imitating the grumpy cat, Bar.” Eddy chuckles as he steps up next to him and meets his disgruntled expression with a smirk. “I’m a master when it comes to memes, I’ll pick something your two brats will like, okay?”


“Sure thing,” Eddy agrees.

“You really think it is a good idea to let him pick your gifts?” Lisa asks, sceptically. “I mean, he thought that ugly-ass Batman toy looked cool.”

“Hey!” Eddy is glaring daggers at the blond woman once again. “First off, it’s not a toy nor ugly, and second, your opinion on that matter hardly counts considering your occupation, okay? The Batman is like a natural predator to you, so of course you’re not going to recognise his awesomeness.”

Lisa snorts unimpressed, while Barry asks his friend to lower his voice.
“W-we’re s-still n-not al-lone h-here,” Barry reminds him exasperatedly, which causes Eddy to roll his eyes but turn his attention back to the shirts.

After they are done with getting Barry’s remaining presents, they decide to make a quick trip to the hot-dog booths they’ve passed on their way over to the drugstore prior, to get a small snack.

While waiting in line, Lisa stirs their conversation once again to the topic Barry really starts to despise.

“I seriously can’t understand why you insist on wearing these ugly grandfather clothes all the time.” Lisa eyes him with a scrutinising look. In her opinion neither the dull pants nor the too big button down shirts do anything for him, and Barry can’t help but get irked by her not being able to let it rest.

“I l-like m-my c-clothes,” Barry insists, causing Lisa to laugh outright and answers that this is the actual problem.

Barry starts to sulk a little after that, and Lisa lets the topic of his non-existent fashion sense drop, though it is obvious that she is somewhat amused by his reaction.

They decide to eat their hotdogs on one of the benches the mall offers its visitors so that they can take a brief break from shopping, and Barry is glad when he can get off his feet for a bit. Sleep is still something that doesn’t come easy to him these days, and the work at the store has been much busier than usual the last couple of weeks.

“You know, I agree with her on that one, Barry.” Eddy’s voice causes Barry to shake the sudden bout of drowsiness off and glance over to his friend.

“What?”

“Your old-people clothes,” Eddy explains, causing Barry to frown in annoyance.

“R-really?”

“Your grandpa pants, for example,” Lisa joins in. “Or the button down shirts you tend to wear.”

“Wh-what’s w-wrong w-with th-them?” Barry asks annoyed, being reminded of very similar conversations he had with Axel in the past.

Why are people complaining about his clothes? They were cheap and mostly from secondhand stores, but he takes good care of them and he knows they are still in a very good condition. Maybe some of them looked a bit faded but they were definitely not something he had to feel ashamed of.

… at least, he thought so.

Feeling very uncomfortable and exposed all of a sudden, he can’t fight the urge to fidget and reaches for his jacket to put it on again.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Lisa adds with a frown as she watches him. “Your clothes are fine, it’s just that they’re rather… old.”

“Both in age and looks,” Eddy agrees and flinches when Lisa boxes his shoulder. “What? You said the same thing just a moment ago!”

Lisa rolls her eyes and seems to make do with ignoring Eddy for now as she turns back to Barry. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear new clothes since I’ve got to know you.”
“Th-that’s n-not t-true…” Barry protests but breaks off when he realizes that, yes, he hasn’t actually really bought new clothes since after his release, other than for underwear and two button downs.

“I d-don’t s-see wh-why I sh-should g-get n-new c-clothes wh-when I d-don’t n-need th-them,” Barry remarks tersely and frowns down at the rest of his hotdog, no longer hungry.

“Okay,” Lisa agrees much to his surprise, and meets his eyes with an apologetic smile. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable with that.”

Barry’s expression relaxes, and he feels rather stupid all of a sudden for how he reacted to his friends’ critic. He knows they didn’t mean to hurt him, and he himself knows that his wardrobe isn’t exactly what anybody would call fashionable.

But clothes are clothes, and as long as his are still fine to wear, he doesn’t see any need to get himself new ones.

“It’s f-fine,” Barry assures Lisa with a faint smile.

Their next stop is a bookstore in the second level as he wants to get a small something for James as well, and he hopes that he would be able to find some book about trains that were still in a price range he could afford with the rest of his money.

“How can someone find trains interesting?” Eddy wonders as he helps Barry in his search for a fitting book. “They’re boring, worse than cars.”

“You don’t like cars?” Lisa asks, shooting Eddy an amused look. “Aren’t men supposed to be interested in cars by default?”

“Like women are supposed to be magically drawn to making sandwiches?” Eddy counters, causing Lisa to huff a laugh.

Barry eventually settles on a historical book about locomotives from the 19th and 20th century that is up for sale and doesn’t even cost eight dollars.

“It’s as boring as I thought,” Eddy informs him on their way out as he is skipping through the book. “And I don’t know whether you’ve missed it but there are no colored pictures in it at all.”

“That’s because it’s a book about trains from back when they didn’t have color photography yet. It’s printed on the cover in big bold letters,” Lisa points out with a snort.

“I know, I can read,” Eddy replies with a roll of his eyes. “That doesn’t change the fact that it’s boring.”


“That dude is a rather boring fellow as well,” Eddy agrees with a nod. “I’m pretty sure he’ll like it.”

At Barry’s annoyed frown, Eddy quickly adds. “I like him, don’t get me wrong, but he’s rather bland.”

“H-he isn’t,” Barry argues. “J-James is a g-great g-guy.”

“Sure,” Eddy agrees. “Great and bland.”

“Ignore that nitwit,” Lisa advises Barry. “He’s just envious because you got James something but not
him.

“What?” Eddy shoots Barry a fake glare. “I thought you got me the best present of them all! I’m your favorite! Remember?!”

“If I were you, I’d be grateful if he gave me a piece of coal.” Lisa smiles sweetly.

“I know what he got you,” Eddy grumbles. “More bleach for your bottle blond head.”

“Natural blonde, sweetheart,” Lisa corrects him.

“Yeah, sure, as natural as Marilyn Monroe.”

Barry only half-listens to his friends’ good-natured bickering as he is on the lookout for a restroom.

Public restrooms are somewhere on the top of the list when it comes to the things he would prefer to avoid if he can help it, but they have been here for a while, and his bladder doesn’t seem to care about his qualms.

He spots the looked-for sign soon enough, and even though it is somewhat embarrassing, he asks Eddy if he would mind to accompany him there.

“Sure,” Eddy agrees readily enough. “Need to take a leak anyway.”

Lisa stays behind, deciding to look around in one of the many clothing stores nearby in the meantime.

There are only a couple of other guys around when they enter the restroom, and Barry swiftly makes his way over to one of the stalls while Eddy uses one of the urinals.

The sound of the other men around causes a familiar nervousness to settle over him, and he is glad when he can finally exit and make his way over to the sink.

That is, till he spots Olli entering the bathroom, and he freezes.

It is as if his world shrinks and everybody else vanishes.

The last time he saw Green Arrow was at the Watchtower, after they took his powers…

A flash of pain runs through his body, vividly enough that he winces outwardly, and he remembers it all too well, how it felt like his body was pierced by thousands of smoldering needles, how his muscles screamed-

Olli, who hasn’t noticed him immediately, halts in his track when he finally does, and for an awful moment, their eyes meet and they watch each other silently.

There is surprise on the other man’s face that is quickly replaced by pure anger, and Barry suddenly feels caged, his former colleague between him and freedom…

Then, someone touches Barry’s shoulder, and he cries out, startled and afraid, whirling around with wide, scared eyes.

“Woah, Bar, it’s just me,” Eddy says, watching him with an aghast look that quickly turns concerned. “Everything alright?”

A shiver runs through Barry’s body, and he glances back to Olli, who has stepped further into the
room not to block the door for the other men who are leaving. Barry doesn’t notice the funny looks he gets from them; he wouldn’t have cared anyway.

Suddenly, Eddy steps around him, so that he shields him mostly from Olli’s view, meeting the hostile look of the archer with just as much intensity.

“You’ve a problem, man?” Eddy asks Olli, his voice firm and angry.

Olli’s eyes narrow, and briefly he seems honestly caught off-guard by Eddy’s interference. Then, a scowl settles back over his face and he looks back at Barry.

“You better leave, Allen,” Olli tells him grimly, eyes blazing with suppressed rage. “Wally is here with his family, and I don’t want the boy’s day to be ruined because he has the misfortune to cross the way with a piece of shit like you.”

The insult is like a slap. Barry winces again and recoils.

“Fuck you!” Eddy spits at the other man. “He isn’t going anywhere just because of a virtuous asshole like you. Who the fuck do you think you are, goatee? If you want a problem with someone, I’m more than willing to fill that role.”

Olli’s attention returns to Eddy, and he frowns. “You know whom you’re spending your time with?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Eddy snorts and waves him off. “With the personification of evil, I heard that spiel before, champ.” His expression grows grimmer as he sneers. “Why don’t you do yourself a favor and piss off, man? I can assure you that you won’t be the one walking away from a scuffle between us two.”

Olli recognizes a threat when he hears one, and Barry doesn’t miss how he changes his stance or how he clenches his fists.

“E-Eddy, l-l-let’s g-g-go,” Barry utters to his friend, touching his arm lightly. His words seem to startle Eddy out of his anger as he turns to him, concern once again visible on his face.

“You don’t have to leave bec-

“P-p-pleas-se,” Barry pleads, and he notices just now that he is trembling when his teeth start to chatter, making it even harder to talk.

Eddy seems conflicted for a moment, like he doesn’t want to give in and let the other man get away with insulting and threatening Barry, but he is also able to see how much this frightens him.

“Sure,” Eddy finally agrees. “Okay.”

Eddy shoots Olli another nasty look but stays quiet and instead makes his way over to the exit with Barry, considerate of staying between him and the archer as they pass the man.

Barry is just about to step out of the restroom when his former colleague stops him.

“Allen.” Olli meets his eyes with a disgusted and grim expression. “Don’t kid yourself into thinking that anyone of us forgot what you did.”

Another shudder runs through Barry as he helplessly stares at the other man till Eddy pushes himself into his field of vision again.

“Fuck you too, goat-face,” Eddy sneers at Olli and pushes Barry lightly to get him to move again.
Barry doesn’t fight him, he let himself be lead away, no longer aware of his surrounding as a bone-deep exhaustion settles over him. He just wants to leave and go home…

He closes his eyes and swallows around the lump in his throat.

He wants Len.

The fear that he could run into Wally on their way out causes him to feel sick, and it only gets worse when he remembers that Lisa is still there.

“She already scrammed,” Eddy assures him when Barry points out to him that they have to warn her. At his confused expression, Eddy nods to the clothing store where their friend said she would be.

There is no trace of her.

“Wh-wh-what i-if sh-she w-w-went t-to a-an-noth-ther s-store,” Barry whispers urgently, but Eddy shakes his head.

“I’m sure she’s already gone,” he explains. “She told you herself that she is used to staying out of trouble.”

Barry wants to protest again but then, out of the corner of his eyes, he notices a mane of red hair, and his mind goes numb.

Wally stands there, two stores away from them, staring at him with wide, pained eyes, looking utterly unprepared as he clearly didn’t expect their ways to cross here.

Then, his gaze darkens, becomes furious, and Barry realizes with an odd sense of calmness that he is most likely going to be attacked again.

Before his nephew can even make a step towards him, a woman puts her hand on Wally’s chest, causing him to break eye contact with him and look back at her. It is the one Barry saw years ago when he accidently spotted Wally on the streets, his wife most likely. He thinks Jay mentioned that her name is Linda.

Then, someone else steps up next to his nephew, and Barry’s stomach makes an uncomfortable flip when he recognizes the blond woman as Dinah. She is studying him with a frown, while her hand rests on Wally’s shoulder as if to stop him from doing something stupid.

“You two really should get lost,” Ollie says from next to them, and Barry isn’t surprised that the man followed them back out.

“Yeah, no need to prolong this farce,” Eddy spits back at him and starts to steer Barry away from them towards the next elevator.

Barry lets him, feeling numb and tired.

***

The shift of the mattress next to him causes Len to wake from his nap.

“Barry?” He mutters, reaching up with the hand of his good arm to rub his eyes. “What time’s it?”

His right shoulder still hurts like a bitch when he moves it too much, so that he generally prefers to strain it as little as possible.

The fear that he could run into Wally on their way out causes him to feel sick, and it only gets worse when he remembers that Lisa is still there.

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His right shoulder still hurts like a bitch when he moves it too much, so that he generally prefers to strain it as little as possible.
Blinking, he looks over to where he recognizes the silhouette of Barry in the dark room.

A frown settles over his face when he realizes that he hasn’t gotten an answer yet.

“Everything alright?” Len asks and is about to push himself up in a sitting position when the other man moves and climbs into bed next to him.

Barry skids close, so that he is actually pressed up to his side, and Len notices with concern that he is trembling.

“What happened?” Len rolls onto his side and slings his still healing arm carefully around Barry’s back, pulling him even closer.

A long minute passes in silence, and he just started thinking that his question would go unanswered when Barry finally speaks. “N-nothing… j-just met someone…”

Met someone? Len frowns in confusion, his brain still not utterly awake just yet.

Right, Lisa took Barry and the speedster to the mall. Something he protested at first but eventually agreed with when she laid into him about how stressed out Barry has been the last couple of weeks and how a big part of the reason for it is on him.

Len bites down on a sigh, and instead starts to rub Barry’s back. “Someone from back then?”

Barry shivers and presses himself firmer against him. “Y-yes…”

*This man’s bad luck is really the stuff of legends*, Len thinks grimly but asks. “They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

The night at Gilbert’s is still fresh in his mind, as is memory of Barry’s bruised throat.

“N-no…” Barry sounds close to breaking, and Len wished he could make things easier for him, somehow stop this chain of disasters that are haunting his friend’s life.

“Good.” Len brushes his lips against Barry’s temple. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

For a second, Barry grows utterly still, as if he suddenly froze.

Then, a sob sounds, filling the otherwise quiet room, and Barry starts to shake as he finally breaks under the strain of what happened to him today.

“I’m here,” Len murmurs against his skin as he lets his friend cry and get at least some of the misery off his chest. “You’re safe, Barry.”

*I won’t let these bastards hurt you again*, he nearly says but stops himself.

Len isn’t stupid, he wouldn’t have stayed alive for so long in this kind of business otherwise. He has had the suspicion for a while now that something is off when it comes to Barry, to his life and all the misery that happened to him. Much more than could be normal.

Whoever is responsible for this, is probably way out of Len’s league, he has no disillusions about that.

So far, Len only had this urgent desire to protect when it comes to his sister, but now the idea alone that someone could harm Barry, put him through another ordeal, causes his blood to boil. He wants to help him, but there really isn’t much he can do, and it is so damn frustrating to be so helpless.
The Rogues are criminals, and people like the JLA would not even consider their words if they tried to talk with them about Barry.

Len closes his eyes and pulls him closer.

“I’m here,” he repeats softly and keeps holding Barry as the weight of his past keeps bearing down on him.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know that many of my readers probably want to throw something at me right now, and… yeah, I kind of would deserve it, I know.

It was inevitable that we would meet some of Barry’s former colleagues from the JLA again, and it went as bad as most of you probably thought it would.

Oliver in this story is not the Oliver from the TV show – I actually like TV Olli for the most part – but the one from the comics, specifically from the pre-New 52 ones, is someone who can be quite a self-righteous dick. Barry and he never really saw eye to eye, and I will investigate their relationship more later on, but for now it is really enough for you to know that he doesn’t like Barry, and his reaction to him is probably harsher than from most of the others would have been.

Oh, and we got a glimpse of Dinah, who is Black Canary here (again pre-New 52 version), and contrary to Olli, I like her a lot, and I’m excited about when we are going learn more of her and her relationship to Barry later on.

If anybody of you wonders, yeah, I had Injustice: Gods Among Us in mind when I mentioned the game with which the Batman statue came with. I really like these figures, I’m the proud owner of a couple of them myself and found the idea funny that Eddy could be a secret collector himself. Poor guy, though, the Batman figure and he just weren’t meant to be.

Huge thanks to all of you who left me feedback for my last chapter! I love hearing from you, I can’t tell you how much it brightens my day – seriously, at times I grin like a lunatic when I read your review, I don’t wanna know what people think when they see me then. x)

Next chapter will be... another sad one. I seriously wish I could offer you a fluffy one, seeing that it is around Christmas when it comes up, but I promise it is not only sad but also, hopefully, heartwarming. I know that I sound like a cracked recorder when I mention this, but things will look up, there is still a lot in front of us before Barry’s story comes to an end, and I’m a strong believer in karma, and he is someone who is seriously collecting the good one. ;)

You guys have a wonderful Christmas season! I’ll be back with the next chapter in two weeks! <3
The snowfall has picked up over the last two hours, and Barry, who is busy mopping the store, pauses to look outside through the large windows. He watches how the thick snowfall makes it nearly impossible to recognize anything from the world outside. Even so, he is certain that everything has to be covered by a thick, white blanket by now, and while it is a pain to travel in weather like that, Barry enjoys the very serene feeling that comes with this side of winter.

He stands in front of the counter, mop in hands, hardly noticing the weariness in his limbs as he watches the falling snow. It has been a long day and the thought that it would become an even longer one is somewhat daunting, though he tries to look forward to tonight.

Glancing at the clock above the entrance, Barry takes note that James will pass by in about forty minutes to pick Mrs. Ming and him up for the Christmas party that will start at eight at his place since his apartment offers much more space than Mrs. Ming’s one does.

With a soft sigh, he reaches up to rub his tired eyes. He didn’t sleep too well last night, somewhat nervous about tonight’s party, and he spent most of today getting the store in a pristine state since it would stay closed for the next two weeks. They will reopen on the second of January again, and he wants to prepare everything so that no bad surprises are waiting for them then.

The notion of having two weeks off is still a little strange to him, as he hasn’t had an actual holiday since he started working here. It will be unpaid, of course, but still, even though he knows he has to plan out his budget more carefully in the upcoming weeks, he can’t deny that he is a little excited about the prospect of being able to sleep in for a couple of days in a row without worrying about how his bouts of insomnia will influence his performance at work.

Barry shakes that thought off, smiling softly to himself, and turns back to his current task.

It is about fifteen minutes later that he puts the mop and other cleaning utensils away and lets his eyes wander scrutinizing through the store one last time.

For some reason, he feels sadness drape around him as his gaze moves around the dimly lit room, an odd sensation of nostalgia, and he wonders what is up with that. Eventually, he blames it on being tired and feeling somewhat wistful at the notion of not returning for over two weeks.
He chuckles, bemused about his own silliness, and turns the last of the lights off before he makes his way upstairs to join Mrs. Ming for tea she invited him to.

The brief but steep walk up to his employee’s small apartment causes the slight throbbing that has already been clinging to his knees for hours to worsen enough that Barry is overcome by a bout of frustration. At times, he hates his body a little for how very mucked up it really is, though he tries not to think about it most of the time, which becomes more and more difficult to do due to how the problems with his joints have become severe enough that they would hurt even without him doing anything taxing. It has gotten so bad a couple of times over the last month, that his knees, ankles, and wrist swelled up after a long day at work, and he had to rest and do cold applications to ease the pain.

Barry knows that he would soon no longer be able to work as sales clerk if things went on like that. Right now, he can still do most tasks even if they are painful, and he has Axel to help him with restocking the shelves or fixing smaller stuff he can’t do by himself anymore, but things can’t go on like this forever.

Chasing that grim thought away, Barry exhales a soft sigh of relief when he reaches the top of the stairs and makes his way through the small vestibule to the living room.

It is as warm and comfortable in here as always, and his mood starts to lift the moment he takes the familiar surroundings in. Again, a slight pang of nostalgia flashes through his chest, making him pause.

“Barry.” Mrs. Ming’s voice gets him to shake the odd feeling off and look over to where the elderly woman has appeared at the doorway that leads to the kitchen. She is smiling, her eyes welcoming and warm as she nods to the couch. “Take a seat, my dear. I’ll get you a cup of tea.”

“Th-thanks,” Barry agrees and does as told while his employer vanishes back to the other room.

Sitting down is a nice change from standing nearly all day, and he lets himself sink into the soft cushioning, closing his eyes.

His body feels heavy, his limbs like lead, and he wishes he could take a nap before they drive over to James apartment.

Tomorrow, he reminds himself, he can rest. He won’t have to be anywhere or do anything. He will just stay in bed and try to catch up on the sleep he has missed over the last couple of weeks because of everything that went on with the Rogues, the Blue Velvet, and his life in general.

Briefly, he wonders how Len is doing. He hasn’t seen him this week so far as he has been busy with work, and Sam is still put out of action due to his broken legs, which makes travelling over to the hideout quite difficult. Lisa is able to operate the Mirror gun and other gadgets well enough, but she doesn’t really like to use the mirrorverse as a means to travel around, as she worries about what could happen if something went wrong.

Barry understands her concern, and has kept his visits to once a week on Saturday after work for the last couple of weeks.

It is strange to suddenly be so cut off from them. He hasn’t really noticed it happening, but now that he can’t visit them on a regular basis, he realizes how much time he has started spending with them.

Thanks to Eddy, who is sticking to him like a shadow most of the time and has become more or less a constant guest on his couch these days, he doesn’t really have any opportunity to feel lonely,
though. Initially, after learning of his friends’ plan to use the speedster to keep track of him and make sure that he was safe, he had been worried that he would grow annoyed by his friend’s presence eventually.

Fortunately, and much to his surprise, this hasn’t turned out to be the case so far, and while Eddy is nearly always there, he displays a keen sense when it comes to predicting when he should give Barry space. This makes the whole situation much easier to handle since he usually keeps to himself whenever Barry is exhausted and just needs some time away from everybody.

Barry, as he waits for Mrs. Ming to return, wonders where Eddy is right now. His friend did pass by earlier this afternoon as he does nearly daily now, something he started to do after the Rogues’ run-in with Cameron’s man. He didn’t stick around for long, though, he only bought himself a Snickers and left soon afterwards, telling him he had someplace to be.

“But don’t worry,” Eddy told him with a wink, just about to take his leave. “My all-seeing eyes will make sure that no ill fate shall befall you.”

Seeing that Barry has been a speedster himself once, he knows about their abilities, and he is pretty sure that his friend wasn’t really joking when he said that. He probably kept checking up on him during the day without letting himself be seen or heard.

That thought is somewhat unsettling, but considering what happened when the Blue Velvet got their hands on him the last time, Barry is willing to live with it for now. Lisa and the others assured him that they are already planning on taking care of Cameron and his men, and while Barry likes the idea of them getting themselves in danger even less, he forces himself to hope that everything will turn out well eventually.

The sound of Mrs. Ming returning to the room causes Barry to let go of the string of thoughts. He looks to her and smiles when he sees that she is holding a tray with their teas and some snacks on it. As she puts the tray down on the coffee table in front of the couch, he notices that she is using the delicate cups from her porcelain tea set she told him was a present from her parents in law. It was a marriage gift to the young couple, quite an expensive one at that time, and has to be worth quite a lot of money these days. Thus it is somewhat of a surprise to Barry that she would decide to use it now, as James told him that she usually only does so for important occasions.

She hands him his cup which he accepts gratefully and tells him to pick one of the almond biscuits she made the other day.

Despite not being really hungry, Barry picks one and start to nibble at it in between sips of his tea. The beverage is warm and soothing, and he lets himself rest back against the couch again, feeling drowsy but comfortable.

“You’ve already decided what you’re going to do during your vacation?” Mrs. Ming inquires as she watches him with kind eyes.

“N-not r-really,” Barry answers. “P-prob-bably s-sleeping a l-lot.”

“You do look exhausted,” Mrs. Ming agrees concerned. “You’ve had trouble sleeping again, my dear?”

“Y-yes… it’s j-just th-the t-time of th-the y-year.” Barry isn’t lying, when the holidays draw close, his nightmares tend to becomes more frequent again and are often worse than over the rest of the year. He guesses it is because of how Christmas brings up memories of his time before Iron Heights
that he would rather not think about. Family, friends, parties… Things that remind him of Iris, Wally, Hal, and the others.

Mrs. Ming gives him a sympathetic, understanding look and reaches out to touch his hand lightly. “I know that you don’t have it easy, but you were able to build a new life for yourself with wonderful people in it that care about you. You aren’t alone, and you have many people who dearly love you. You have to keep that in mind, Barry.”

Surprised about these encouraging but unexpected words, Barry isn’t sure how to respond. The elderly woman’s eyes suddenly seem very doleful and weary, and she pulls her hand back, shaking her head. “You’re such a good man, it is hard for me to understand how such horrible things can happen to someone like you.”

A cold shiver runs through Barry, and he suddenly feels much more awake again. He isn’t sure why she would touch upon this now of all things, and a part of him panics over what she means with horrible things. As his employer, she has been informed that he was in prison and what he was there for, of course, and she probably knows that he was abused there, but the way she said it…

He starts to feel sick…

Noticing his alarmed expression, Mrs. Ming becomes concerned and adds. “I’m sorry, Barry, I crossed a line there I didn’t mean to.” She sighs and reaches up to her temple, pressing her lips into a thin line for a moment. Then, she turns her gaze back to him, meeting his eyes with an intensity that causes Barry to tense up.

“You are a strong person, Barry, far stronger than you believe,” Mrs. Ming proceeds. “You have been dealt a difficult fate to bear by life, but you don’t complain, you don’t fault others for it as many would do, you take what you’ve been given and try make the best out of it. I don’t know many people who would have been able to do that.”

She studies his face, and neither the fondness nor the deep sadness that lie behind her eyes are lost on Barry.

He doesn’t understand why she would touch upon this now all of a sudden.

Over the years he worked for her, she has offered him comforting words and little acts of kindness whenever she noticed that he was feeling depressed. They never talked about his past, though, she never inquired about Iris or anything else from his former life, and he never felt the need to bring it up or to explain himself to her. It was different than with the others.

Whenever he shared tea with her in her little apartment, when he helped her with something, changing a bulb, solving puzzles, or whatever else, it was always like he could temporary let go of the dread his past has to offer.

“I am very happy I got the chance to get to know someone like you,” Mrs. Ming tells him earnestly. “You’re an addition to my family I didn’t expect to find this late into my life.”

Barry returns her look with wide eyes, uncertain what to say as a sense of foreboding overcomes him.

Mrs. Ming has been doing much better over the last two months. She hasn’t been sick even once in that time…

People do often flourish once more before they eventually die.
That notion holds something utterly horrifying, and even though Barry understood that Mrs. Ming’s death is an inevitability that is closing in for a while now, though he feels like this catches him utterly off guard.

“A-are y-you alr-right, B-Bo?” Barry asks quietly, his voice coarse and hardly more than a whisper.

Mrs. Ming smiles that warm, comforting smile of hers and touches his hand again, which, he notices then, is slightly shaking.

“I’m more than alright, Barry,” Mrs. Ming assures him. “I’m truly happy. I have a wonderful family and friends, James is doing very well as is my daughter, and I know that I can be grateful for everything I was able to experience so far. I had an amazing husband, I travelled far, and I succeeded in building a new life here for myself and my family.”

A faint sorrow glints through the warmth in her eyes as she goes on. “I know that I have been very lucky, I just wish that I was able to help you more, my dear boy.”

Barry feels his throat close up and his eyes start to itch. He swallows with some difficulty, and is just about to try and protest when the elderly woman turns to pick up a crème envelope from the tray he hasn’t noticed before.

“I want you to have this, Barry,” Mrs. Ming says as she offers him the envelope, and Barry, after a moment of hesitation, accepts it with a growing sense of anxiety. The paper is thick and smooth to the touch, but light. He studies it for a long minute, wondering what it could hold for him, though a part of him already suspects what it is, which causes his stomach to drop.

“B-Bo, th-that’s n-not-”

“Barry,” Mrs. Ming cuts him off firmly but kindly. “I want you to have this, and you will make me very happy if you accept it.”

Reluctantly, Barry turns his look back down to the envelope in his hands, eying it with increasing apprehension. He doesn’t want to open it and see what it holds. He thinks he already knows it anyway, and the idea is just downright depressing.

Mrs. Ming doesn’t urge him but waits patiently, watching him quietly.

Eventually, Barry opens the envelope slowly, swallowing nervously as he lifts the flap.

It is as if someone empties a bucket of ice water over him as he looks inside and spots numerous one hundred dollar bills.

“I c-can’t ac-cept i-t,” Barry croaks and blinks rapidly when the burning in his eyes only gets worse. “B-Bo, th-that’s t-too m-much-” A touch to his wrist causes him to stop.

“You would do me a great favor, if you take it,” Mrs. Ming explains softly. “I always wanted to pay you more than I was able to, and while this money is not nearly as much as I would like to give you, it is still a little something that will hopefully help you.”

Was this a parting gift? Was she…

She has been feeling better, though!

Why this all of a sudden? Why now?!
Barry takes a shuddering breath and hardly notices how the first couple of tears start to run down his cheeks.

The realization that this could be the last time he has tea with her hits him, and he starts to tremble. He doesn’t want to lose her. He doesn’t want to lose this kind old lady who is always willing to offer him comforting words and company when he doesn’t feel well.

She has been the first person who he had after his release from prison, the first one who showed him kindheartedness instead of apathy.

Back then, after he was pushed back into a life outside Iron Heights, Mrs. Ming and her little store were the only things that made his life bearable, that gave him purpose. He doubts he would have been able to hold on without that till he met Len again, Mary, Eddy, James, and the others. If it weren’t for her…

A sob passes Barry’s lips, and he presses his hand over them, squeezing his eyes shut as he tries to hold himself together and not to break down in front of her. He doesn’t want to repay her kindness with tears and sadness.

“Oh, my dear boy, it will be alright,” Mrs. Ming comforts him soothingly and startles Barry slightly when she puts her hand on his back and urges him closer. He doesn’t resist, he lets himself be guided into the embrace, welcomes it despite how tensed up his body is while he fights the need to break apart into a thousand pieces.

The sadness that weighs on him seems omnipresent, as if it is not only surrounding him but also filling his insides, causing him to shudder as he cries silent tears against the old woman’s shoulder.

“It is okay, Barry, everything will be okay.” Mrs. Ming rubs his back, like someone would do with a young child to calm them down when they are upset, and Barry whimpers at the realization that this is probably the first time he had a mother figure like her in his life.

He vaguely remembers that his mother held him like this too, but it is hard to recall anything really about the people that were his parents. They are faceless, voiceless silhouettes in his mind that get harder and harder to make out with each passing year.

“D-don’t l-leave,” Barry utters against her shoulder, shaking, his hands painfully clenched into fists. “P-p-plea-se…”

They always leave, all the nice people in his life. They vanish, die, or just realize that they can’t stay around him…

*You egoistical little brat,* a voice in his mind hisses angrily, *she is dying because she is old, not because of you.*

Barry shivers and sobs.

He doesn’t want her to die…

“I’m not going to leave,” Mrs. Ming assures him, resting her cheek on the crown of his head. “I will always be there with you, Barry. In your heart, in your memories, and a part of me also lives on in James. In a way, I will never be truly gone.”

Barry grits his teeth, whimpering. His chest feels like it is going to break open any moment now.
It is horrible to make this about him, to allow himself to be consumed by his own pain while she is the one who…

“I-I’m s-sor-ry…” Barry utters in between sobs.

She hushes him softly and starts to hum a low, calming melody, which Barry doesn’t recognize. It sounds nice though, comforting, and he finds himself listening to it, becoming nearly transfixed with the foreign tune.

A strange sensation overcomes Barry, and the pain in his chest seems to ease away a little bit, while his sobs quieten and his tears slowly stop.

For a short while it suddenly is as if they are in a bubble, cut off from the world outside, unbothered by the reality of things. It is a welcome escape, and when Mrs. Ming finally stops to hum to him, Barry can’t say how much time has passed, probably five to ten minutes, but he finds himself feeling calmer once more.

Slowly, reluctantly, and somewhat embarrassed, Barry pulls himself back and rubs his face that is still wet from his earlier tears. Mrs. Ming lets him and waits patiently as he tries to get his emotions under control.

“I-I’m s-sorry,” Barry eventually apologizes softly. He lifts his eyes and meets hers. “I d-didn’t m-mean t-to…”

Ashamed and still riddled with sadness, Barry looks away.

“There is no need to apologize,” Mrs. Ming assures him.

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and brushes over his eyes again. He glances up to meet hers again and asks after a moment of hesitation. “D-does J-James kn-know?”

A small, sad smile appears on Mrs. Ming’s lips. “I think he does, but he…” She sighs quietly and shakes her head. “He can be as stubborn as his mother when it comes to things he doesn’t want to see.”

She clasps her hands in her lap and falls silent, seemingly considering something. When she speaks again, there is sorrow clinging to her words.

“I wish I could leave things in a better state for him.” Mrs. Ming frowns, her eyes on the tray next to them. “It will be hard for him. My daughter Suzan, his mother, she... they have never been close, and it will hurt him when he learns that she is going to sell this store.”

Cold dread settles into the pit of Barry’s stomach as he hears this, and Mrs. Ming gives him a sad look, knowing what this piece of news must also mean for him.

“My husband and I decided before his death that she would eventually inherit it, and she informed me years ago that she is not intending to keep the house when it eventually falls into her hands.”

“Wh-why?”

“Grief and anger.”

Barry doesn’t understand, but he doesn’t want to inquire any further as he can see that it hurts the elderly woman to talk about this.
Still, he can’t help but wonder whether this is connected to the reason why James grew up with his grandmother and never really mentioned his mother. He has been wondering for a while whether it was due to bad blood as their estrangement is very obvious.

“I am truly sorry for this, Barry,” Mrs. Ming says, the regret audible in her voice. “I wish I could make it possible for you to keep this job till your parole is over.”

What it would mean for him to lose his job, is something Barry doesn’t even want to think about right now. His parole officer would be less than pleased, and he knows he must have an occupation to stay out of prison. The idea of what could happen if he didn’t find another job is nauseating, and he pushes it away, seeing that he has other things to worry about right now as it is.

“A-are y-you s-sure y-you… I-I m-mean y-you’re d-doing b-better,” Barry points out, sounding nearly pleading as he does so.

“I feel it.” Mrs. Ming smiles calmly. “I’ve been feeling it for a while now, how my body slowly starts to shut down on itself, and after eighty-seven years, I’m ready to move on.” She reaches out for him once more, and Barry lets her grasp his hand. “I’m not afraid of it, and while I’m sad about leaving you all behind for now, I’m looking forward to see my husband again.”

Barry tries to returns her smile, but fails miserably. He knows that there is something after one’s life ends, thanks to his former experiences as the Flash assisting Zatanna, but he doesn’t believe in heaven, and he doubts that you’ll ever really meet the people you once held dear again after they are gone.

A part of him wants to believe, though. He wants to see Iris again, he wants to apologize to her for what he let happen, and he wants to see Hal again, and Simon. Knowing that he is going to lose another friend makes him want to believe so badly that it hurts.

“Barry,” Mrs. Ming proceeds, squeezing his hand lightly. “I’m aware that this is difficult for you, and that it will be difficult for James, but you two have found wonderful friends in each other. You will be able to help each other through the grief, and you will realize that I’m not really gone. I’m with you in your memories, and I’m with you in your hearts, and I will watch over you, I promise.”

Tears fall again when Barry squeezes his eyes shut and nods. “Th-th-thank y-y-you…”

“My dear boy,” Mrs. Ming says with a familiar fondness and cups his cheek. “You have no idea how much you’ve enriched my life.”

A sob forces its way past Barry’s lips, but he is able to bite down on the next, stubbornly fighting the pain that constricts his chest.

“James is truly happy that he can call you his friend.” Mrs. Ming tentatively brushes over Barry’s head.

The sound of the door being opened downstairs startles both of them, causing them to realize how much time must have passed since James seems to have arrived to pick them up already.

Barry quickly rubs over his eyes with the end of his sleeve, drying them even though he knows that this won’t help him get rid of the signs that he has just cried as they feel swollen and red.

Stumbling to his feet, he utters an apology and swiftly makes his way to Mrs. Ming’s bathroom to get himself some minutes to calm down.

He locks the door and walks straight to the sink, splashing some cool water onto his face as he listens
to how James enters his grandmother’s apartment, a bright and friendly greeting on his lips as always.

It pains him to imagine how hard this will be on his friend. James loves his grandmother dearly as she was the person who actually brought him up and took care of him for nearly all of his life.

Shivering, Barry splashes some more water on his face and turns off the faucet. He shakes his hand and reaches for the towel next to the sink to dry his face and hands. His gaze drops on his mirror image, and he pauses.

Standing here, in Mrs. Ming’s bathroom, as he has done so many times in the past, and imagining that this would very likely be the last time, causes another wave of sadness to overcome him.

After tonight’s party, Mrs. Ming and James would drive to Wisconsin to visit more family and stay there over the holidays.

The notion that Mrs. Ming would pass away surrounded by family, people she loves, is somewhat comforting at least.

A part of him still wants to believe that she is wrong, that it isn’t possible for a person to be able to predict when they are close to death, but he knows that this isn’t the case.

It is bitter to think that he worked here for the last time today without realizing it, but a part of him is also grateful for it, because he doesn’t know how he would have coped with it, if he had actually been aware of that fact.

This store, no matter how silly it may sound, has become a second home to him. He often spent more time here during a week than in his own apartment, and while it was tough for him at times, he always loved to know that he had this place, somewhere with a purpose, somewhere where he was welcome with open arms.

What will he do now? With his dear friend gone, with his job gone, with his second home gone… Barry forces himself to take a calming breath, inhales deeply and exhales slowly regaining control.

He will move on. Like he always does.

“Barry?” James’ voice reaches him through the closed bathroom door. “You’re alright in there, or do I have to worry that you flushed yourself down by accident?”

Unable to stop himself, Barry huffs a laugh. He rubs his hands over his face as another shiver runs through his body, and turns to the door to answer. “N-no, I’m s-still h-here.”

“Good,” James agrees in audibly good mood. “You’d me worried there for a moment.”

“I’ll be done in a m-minute.”

“Sure, we’ll be waiting.”

Barry glances back to his reflection in the mirror and suddenly he is overcome with the need to reach out and call for Sam, knowing that the man still keeps an eye on his mirrors just in case even though he was unable to really leave his bed right now.

He wants to talk to Len, only for a moment, only to see his face…

Closing his eyes, Barry takes another slow breath and eventually makes his way out of the bathroom.
“Hey,” James greets him but his smile quickly slips from his lips when he gets a better look on him, and he asks in concern. “Is everything alright?”

Barry waves him off, chuckling. “I b-broke a j-jar w-with th-the ch-chilly p-pulver and f-forgot t-to w-wash m-my h-hand afterw-wards.” He grimaces. “I r-rubbed m-my e-eyes w-without th-thinking, wh-which t-turned o-out t-to b-be a p-painful id-dea.”

“Ouch,” James agrees and gives him a sympathetic look. “Are you doing okay or do you think we should pass by at a drugstore to get you some eye drops for it?”

Touched by his friend’s offer, he can’t help but smile. “Th-thank y-you b-but th-that is n-not n-necessary, I th-think I r-rinsed th-them out w-well en-nough.”

“Okay, but tell me if you change your mind, it’s no trouble at all,” James informs him.

Barry nods, and a well-known fondness settles into his chest as he watches the other man.

“James,” Mrs. Ming pulls their attention back to her as she gets up from the couch and picks up the try with leftover tea and cookies. “Would you be so nice and help me with the cake I have prepared.”

“Of course, lao lao,” James agrees readily and follows his grandmother to the kitchen.

Barry stays behind in the living room, and listens to them potter around for a moment before his gaze drops to the coffee table.

There, the crème colored envelop is still resting, and the sight alone causes the sadness in his chest to intensify again.

He doesn’t really want to look at it or the money right now or cause James to inquire about it should he notice it later, so he ends up picking it up and putting it into his back pocket.

It feels heavy there, nearly like lead, and Barry knows that it is ridiculous, but after they are all done and in James’ car on their way to the party, he still feels an immense relief when he is finally able to stuff it into his backpack and forget about it for now.

Chapter End Notes

My wonderful readers, I wish all of you a Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, and for those who doesn’t celebrate anything today or still have some time till you celebrate Christmas, I hope you too have an amazing day! :)

I’m currently staying with my parents, and I’m busy with visiting various relatives and stuffing my face with different delicious Christmas meals (I’m not complaining ;), and it is mostly thanks to my amazing beta that I’m able to post this chapter on time today! <3

I hope you all enjoyed this part, though I know that it will probably make some of you a little sad that we about to reach a point of saying farewell to a character that we’ve known since the beginning. I really love Mrs. Ming, what a good and caring person she is, and the positive influence she had on Barry. She did help him a lot, far more than she realizes, and like with many goodbyes of that sort, it will be hard for her loved ones to deal with that change, but like in real life, you can’t avoid it.
Despite the sad revelation about Mrs. Ming’s healthy, I wanted to give you something positive with this chapter, too. Mrs. Ming isn’t afraid of dying as she is at peace with where she is right now in her life, and she wants Barry to understand that. Unfortunately, Barry has troubles to understand that, as his stance on death is not one that gives him a lot of comfort in this situation. I guess it stems from the guilt which he is still carrying around with himself and the pain over the idea of losing a very dear loved one. My own insecurity on that topic reflects itself as well, I guess, but I generally choose to believe that whatever waits for us on the other side will be something good, like a homecoming of sorts.

I really think chapter 77 or 78 would have been a more fit read for Christmas day, but I hope that this chapter didn’t dim your mood too much! Today is a happy day, one of family and loved ones, and I wish everybody of you that you can enjoy it one way or another!

Thank you so much for the numerous and amazing feedback I got for my last chapter, it really means a lot to me, and while I will finish this work either way, it makes sharing it with you to a much more rewarding experience.

The next chapter will take place after the party Barry is about to visit in this one. Initially, I wanted to write what takes place there, and I already wrote a sketched chapter down, but I never really got around to turn it into an actual piece. I moved on to the one after it because it didn’t turn out right at the first couple of tries, and eventually I left it be altogether. I will have smaller flashbacks to what happened there, in the following chapters, and I think that will be enough to prevent any confusion.

Chapter 76 will be up in two weeks, and it will be the last one before we finally also reach Christmas in Singularity! Again, Barry will get an unexpected but not unwelcome visitor, and he will be surprised by how much things have changed without him noticing.

See you in two weeks! :)
Axel is already at James' place when Barry gets there, along with several of Mrs. Ming’s family members as well as some of her friends.

Barry learns that Mrs. Ming, while having just one daughter on her own, does have numerous nephews and nieces who themselves have a bunch of children. They are all clearly happy to meet the older woman again, and the younger generation greets her warmly, with hugs and kisses on the cheeks, while the older ones stick to exchanging greetings that are no less heartfelt.

Mrs. Ming introduces Barry to them, and he is surprised that their welcoming demeanor doesn’t change in the least the moment the focus is shifted onto him. Even so, he is nervous and sticks to a couple stammered greetings, and blushes when his employer informs her friends and family what a wonderful help he has been so far.

Thankfully, Mrs. Ming’s attention is drawn to her youngest grand-niece soon afterwards, who she hasn’t met so far, and Barry can retreat to the side-lines next to the buffet table, preferring to observe the growing crowd around him than being involved in any conversations.

He is glad to notice that Axel seems to have been able to connect to a number of other teenager his age already and watches how they talk animatedly about some thing or another. It is nice to see him with other kids his age that have a more stable home life than he does, and for a few minutes he keeps watching them laughing and fooling around, though it is obvious that they try to keep it down due to the adults around of whom some are undoubtedly their parents.

It does become quite crowded as the evening progresses, leaving most of the younger grown-ups to eat standing around the buffet, and eventually Barry is pulled into a conversation since it would be rude for him to retreat outside the room to avoid such a thing from happening.

It is unexpected how kindly he is treated by nearly all of the other guests, and he does not know how to feel about the fact that nobody asks him about his past, about what he did before he started working for their family matriarch. It appears a little, like they knew that this is an unpleasant affair.
for him, and he doesn’t want to think about what that could mean.

James sticks to his side for most of the evening after he finished making his round to catch up with the attending people. He introducing Barry to his aunts, uncles, and cousins, always funny and charming, and clearly mindful to keep him comfortable, which is not surprising but still touching.

The only person who does not seem to be all that keen about his presence at the party is Mrs. Ming’s daughter and James’ mother, Elisabeth, who obviously prefers to keep a distance to him after their somewhat cool introduction. James is annoyed by his mother’s attitude and apologizes to Barry about it. He explains that she could be quite a difficult person if she wanted to be and tells him not to take it personal.

Barry tries to take this advice to heart, though it troubles him a little that James’ mother would dislike him even though they’ve never met before. He relaxes soon again and spends the next two hours enjoying himself much more than he thought he would, feeling oddly normal amid these friendly people who seem to accept him with no problem whatsoever.

It is close to eleven when Barry starts to get a little overwhelmed by being among so many strangers, no matter that most of them are nothing but pleasant, and James, observant as he is, picks up on it. He excuses them from the group they were talking to, and leads Barry to the balcony that is connected to his bedroom.

The air is filled by snowflakes as they step outside, and Barry welcomes the biting cold that helps to clear his head. They stay out there in silent for a minute or so, enjoying the view they are allowed from up here, and the restless energy that started to buzz below Barry’s skin retreats once more, leaving him more relaxed if a little tired.

James touches his elbow lightly, drawing Barry’s attention back to him. His friend smiles and tells him that he is glad that he decided to come. Barry returns the smile, and remarks that so is he. They talk a little about what James and Mrs. Ming have planned for their stay in Chicago, before the decide to head back in as they both didn’t pick up their coats, and they are growing cold.

On their way in, Elisabeth crosses their way, and Barry isn’t sure whether she hasn’t been waiting for them or not, but it looks a little like it. James and his mother have a brief, harsh spat, that leaves the man clearly hurt, but he assure’s Barry that he is fine and that they should proceed to enjoy the party. Barry agrees, not sure what else to do, although he knows that his friends is lying, and not for the first time he wonders what kind of relationship James and his mother have.

The rest of the party goes by much more smoothly, and James calls Barry a taxi shortly after two in the morning, ignoring his protests and insistence that he could use the nightline just fine instead.

After making sure that Axel would be fine and saying goodbye to Mrs. Ming, they botch head downstairs. While they are waiting in front of the apartment building, surrounded by the cool December night, James takes hold of his hand, touch light and unthreatening. He meets Barry’s eyes warmly, and tells him once more that he is glad that he took the time to join them.

Barry responds with a soft smile and assures him that he too is glad he did so as he had a very enjoyable night. It is then that he remembers that he has still James’ present in his backpack and gives it to the other man. James is visibly delighted by the book, telling Barry that he loves that kind of photography but also remarks that it wouldn’t have been necessary. Barry ignores that and enjoys the feeling of a present well picked.

James looks somewhat embarrassed then and explains that he did get something for Barry too, but that it has not arrived just yet.
Barry guessed that his friend would get him something as well, and he is getting a little curious when James refuses to tell him anything about the present, just that it will be amazing.

They spent the next couple of minutes in silence, enjoying the calmness of the early hour and how the street around them are unusually quiet, make it appear like the city seems to lay in a deep slumber.

When taxi arrives, James holds Barry back as he is about to reach for the backdoor. He hesitates for a moment but eventually tells Barry how much he means to his grandmother and to him too, and that he is one of the nicest, kind-hearted persons he has ever met.

Barry is a bit taken aback by this words but answers with a hesitant smile and a light squeeze of James’ hand before bidding him goodnight and climbing into the taxi, ending that night.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter despite its short length! :)

Thank you for following Singularity and leaving me such amazing feedback! I hope all of you had a beautiful Christmas with your loved ones, and that your New Year will be just as great (or even better ;).

The next regular chapter will be out as usual on Sunday in two weeks!
Irrevocability of Changes

Chapter Summary

Jay visits Barry, and Barry learns something he would have never expected.

Chapter Notes

Beware, my dear readers, this chapter is not the edited version, thus it is probably crawling with errors (hopefully mostly smaller ones ;).

I’m on a holiday in Germany and I don’t have the edited version from my beta yet, but since I won’t be able to get to my laptop at all tomorrow, so I’ve decided to upload this versions a little for you (just another half an hour till midnight and Sunday, after all). I want to stick to my uploading schedule when I can help it, but I promise that I will exchange this version with the edited one as soon as possible! ;)

Update: This chapter is now edited by the amazing Quintessenza! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is four days prior to Christmas when Barry gets a visit from Jay.

The older man looks tired but in a good mood, when Barry lets him in, and for once he is genuinely happy his friend passed by. He hasn’t seen nor heard much from Jay over the last couple of weeks, and he is wondering how Joan is doing.

“If the weather keeps up like this, I won’t be surprised if I come across a penguin the next time I run over here,” Jay remarks bemused after he took a seat at the table while Barry goes to prepare them some coffee. “The Twins haven’t had such a strong winter in years.”

“It’s n-nice, th-though,” Barry points out as he puts some of the grinded coffee in the metal can and adds the hot water he initially heated up for tea. He glances out his kitchen window where everything is covered by a thick layer of snow. “It g-gives ev-eryth-thing a-a n-nice f-festive t-touch.”

“True,” Jay agrees but his slight pinched expression shows that he doesn’t really agree. “But it’s a pain if you have to run on wet, frozen ground. Bart broke his right arm and jaw when he slammed into a parked car during one of his fights with the Teen Titans a couple days ago.”

The words are so unexpected, that Barry freezes for a moment.

This is the first time that Jay touched upon hero business, at least this blatantly.

Then, Barry catches up with what the other man actually said and feels familiar worry settle over him. He turns to Jay with a concerned look. “Is h-he al-r-right?”

Jay nods with a reassuring smile. “He’s fine, you know how quickly a speedster can heal, and he
was up and going just a couple of hours later.” He huffs a chuckle and shakes his head ruefully. “At least he is somewhat more careful now that he realized that our warnings weren’t just meant to annoy him.”

Barry swallows and stammers a confused. “G-Good… th-that’s g-good.” He turns back to the small pot with their coffee, feeling oddly unsettled by how open Jay suddenly is about that part of his life.

It isn’t as if any of it was new to Barry since he was a superhero himself for over half a decade, but…

He certainly isn’t anymore, and, so far, Jay has seemed very aware of this fact as well and never really touched upon any sort of hero business when he was visiting.

They fall silent, and Barry can’t be sure, but he believes that Jay has noticed his uneasiness and probably knows where it stems from.

“Have you had a busy month?” Jay asks out of the blue and at Barry’s surprised and somewhat wary expression, he elaborates. “Since Christmas is approaching quickly.”

Barry relaxes a little and nods. “Y-yes, w-we d-did h-have qu-quite an inc-crease in c-customers over th-the last c-couple of w-weeks.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Jay says, smiling. “Are you going to close over the holidays?”

Barry turns to get two mugs from his cupboard. “Y-yes, w-we’re c-closed r-right n-now, as it i-is.” He tries to keep the worry off his face as he remembers the evening three days ago, when he sat together with Mrs. Ming in her living room, and she said her farewell to him. The notion that it probably wasn’t meant to be only temporary causes his chest to hurt and he pushes that thought away as he fills the mugs with coffee.

Or, he tries to, at least.

The unwanted memory of the money he got comes to his mind, and his mouth turns into a thin, pinched line. The three-thousand dollars he counted are still in the crème envelope, resting at the bottom of his sock drawer, and it has been there since he arrived home after the Christmas party. He eventually would have to fall back on it, considering that he is likely out of work, but for now he doesn’t want to touch it.

“I’m happy to hear that,” Jay remarks. “Everybody needs some time to relax every once in a while.”

Jay doesn’t say so outright, but Barry understands what he means. Like Len and many others, the older man too seems to think that he is working too much, and Barry nearly huffs a bitter laugh at that notion, because it probably would be a while until he can do so again at all.

People like him usually only get jobs at construction sites or similar tasks, cheap help for hard labour, and Barry doesn’t kid himself when it comes to how ruined his body really is. He could never do that kind of work, it is just not physically possible for him, and getting another job as an alleged paedophile and murderer will prove itself as a challenge.

“How long will your holiday last?” Jay asks, watching him.

“T-till after N-New Y-Years,” Barry lies as he takes their drinks to the kitchen table. He hands Jay his and takes a seat opposite to him.

“So still more than a week.” Jay sounds quite pleased about that. “You have anything planned for
that time?”

“N-no,” Barry replies honestly with a small smile. “J-Just c-catching up on s-sleep.”

The other man hums in understanding. “That’s good, considering how hardworking you are, you really earned yourself some downtime.”

Again, it is unexpected and somewhat strange to have Jay talk to him like this, praise him so directly, and Barry’s only reply is a small, awkward smile.

Jay doesn’t mind his lack of an actual response and instead asks, “You’re going to celebrate Christmas with your friends?”

At that question, the Rogues and their intent to take him with them to the Saloon on Christmas Eve immediately spring to Barry’s mind. This is hardly something he can share with Jay, though, at least if he doesn’t want to land back in the Heights within the day.

“P-pro-b-bably,” Barry answers somewhat nervously and hopes that it is not too obvious how uneasy this question makes him. He quickly adds to steer the conversation in a somewhat safer direction. “I act-t-tually w-was at a Ch-Christmas p-party j-just a c-couple of d-days ag-go. M-Mrs. M-Ming’s g-grandson, J-James, h-hosted it.”

“Mr. Lao?” Jay confirms and seems quite pleased about this piece of information. “I’m really happy to hear that. Was it a nice celebration?”

Barry nods, smiling at the memory of that evening, though it dims a little when he remembers again that this was possibly the last time he saw his employer.

There is still doubt in him regarding Mrs. Ming’s prediction. It is hard to imagine that people can sense when their life is going to end, but it isn’t unheard of either.

Even so, he silently hopes that she was wrong, and that she would be there again after New Year, waiting for his arrival with a warm and kind smile.

“Don’t think I don’t know what kind of person you are.”

The harsh words of Mrs. Ming’s daughter come back to him, and Barry frowns as he recalls the meeting with that woman.

“My mother has always been too lenient when it comes to parasites who live off her kind nature,” Elisabeth told him bitterly, harshly.

Her dark eyes weren’t on Barry, though, who had been unlucky enough to run into that woman after stepping back inside from the balcony. James had suggested to him to take a small break from the party there and catch some fresh air, and James was now also the one on the receiving end of that cold stare.

The hurt expression that crossed his friend’s face in response to his mother’s words was plain to see, and Barry felt horrible for him and utterly taken aback by the realisation that this woman didn’t seem to care very much for her son.

“I don’t understand why she agreed to hire a criminal,” Elisabeth proceeded, her gaze back on Barry, nearly scowling. “What were you in prison for even? Petty theft? Murder?”

“Enough, mother,” James interrupted her, voice forcefully clam. “If you have a problem with Barry
working for lao lao, you should talk to her.” Lightly, he urged Barry to move again, then, to pass that angry looking woman that stood between them and their way to the living room where the other guests were.

“Like your grandmother has any common sense left in her old age,” Elisabeth said sarcastically.

James didn’t stop at those words but looked back at her, face grim. “It is interesting that you are troubled by lao lao’s choice of help three years after she hired him. It nearly seems like her decrease in health could have something to do with it.”

“Watch what you’re saying, James,” Elisabeth warned him. “I know that, despite all her shortages, mother does care about being respectful to the people you owe.”

James stopped then, glaring outright at the woman a couple of feet away from them, the noise of the celebration going on down the hallway filling the uneasy tense air with an inappropriate sound of joy. “Of all the people in my life,” he told her with audibly suppressed anger. “You are the last one I owe anything.”

Barry, who was watching the whole thing with a growing sense of unsettlement, jumped when James’ mother suddenly covered the gap between herself and her son so quickly that he hardly had been able to follow it before the sharp, painful sound of a slap cut through the air-

“Is everything okay?” Jay asks concerned, and Barry shakes the memory off, though the queasiness it caused lingers.

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees, rubbing his eyes. “F-fine, j-just…”

Briefly, he wants to tell Jay about that night, about James and his mother, and how damaged their relationship appears to be, about how sad he is for his friend, but…

Barry shakes his head and shoots the other man a small smile. “It’s n-nothing, r-really.”

Jay studies him quietly, the frown on his face a sign that he has an inkling that there is more to his sudden shift in mood. Despite his hunch, he is nice enough to let the topic drop, though.

“How is J-Joan d-doing,” Barry asks, shifting the topic to something he has been worrying about a lot recently.

Jay relaxes, and his expression lightens. “According to the doctor, the chemotherapy is going very well.”

“I’m g-glad t-to h-hear th-that,” Barry says honestly, very much relieved to learn that Joan is responding well to the treatment.

“The chemo wears her off,” Jay proceeds and his face turns a little grim then as he lowers his eyes to the mug in his hands, studying it absentmindedly with a concerned look. “She’s tired most of these days, and while she doesn’t want to show it, I know that she is hurting.” He sighs wearily. “I wish there was more I could do to support her. She tells me that she is fine, but I know that she puts on a brave face because she is worried about me.” He huffs an unhappy laugh and shakes his head. “Joan is always worried about others, even when she herself is the one in pain.”

“Sh-she c-cares ab-bout y-you,” Barry points out quietly, feeling bad for his former friend,” and sh-she’s v-very s-strong. I’m s-sure sh-she w-will b-beat th-the c-cancer and m-make a f-full r-rec-recovery. Sh-she p-probably kn-knows it a-alr-ready a-and is m-more c-concerned ab-bout y-you n-not b-being f-focused in a f-fight wh-when y-you…”
Barry breaks off, face growing hot, and quickly lowers his head, realizing that he is taking too much of a liberty there. He is getting too comfortable, and he could kick himself for it. He is no longer one of the people who can give Jay advice, who can mention his alter ego like that, and he really doesn’t want to attract the other man’s ire or suspicion.

To Barry’s utter surprise, Jay doesn’t seem to take his words the wrong way, because, after a brief pause, he says, “Thank you, Barry.”

Still, feeling a little like on thin ice, and worried that he could fall into the freezing water should he make a wrong move, Barry stays quiet and only nods.

“She also tells me all the time that I worry too much,” Jay remarks and chuckles softly. “And she too tells me to keep my head in the game.” He sighs and leans back into his chair. “Thankfully Christmas approaches and the only kind of criminals we’ve to worry about for the most part are pickpockets.”

Even though it’s nearly a decade since Barry himself had put on his costume and dealt with the Twins’ lowlife, he still can recall how the number of small crimes skyrockets around this time of the year. Pickpocketing, simple muggings, and breaking and entering are the main concern of the police and heroes who try to keep the citizens save.

The bigger fishes the criminal branch of society has to offer seem to prefer to do an occasional elaborated stunt closer to Christmas, but generally seem to prefer to wait till after the holiday season to cause any real trouble again.

Well, expect for the madmen in Gotham, of course.

Why that’s the case, Barry has never figured out. He was always just glad to have a break around this time of the year as he had enough other things to take care of as it was. A part of him always assumed that even criminals get affected by the Christmas spirit, which may sound silly, but it is also plausible as they are also just people.

“Bart informed me that he visited you at work again,” Jay remarks out of the blue, causing Barry to tense up in response and shoot him a wary look.

“Relax, Barry,” Jay tells him, the amused twinkle in his eyes replaced by a more sombre emotion. “I know that you wouldn’t hurt the boy.”

This is not a statement Barry expected, nor is the anger that quickly follows the surprise.

“R-Really?” Barry asks, and he can’t keep the scowl off his face as an unexpected bitterness overcomes him out of nowhere. “I-I’m a p-paedoph-phile, y-you’re r-really n-not w-worried wh-what I c-c-could d-do t-to B-B-Bart i-if I’m l-left al-alone w-with h-him?”

His words seem to catch Jay off-guard as the man only returns his glare with a taken aback look before his face falls, and he appears much more worn out than Barry has ever seen him.

“Barry…” Jay averts his eyes for a second, a deep frown settles on his face as he seems conflicted about what to say.

The rage that overcame Barry vanishes just as suddenly, and he is left with the horrifying realisation of what he just did, of what he just said.

“It’s alright.” Jay doesn’t miss the fear on Barry’s face and gives him a grim but still somewhat reassuring smile. “You speaking your mind isn’t going to get you in trouble, especially not because of me.”
Barry doesn’t understand, and a shiver runs down his back as he lowers his gaze back to the mug in his hands.

A long silence settles between them, during which Barry can feel how Jay continues to study him quietly, thoughtfully.

When Jay finally speaks again, he sounds hesitant. “Barry, you do realize that the evidence that was collected is speaking against you.” It is a statement, not a question, and Barry grits his teeth, hating to be reminded of this and angry at himself for opening this can of worms in the first place.

“J’onn read Wally’s mind, and you confessed your guilt under the influence of Diana’s lasso,” Jay reminds him. “What were we supposed to make of that? How can Wally remember you hurting him if it never happened? How can you speak anything but the truth under the influence of an object that makes it impossible for someone to lie?”

Barry squeezes his eyes shut and takes a shuddering breath. His arms have started to itch like crazy again.

“I-I d-don’t kn-know…”

It hurts and it is sickening. Hearing Jay remind him of the reason why he was put through all of this is nothing but a miserable experience.

“Me neither,” Jay says quietly, sounding tired and frustrated. “But I struggle to believe that I was so wrong in judging your character, Barry. I have known you for years before that night, and you never once seemed like anything but a decent and kind man to me.” He exhalés a heavy sigh and frowns grimly. “I don’t understand why you would do such a thing. It just doesn’t fit; it makes no sense.”

Barry stays quiet. There is nothing he could offer to that, since he asked himself many times in the past how his former friends could just lock him away like that, not bothering to wonder why he would suddenly do something so out of character.

With time, he started to accept that he must have given them reasons to expect this from him. They noticed that something must be wrong with him.

“I don’t understand it, Barry,” Jay repeats, sorrowfully. “And with the evidence that speaks against you, it is hard for most of us to really try and question it.”

Most of us…

Barry glances up again, towards Jay.

Jay seems to have expected this as he is meeting his eyes firmly as he proceeds. “I don’t know what happened that night, and I wish it was different, that things turned out differently, for you and your family.” He averts his eyes to the mug that is resting in his hands, as if he was pondering about what to say next or how to say it. When he looks up again, he seems less grim, but the sadness still clings to his gaze.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore, whether those allegations against you are sound or not, but I know that you went through a lot, and that we probably failed you as much as we failed Wally and Iris back then,” Jay tells him quietly. “And I am so very sorry for that, Barry.”

Barry swallows with some difficulty around the painful lump that formed in his throat and lowers his head, trying to blink the tears away that burn in his eyes.
This is not what he expected.

This is… confusing.

Why does Jay suddenly doubt his guilt?

…and what does he know about his time in prison?

The notion that the older man could be aware of what happened to him is outright nauseating, and he shivers in response, feeling naked and helpless all of a sudden.

“You won’t hurt Bart,” Jay goes on after a pause, and Barry can feel him watching. “I’m sure of it.”

“Wh-why?” Barry croaks and lifts one hand to rub his eyes, unwilling to break down in front of his former friend.

It takes Jay a long minute to answer his question, as if he wasn’t sure how to put his reasoning into words.

“I know that this is a lacking answer, but I just know,” Jay eventually explains. “I’ve kept an eye on you for a long time now, and I see how you try to live a normal life as good as you can after everything that happened. You could have turned bitter or hateful, but you didn’t. You may hold a grudge against me and the others, but I think that is understandable, and even so you don’t let your anger consume you.” He gives Barry a faint but honest smile. “Despite everything, you were able to make friends with mostly decent and good people, and I doubt that someone like Mrs. Ming or her grandson, or Ms. Nicolescu would care so much about you without good reason.”

Jay sounds absolutely certain when he finally says, “I know I can trust you around Bart, Barry. I would have to be blind not to see that the boy means a lot to you. You won’t hurt him.”

Hearing Jay say this is painful and soothing at the same time, and Barry closes his eyes as he takes a deep breath. He exhales it slowly, trying to calm the turmoil of emotions inside his chest, and when he looks back at Jay, he still feels tensed and nervous but no longer as upset.

“I d-didn’t k-k-kill Ir-ris a-and I-I d-didn’t… I-I d-didn’t r-rape W-Wally,” Barry holds the older man’s eyes firmly as he says this. “Y-you a-and th-the oth-thers b-bel-lieving o-othersw-wise w-won’t ch-change th-that, a-and… I m-made m-my p-peace w-with th-the f-fact th-that I’m a d-disg-grace t-to all o-of y-you.” He smiles sadly. “Th-things c-could n-never g-go b-back t-to h-how th-they w-were a-nyw-ways, e-even i-if y-you s-suddenly b-believed m-me.”

His life has been irrevocably altered, Barry realized this not long into his time in prison. This thought still filled him with despair at times, but there is nothing he can do about it.

Jay studies him dolefully, and Barry is reminded of the last time this topic came up between them and how differently the conversation went back then. He believes Jay when he says that he has doubt about his guilt now, he just doesn’t understand why all of a sudden.

It doesn’t make any sense.

Barry swallows and picks up his coffee. The drink is only lukewarm now, but he still takes a sip, welcoming the bitterness that coats his tongue and throat as it washes the taste of unshed tears away.

“Wh-what is B-Bart d-doing o-on Ch-Christmas?” Barry asks, no longer willing to talk about this part of his life. “Are h-he a-and M-Max g-going t-to sp-spent i-it w-with y-you?”
Jay frowns over his sudden and clunky change of topic, and Barry has the feeling that he doesn’t really want to let it go like this.

Thankfully, Jay seems to understand that Barry just can’t talk about it anymore right now, and allows it to slide.

“Yes,” Jay agrees after a minute. “We’re going to…” Here he falters for a moment and seems hesitant before he goes on. “We’re going to have a Christmas party at Wally’s. Joan and I will stay at his home over the holidays, and Max and Bart will join us for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.”

The mention of Wally causes Barry’s stomach to drop, and he lowers his gaze once more as he nods in understanding.

His last meeting with his nephew is still very vivid in his mind, as is the shock he has seen on the young man’s face that was quickly replaces by anger.

“Linda told me that they run into you about two weeks ago when they did some of their Christmas shopping,” Jay remarks, probably noticing his shift in mood and understanding where it came from.

Barry stays quiet, his body has tensed up nearly painfully in response, though, as he wonders whether they knew about Lisa, and whether his careless act of going out in public with her would come back to bite him now.

“She told me that a man was with you who looked ready to punch someone,” Jay goes on, and Barry is surprised when he notices the small smile the older man gives him as he glances at him worriedly. “I take it that she was talking about Eddy?”

Barry nods wordlessly, and Jay goes on. “Olli told me that Eddy threatened him.”

“H-he d-didn’t!” Barry defends his friend quickly, angry at the archer for claiming so. “H-He j-just w-wanted t-to h-help m-me.”

A concerned frown appears on Jay’s face as he studies him. “Did Olli try to hurt you?”

The question comes unexpected, and Barry finds himself momentarily dumbfounded.

“N-No…” Barry eventually replies. “H-He…. H-He j-just w-wanted m-me t-to l-leave b-before W-Wally c-could s-see m-me…”

“I don’t want the boy’s day to be ruined because he has the misfortune to cross the way with a piece of shit like you.” Olli’s words are still clear in his mind, and recalling them causes a harsh pang in his chest.

Green Arrow and he had never been particularly close, they were just too different, and Olli hadn’t been particularly fond of him from the beginning. It was partly due to Hal, as the archer was not willing to share his best friend, especially with him, and partly because Barry didn’t agree with his political views or how he treated his sidekick.

It never really caused any serious trouble between them, though, as Barry hated the notion of having a fight with a team mate and mostly just pulled back and kept his distance.

When Olli looked at him back in the restroom of the mall, there was clear animosity in his eyes, though, and the same kind of disgust with which he and the other heroes watched him with after that fateful night, when they took his powers.
The memory of that day is still mostly fogged up, and Barry would love to keep it that way. Seeing people, you hold dear look at you like that is an utterly awful experience, and he would rather not be able to recall it in all detail.

“Olli has become quite protective of Wally,” Jay informs him. “Dinah and he pretty much took him under their wings after Iris’ death. He doesn’t want the boy to be hurt.”

Barry isn’t sure what to say to that. He didn’t know that Green Arrow and Black Canary have had such a big influence on his nephew’s life after he was put into prison, and while he knows it is petty, the idea that Wally could have replaced him with Olli is upsetting.

Dinah, at least, is someone Barry is really glad his nephew has in his life. The woman is smart and has a big heart, no matter how tough she can appear at times. Her degree in psychology is probably a big asset as well, considering what Wally has to deal with.

Even so, being confronted with the knowledge that he wasn’t just ripped out of his nephew’s life but also replaced hurts enough that his eyes start to itch again.

“Th-That’s g-good,” Barry utters and lowers his gaze to the table, while he tries to keep the unhappy frown off his face.

“They care for the boy,” Jay adds, as if he had an inkling of Barry’s disapproval. “Them being there for him helped him through the worst of it, Barry.”

“Y-Yeah,” Barry agrees and shifts restlessly, leaning back into his chair but ends up hunching forward again, as the need to pull his knees up and coil up on himself is ridiculously strong right then.

Despite not looking at Jay, he can still feel his concerned gaze on himself, and he suddenly feels just tired of this conversation, of having the man over at all…

Most of the time he can look past everything he lost, but after this conversation the task suddenly appears enormous again, and he really just wants to go back to bed and sleep the rest of the day away and forget.

“Ah, I nearly forgot,” Jay exclaims, causing Barry to glance up. The older man picks up the white bag he brought with him that has been resting on the chair next to him so far. He puts it on the table and picks up a white Tupperware container.

“Joan made a Christmas stollen the other day,” Jay explains and hands him the container with the fruit bread, “and she wanted me to give you this.”

“Th-thanks,” Barry accepts it with a small smile, honestly grateful for Joan’s kind gift.

Jay reaches into the bag once more and pulls out a small angle made of straw that was meant to be put on a Christmas tree.

“Max and I took Bart to a Christmas market in Virginia last weekend, and the boy got this for you,” Jay says as he hands Barry the small ornament.

Barry feels a comforting warmth settle in his chest as he takes the small angel and studies it with a soft smile.

It is a lovely gift, even though he doesn’t intend to get himself a Christmas tree.
Carefully, he strokes his thumb over the small figure, taking the simple but pretty piece of craftsmanship in as he studies it.

“Th-thank y-you,” Barry eventually says to Jay. “P-please t-tell h-him I r-really l-like it.”

“I will,” Jay agrees, looking a little more at ease than prior.

Barry then remembers his own gift he has for Bart. “I g-got h-him s-someth-thing t-too f-for Ch-Christmas. C-Could y-you g-give it t-to h-him?”

“I think Bart would prefer it if you yourself gave it to him,” Jay points out, which disappoints and confuses Barry as he doesn’t think he is going to see the boy anytime soon.

Noticing his expression, Jay frowns for a moment. “Hasn’t Max passed by yet?” At Barry’s negation, he goes on to explain. “Max told me that he would like to invite you to spend Boxing Day with Bart and him. He probably didn’t have time to come by and ask you because he is helping the Teen Titans out with a project at the moment.”

Barry is surprised to hear about that, as he had no idea that Max had any plans of that kind. Not that he wouldn’t enjoy spending Boxing Day with Bart, as he does miss the kid.

Bart’s last visit to Mrs. Ming’s store did last a couple of hours but after their lunch break, Bart spent nearly all the rest of the time at Axel’s side, following him around and eager to help him with his different tasks.

It quickly became apparent that both boys, despite Axel’s initial hostility, did end up liking each other, and when Max passed by close to seven, Bart was overly excited to introduce him to his new friend.

Seeing Bart connect so well with someone else close to his age was nice to watch, as Barry knew about the difficulties he had making friends with his peers at school. Thus he left them alone for the most part, but this also meant that he wasn’t able to talk much to him for the rest of his stay.

Barry wonders whether Max would be alright with him bringing Axel along, but he realizes very quickly that this could put him into a rather uncomfortable position should the other man wonder about why he would be in contact with a young teen outside of his work. Somewhat disappointed, as he is sure that both kids would have enjoyed it, he let go of that idea again.

“C-Could y-you t-tell M-Max th-that I w-would v-very m-much l-like t-to s-spend B-Boxing D-Day w-with h-him a-and B-Bart?” Barry asks. “I-I m-mean, h-he d-doesn’t n-need t-to c-come h-here j-just f-for th-that.”

“Of course,” Jay agrees easily, and Barry is grateful for it as it decreases the possibility that Max could pass by when he is over at the Rogues’, and he doesn’t like the notion of lying to the man about his whereabouts or accidently making himself look suspicious.

“I’m sure Bart will be excited to hear that,” Jay adds and picks up his mug of coffee to take a sip. Judging by the slight grimace he makes, he isn’t the biggest fan of cold coffee either.

Barry, whose mood has lightened considerably over the last five minutes, offers to make a fresh one and for them to eat some of the stollen Joan made. Jay doesn’t seem to be in a hurry to get going again either as he agrees.

About ten minutes later, they sit together at the table again, each of them provided with freshly brewed coffee, and a plate with a slice of the fruit bread.
Noticing the grim expression with which Jay is studying the article in the paper Barry left on the table the other day, he asks with a thin smile, “Y-you aren’t v-very f-fond of Alv-vares, are y-you?”

Jay chuckles and shakes his head. “No, not really.” He glances down at the paper with a frown. “I’ve been at that gala the article is about.”

Barry knows so, it’s mentioned in the first column, and Jay wasn’t the only Flash that had the questionable honor to be invited to that event.

“You read it?” Jay asks, shooting him a curious look, and smiles grimly when he nods in return. “Then you probably know that Wally won’t be attending any further functions where Alvares and his party is involved.”

“Alv-vares g-goaded h-him on,” Barry assumes as the article itself didn’t really go into detail about what caused the Flash to grow upset enough that he punched that politician.

“The man is good with words, and he knows how to manipulate others,” Jay explains and leans back into his chair with a weary sigh. “Wally had been close to snapping for weeks now, in any case.”

It isn’t necessary to ask since Barry is more than aware that he is probably the very reason for his nephew’s anger.

Jay’s face is grim and worn as he absentmindedly studies his coffee. “It probably was quite a stroke of luck under these circumstances that he punched Alvares instead of losing it during a fight with the Rogues or any other criminal. The publicity will be horrendous for the near future, and Alvares clearly hoped for something like this to happen, but it is still better than having the Flash…” He breaks off, looking reluctant to finish and instead reaches up to rub his eyes with another sigh.

Hearing this is like a slap to Barry’s face, like someone emptied a bucket of icy water over him, and he stammers. “W-Wally w-wouldn’t d-do s-someth-thing l-like th-that! H-He’s a g-good m-man!”

The look Jay gives him them is an odd one, and Barry isn’t sure what to make of it.

“Wally is a good man,” Jay finally agrees after a long pause. “But he is also deeply hurt, and he is dealing with it way worse than we thought he does.”

A familiar guilt and exhausting sadness settles over Barry, and he lowers his fork to the small plate. Any appetite he had is gone.

“Barry,” Jay starts, gently. “Wally is getting help, and he will do better again soon, I’m sure of that.”

“D-does h-he s-see a th-therapist?” Barry asks.

“Yes,” Jay agrees. “He has to if he wants to stay a member of the Justice League.”

“Wh-What?” Barry’s surprise over that information quickly turns into concern. “B-Bec-cause of th-the inc-cident w-with A-Alvar-ress?”

“That is part of the reason,” Jay explains. “He also got more violent when dealing with criminals over the last years, and it has gotten to the point where the public has started to take notice of this as well now. It worries the League. Him attacking you at Gilbert’s last month didn’t help either.”

“I d-didn’t p-press any ch-charges,” Barry points out quietly, and while he feels extremely guilty to learn that his nephew is still suffering so much because of him, he does understand the League’s decision to have Wally get therapeutic help. It’s obvious that the young man is having troubles with
Barry’s release from prison, and having been forced to see him in person once more probably ripped the wound open again that never really succeeded to heal to begin with.

“I know,” Jay agrees, and it occurs to Barry that he looks even more troubled for a moment when he proceeds. “What happened still made the news, though, and the League is only trying to look out for the boy, not to punish him.”

Barry knows that and lets his gaze fall back on the slice of stollen on his plate, staring at it morosely as the knowledge of that he is responsible for Wally’s pains and that he is unable to help him in any way rests on him like a heavy weight.

Silence settles between them, again, longer than the brief pauses before.

Jay’s gaze is palpable, but Barry hardly notices it as he is too absorbed in his own mind.

“Did I ever tell you that I decided to retire shortly before I met you?”

Barry looks back up at Jay, who meets his eyes with a faint but warm smile.

“I thought that after nearly forty years of being the Flash, it was time for me to step down and give way to the younger generation of heroes,” Jay tells him. “Many of the others had already done so, like Ted and Scott. We all thought we don’t really have a place in this world anymore with how much it had changed compared to when we started out.” He chuckles as he seems to recall the time he is talking about. “We told ourselves that we just got too old to do this.”

That is news to Barry, who is listening attentively, though he is a little confused over what could have brought on this unexpected little story.

“The reason I eventually decided to not stop but to keep moving,” Jay proceeds. “Was not some crazy villain who made me realize that I couldn’t retire, or a prep-talk from Joan or one of my younger colleagues at that time.”

Jay pauses, then, and meets Barry’s eyes intently. “It was running with you,” he explains, “seeing your enthusiasm about helping people, your desire to do the right thing and make the Twins a better place.” His expression becomes nostalgic for a moment as he is clearly remembering something fondly. “It was feeling the speed force like I did in my early days, being suddenly closer to it again. You somehow changed things for me, Barry.” Jay chuckles softly. “Your joy over being the Flash was infectious, and I remembered again why I loved doing this so much in the first place.”

Barry feels speechless as he stares at the other man with wide eyes.

He didn’t know that.

Not that Jay wanted to quit nor that he didn’t because of him.

Imagining this seems odd, nearly outrageous, and Barry once again is utterly confused over why Jay would bring it up now of all times.

“I forgot about it,” Jay goes on, and a frown settling over his face as he speaks. “I just… I didn’t remember it for some reason, until about a year ago, when Bart wanted to know about how I met you.” He pauses momentarily, rubbing his chin with a thoughtful expression. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, lately, and it makes the things that happened so much harder to understand.”

Jay stops and presses his lips together, brows knit. To Barry it seems like he is pondering over something, and he can’t but watch him expectantly with a mixture of curiosity and wariness.
Eventually, Jay lifts his gaze again to meet Barry’s, a resolution on his face that hasn’t been there before.

“I thought I knew you, Barry,” he says. “I would have trusted you with Joan’s and my lives, because I saw nothing but a decent, hardworking young man when I was with you. I would never have thought that you could ever do something like what happened to Iris and Wally. I would have found it impossible to believe.”

Barry averts his eyes, feeling like an idiot for believing that the older man would say anything else but this.

“And the more I think about it,” Jay goes on, “the harder it becomes to do so now.”

Barry’s head snaps back up fast enough that a sharp pang goes through his neck and back, but he doesn’t notice as he stares at the other man in disbelief.

“We both know that the evidence against you is solid,” Jay reminds him. “But let’s assume that you’re really innocent. In that case, you have to know that nothing of what happened to Wally is your fault.”

“I-I f-failed h-him,” Barry disagrees vehemently, distraught that not even Jay seems to understand how Wally’s current situation is his fault.

“If someone was able to manipulate Diana’s lasso and J’onn’s powers in a way that it would lead to you being locked away in Iron Heights, we have to assume that they were very powerful. Enough so that you can’t blame yourself for not being able to protect Wally,” Jay rationalizes.

“I-I w-w-was h-his m-ment-tor… I-I’m h-his u-unc-cle, I-I sh-sh-should h-h-have p-p—… p-p-prot-ected h-him.” Barry hisses and clenches his fists, ignoring the sharp pain that shoots through his joints in response. “I-I’m h-h-his f-f-fam-mily…”

Nobody protected him when he was a kid, nobody made sure that he had enough to eat, or that he had a bed to sleep in, or that he was put with people who were decent enough not to beat him… or worse…

He swore to himself when Iris and he took Wally in that he would make sure that the little boy never had to experience what he had to live through, but he still wasn’t able to do so in the end.

Wally experienced the same horrors he did because of him, because he was a failure as an uncle and as a hero.

“I-I c-could-dn’t p-p-prot-tect h-him…” Barry grits out, eyes squeezed shut, and it feels like his chest is going to crack open any moment now. Warm tears start to run down his cheeks, and he angrily brushes them away, furious at himself for being so weak.

“Barry, you weren’t the only one who should have noticed that something was going on,” Jay point out firmly and adds somewhat subdued and ruefully. “And Wally isn’t the only one we weren’t able to protect.”

A shiver runs through Barry’s body as he hears that, and he shakes his head sadly as he averts his gaze to the table. “I-I w-w-was a-a g-grown u-up m-man, J-Jay… y-you sh-sh-should-dn’t h-h-have t-t-to p-p-prot-tect m-m.” He closes his eyes and feels more warm tears roll down his cheeks as he smiles bitterly. “I-I r-r-really d-don’t c-care wh-wh-what h-hap-pend t-t o m-m-m, b-b-but… I-Ir-ris a-and W-Wal-ly… th-they d-d-didn’t d-des-serve th-that. W-W-Wally w-w-was j-just a-a ch-ch-child… a-a-and I-I l-l-let th-this h-hap-pen t-t-t o h-him…”
Barry would never be able to forgive himself that, knowing that Wally’s torment was due to him being unable to protect his own family.

“Wally was also family to me and Joan,” Jay reminds him. “So were you and Iris, and I wasn’t able to protect a single one of you either.”

“J-Jay, th-th-this i-is n-not o-on y-you…” Barry shoots the other man a weary look. “H-How c-coul-d y-you h-have kn-known th-th-hat an-n-nyth-thing i-is g-g-goin-ng o-on wh-when… wh-wh-when I-I w-w-wasn’t a-able t-to… I-I l-l-lived w-w-with th-them… I-I w-was s-su-p-p-p-posed t-to…”

Unconsciously, Barry puts his arms around himself, hugging himself in an attempt to find comfort like he did so many times in the past. He feels exhausted, emotionally much more than physically, and having been forced to remember his shortcomings is eating away at him with sharp, painful teeth.

“C-C-Can y-you p-p-please l-l-leave?” Barry asks tiredly, not really worrying about whether he is being impolite just then. He feels so exhausted, he just wants to go to bed and sleep.

Jay doesn’t reply immediately, and Barry can feel his gaze on him, the concern in it palpable. “Will you be okay, if I leave you alone now?”

What a silly question. Barry nearly huffs a laugh, but he can hear how serious the older man is about it, and instead glances up at him. “I-I’ll b-be f-f-fine… I-I j-j-just w-want t-t-to s-sleep a l-lit-tle.”

It is strange to think that Jay could suddenly be worried about him this much.

Barry feels horrible right now, but it certainly isn’t the worst he ever felt.

“I-I-I’ll b-be f-f-fine,” Barry repeats tiredly and reaches up with one hand to rub his eyes that feel swollen and red.

“I want to give you something else before I leave,” Jay says which causes Barry to turn back to him in surprise and wariness. The older man picks another bag up from the chair next to him that Barry hasn’t noticed so far.

“It’s from me and Joan, for Christmas,” Jay explains and pushes it over the table towards him.

Barry watches it for a moment, not sure what to think of receiving a Christmas present from Jay. “You can open it later,” Jay tells him as he notices his hesitation. “It would really mean a lot to both me and Joan if you accept it, though.”

Frowning deeply now, Barry directs his gaze back to the plastic bag holding the gift. He eventually decides to take it, the curiosity getting the better of him despite the apprehension he can also feel.

Inside the bag, he spots a small box, and his stomach drops as he reads the print on it.

“I-I d-d-don’t n-need a-a ph-phone,” Barry immediately points out, feeling oddly upset about this present. He doesn’t need Jay to give him something so expensive, he can use the payphone around the corner just fine, he has so for the last three years!

Barry is just about to push it back, when Jay’s words cause him to halt. “I- We worry about you.”

Those are well-meant words, but they still cause a sudden bout of anger to overcome Barry as he glares at Jay.
“Y-you w-w-worry ab-b-out m-me?” Barry asks, feeling his eyes tear up in what is less sadness this time but rage. “N-now? Y-you th-th-think y-you h-have t-t-t o w-w-w-…” He grits he teeth together and squeezes his eyes shut, ridiculously upset all of a sudden, and he can’t even say why exactly that is the case.

His fingers dip into the box of the new phone, and he feels like taking it and flinging it at the other man for… for…

Barry takes a slow, deep breath, forcing himself to calm down.

His chest hurts again, and he feels slightly nauseated.

A silence briefly settles over them.

“I know that you’re hurt,” Jay speaks quietly; the sadness nearly tangible in his voice, and Barry feels that his eyes start to itch again. “And I’m sorry for that, I truly am. I never wanted…”

A soft, frustrated sigh follows, and Barry waits for the other man to go on, to finish so that he can finally leave.

“You are angry, and I understand that, but I would really ask you to accept this gift, just for the case you need to use it. The Keys aren’t the safest area to live in, and I know that you have to work at very odd hours,” Jay explains. “It would put both Joan and me at ease to know that you can reach somebody if you need help.”

Help…

Barry swallows around the painful lump in his throat, and wonders why this act of kindness hurts him so very much.

He is tired, he just wants Jay to leave.

“O-ok-kay…” Barry agrees and brushes over his eyes before he glances back up, meeting the older man’s eyes. Somewhat reluctantly he adds. “Th-th-thank y-you…”

Jay studies him. “You know that you can call me anytime you need something,” he reminds him.

Barry nods and forces himself to get up. Jay does the same.

“I’ll briefly pass by tomorrow again, if that’s alright with you,” Jay informs him, and Barry doesn’t have the energy to feel annoyed anymore over this sudden bout of concern or anything else. His mind seems to have grown numb and heavy, and it is getting complicated to think clearly.

“S-s-sure,” Barry murmurs instead and walks Jay to the door.

“Maybe you should get some company from Mary or Eddy after you’ve rested,” Jay suggested as he steps out in the gloomy floor. Barry nods wordlessly, though he doubts he would leave his bed today again, and as far as he knows neither of his friends are currently around as it is.

“Thank you for the coffee.” Jay gives him a warm smile that is a little worn down by the worry that is still plain in his eyes to see.

Barry returns it automatically, though it feels all wrong on his face. “O-Of c-c-course, th-th-thanks f-f-for p-p-pas-sing b-b-y. P-Pleas-se s-s-send J-Joan m-my g-greet-t-ti-ins.”

“I will,” Jay agrees and adds. “Rest well, Barry, and take care.”
It is a relief when Barry can finally close and lock the door again. He leans against it for a moment, his forehead resting on the cool wood, and he briefly entertains the thought of just sitting down right there.

Despite his exhaustion, he recognizes what a silly idea it is, and he forces himself to make his way to the bedroom, which feels ridiculously long and strenuous.

As he passes the kitchen table, he decided he would clear it later, after a nap.

He ignores the present that is still lying there entirely.

He just needs a nap.

He is so tired…

Barry welcomes the softness of his bed as he covers himself with his blanket, pulling the pillow over his head to cut out the light and the world, and falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter despite the lack of any competent editing, I tried to go over it again today, but the apartment we rented was stuffed with people and now it is after elven pm and I got to about the half-point when I decided to just throw in the towel. It is a really long one, and I would probably sit another hour here otherwise, and we have to get up early tomorrow, so, with a heavy heart, I choose my sleep over doing some more re-reading. ;)

This is only a short note, I'm sitting in the kitchen, and I think my friends can hear me tipping from their rooms, so I don't wanna be an ass and keep them up.

Of course, this is a chapter, where I generally could say a lot to, considering that Jay seems to have fundamentally changed his opinion on Barry and everything that happened. Why? Well, you will have to be patient till you learn more about it, but that is nothing new now, is it?

Also, again a huge thank you to all of my amazing readers who took the time to leave me a feedback. You have no idea how much I love hearing from you guys! <3

Sorry again for the lack of editing in this one, I hope next chapter will get up in its usual edited form! This Sunday unfortunately feel on my holiday away, and I totally underestimated the lack of time I would have for Singularity.

I think you guys will be happy to learn that the next chapter is a rather important one for Barry's and Len's relationship, and that it will be a very long one again too.

I hope you guys had a Happy New Year and a good start in 2017! Cu on Sunday in two weeks!
Visit to the Saloon

Chapter Summary

Barry joins Len and the others to the Saloon at the night before Christmas. Things don’t go as planned, as usual.

Chapter Notes

This story has been edited by my magnificent editor Quintessenzza, who did an amazing job as usual! Seriously, thank you so much for finding the time to do this despite how busy you are right now! It makes my story so much better! :)

Also, I’m sorry I updated later today, but I’m not feeling so well, my throat has been bothering me, and I have had troubles sleeping for the last couple of days. I initially wanted to get up early enough to post this at the usual time, but my body was like “Nope, not happening! >:)” and I slept like till past one pm. xD

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Saloon is a lot how Barry remembered it.

Crowded, a little seedy, and loud.

It is the evening before Christmas, and the Rogues finally decided to bring him along and properly introduce him to this place.

Barry still isn’t sure whether it was the right decision to agree to this, and the fact that Len doesn’t seem like he wants him anywhere near this place only makes him even more nervous and tense.

Lisa and most of the others think that it is a great idea, though, and after they had put a lot of effort into persuading him, Barry eventually agreed, despite the unease the notion of visiting a pub full of criminals causes him.

“Relax,” Sam tells him, having to raise his voice to be heard over the noise of the crowd around him. “You look like you’re going to puke any moment.” He sits opposite to Barry at the table they have just claimed for themselves. The crutches he still needs to get around due to his still healing legs are resting next to him against the table.

“Sam.” Hartley shoots a disapproving look at his friend in his usual berating manner before he turns to Barry with reassuring smile. “There is no need to worry, Barry, just try to enjoy the evening.”

“Yeah,” Mick agrees gruffly, sitting at the head of the table to Barry’s right. “If some shithead tries something, he’ll make acquaintance with my fists.” At that, the man cracks his knuckles menacingly and glances around, smirking. “I haven’t had a good bar fight in far too long.”

These words are anything but reassuring, and Barry wishes he could slide even lower in the chair he
“Stop scaring him, you dunce,” Lisa tells Mick annoyed as she rejoins them with three mugs of beer. “He’s nervous enough without you idiots starting something.”

Roscoe, who follows close behind his girlfriend snorts. “Did you really expect anything else from Rory?”

“Suck a cock, Dillon,” Mick retorts with a smirk but accepts the beer the man hands him with a nod.

“I will leave that to Piper,” Roscoe replies drily and takes a seat next to the pyromaniac.

“No self-respecting gay man would go for an arrogant jackass like you,” Hartley points out and while he shoots the other man an annoyed look, he doesn’t seem particularly ruffled by the comment.

“He has you there, Dillon,” Sam points out and grins amused when the other man flips him off in response.

His friends’ relaxed demeanor puts Barry a little more at ease, and he reminds himself that he does have them should something go wrong for some reason.

Which he really hopes won’t be the case, but he can’t help but worry.

“Oi, didn’t Cold tell us to be on our best behavior before,” Digger asks as he returns with a big bottle of a clear liquid. Barry assumes that it is vodka but learns upon seeing the label that it is actually moonshine, which causes him to arch his eyebrow at the other man’s choice.

In the meantime, Digger squeezes himself between Roscoe and Sam, ignoring their annoyed protests, and proceeds. “He doesn’t want you fuckwits to scare Allen off, remember?” He then shoots Barry a knowing smirk, opens the bottle and takes a long gulp.

Barry feels quite mortified for a moment, and ducks his head, his face growing uncomfortably hot as he is reminded once again that the Rogues have undoubtedly picked up on the thing between Len and him by now.

“For fuck’s sake, Digger,” Lisa grouses. “Watch what you’re blathering about, idiot! We haven’t even been here for five minutes and you’re already on your way to get wasted!”

“What did I say?” Digger asks Lisa with an honestly confused frown which gets him an exasperated eye-roll in return.

“Just keep your nose out of business that isn’t yours,” Hartley advises and takes a sip of his beer. “We want to have a nice evening, remember?”

“I’m all for a bloody nice evening, mate!” Digger grunts and squints at him. “But not that kind of nice, you know I don’t swing that way.”

Sam snorts into his beer while Mick barks a laugh, both ignoring the glare Hartley shoots them and Digger.

Barry glances around nervously, wondering whether his friends draw the attention of the crowd surrounding them. Thankfully, the other patrons don’t seem in the least bit interested in them, though, but looking around causes him to notice once again how full it really is in here.

Initially, when they entered the place, Barry briefly hoped that they would have to leave again as not
a single table was free and the bar itself was crowded as well. Len and the others certainly wouldn’t want to stand around with their beers, after all.

To his surprise, neither of them seemed discouraged by that, and instead Mick, Roscoe, and Lisa made their way over to one of the bigger tables closer to the front. Barry watched in utter amazement and slight unsettlement how the round of people that had been occupying it so far quickly got up after exchanging a couple of words with his friends, not looking particularly happy about it, sure, but not like they would want to start something over it either.

As Barry followed Len over, he glanced at the bar and noticed a huge, buff, black man standing behind it and shooting his friends an annoyed look. It was obviously Charlie, the owner, and he also was a lot like Barry remembered him.

Now, sitting here, in the infamous Saloon the criminal underground of the Gems loves to frequent and Barry has never been to as a patron before, he wishes things hadn’t gone so smoothly and they just returned home.

It is a petty thought since he really doesn’t want Mick or the others to get into a fight, but he can’t bring himself to feel comfortable among so many people in the first place, and the knowledge that most of those are criminals sets his teeth even more on edge.

“Relax, Bear,” Lisa tells him for probably the tenth time, causing Barry to let go of his train of thought. She shoots him a reassuring smile when he turns to her with a wary look. “We’re going to have a nice evening, don’t let yourself be intimidated by these people. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

“Yeah! We’re totally going to kick anybody’s butt who tries something!” James boisterous voice that comes directly from behind Barry cuts through the cacophony of people around them like a hot knife through cold butter.

“James, not so loud. We’re inside,” Hartley reminds his friend annoyed.

“Sorry,” James returns somewhat embarrassed as he sits down next to Hartley, beer in hand. He shoots Barry an apologetic look. “Didn’t mean for it to come out so loud.”

“Watch it the next time you open your mouth,” Len tells James gruffly as Marco and he join them at the table as well. His expression is grim, has been for most of the day. It seems he got up in a foul mood this morning.

Even so, Barry can feel himself relax a little as Len’s return eases the feeling of anxiety that is clinging to him. He scoots a little to the side to make him space, and accepts a mug of beer with a small smile. “Th-thanks.”

Len studies him with a frown as he takes his seat. “You’re doing alright?”

“Y-yeah,” Barry agrees, and seeing that Len is now here, it is at least not entirely a lie.

“You’ve to get out more, Allen,” Mick remarks as he pulls out a deck of cards from his back pocket. “It will do you some good. You’re way too strung up all the time.”

“Not everybody likes drinking themselves into a stupor every other day,” Lisa point out tersely, and Barry doesn’t miss the poignant look she shoots her friend at that.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mick agrees with a shrug and starts to deal the cards. Barry wonders what that is about and whether they’ve been talking about him and how he spent his free time when he wasn’t
around. He honestly isn’t sure what to think of that.

“Mick has a point, though,” Marco says as he picks up his cards. “Working your ass off nearly 24/7 can’t be healthy.”

“I’m not working that much,” Barry disagrees somewhat annoyed but blushes when he gets a round of incredulous looks in return.

“Right, and I’m going to be the next president,” Sam agrees sarcastically.

“Don’t be a bunch of jerks,” Lisa admonishes them. “It wouldn’t hurt either of you if you took a page out of his book.”

“We aren’t,” James argues. “We’re just worried about him.”

Yeah, who will cook for us every once in a while, if he works himself into the ground,” Mick agrees with a smirk but shoots Barry a wink.

Amused, Barry shakes his head and turns back to his own cards, noticing that he got a bad hand to begin the game. It is probably a good thing, he muses. Although they are playing for really small amount à la five to ten cents, he is rather apprehensive about losing any money at all right now.

Mrs. Ming comes to his mind. A heavy sadness settles over him and he hardly picks up on Sam opening the round. He still hopes that she is wrong and that nothing will happen. The thought of losing her is upsetting, as is the idea of never being able to go back to work in the little store again which has become a lot like a second home to him over the years, more so than he has ever expected.

It occurs to him that Mick and the others are probably right, he did spend the main part of his time there-

“Your turn, Barry,” Len tells him, forcing Barry to turn his attention back to the game.

Frowning, he studies his cards before he realizes what he is doing, and he bites down on a sigh.

“That bad?” Sam asks, his amusement more than audible, and Barry shoots him a dark look as he puts his cards down.

“I’m out,” Barry says, causing the others to snicker.

“How are you still not able to keep a neutral expression, mate?” Digger wonders aloud, grinning. “You’ve been playing with us for nearly three years by now.”

“He’s hopeless,” Roscoe decides haughtily. “People like him just can’t help but wear their emotions on their sleeves.”

“Oh, shut up,” Hartley grouses. “He’s in an environment he doesn’t feel comfortable in yet, he has gotten a lot better when we play back in the hideout.”

“Yeah!” James agrees. “You lost against him just last week, Top, remember?”

The man in question shoots James a withering glare for pointing that out, while Lisa huffs a laugh and squeezes her partner’s free hand. “You totally deserved that one.”

Roscoe wrinkles his nose but leaves it at that.

Barry proceeds to watch the game, slowly relaxing as time goes by and nothing bad happens, and
when Hartley folds next, his friend starts up a conversation with him, talking about the cirque de soleil that is currently in Central City and how he is planning on going there with James in the beginning of January.

“I wish I was able to pull off acrobatics like them,” Hartley remarks wistfully, sipping on his beer. “It would make some heist much easier.”

It probably would, but Barry is rather glad that this isn’t the case, as the Rogues make it already hard enough for the speedsters to take care of them at times. Still, he understands his friend’s impressment seeing that he too has always been fascinated by the artists that work in that kind of circus, and if he ever got the possibility to watch such a show, he certainly would take it.

“I can pull off acrobatics like that!” James points out with a frown. “And I told you that I can teach you, if you want.”

“I know,” Hartley agrees with a smile. “It’s a very nice offer, and I’m sorry to say so but you’re a crappy instructor, James.”

“I’m not!”

“You’ve no patience.”

“I do too!”

“You started to complain about how I still wasn’t able to do a backflip after I tried it four times,” Hartley reminds him amused, causing his friend to huff in indignation.

“That’s because a backflip isn’t that hard,” James points out annoyed.

“For someone like you, who grew up in a circus, I’m sure it isn’t,” Hartley agrees. “But for someone like me, who never did anything like that before, it’s an entirely different story.”

James pushes his lower lip out, and crosses his arms, pouting. “No, it isn’t. It’s all about how you hold yourself and how you jump. Anybody can do that.”

“Like hell,” Mick snorts. “I’d probably break my neck if I tried that gymnastic shit of yours.”

“It’s acrobatics!”

“Whatever.”

A fond smile settles over Barry’s lips as he listens to his friends, feeling a little glad now that he came along. He seems to have been nervous for no real reason, and if he had given in to his fear, he would have missed a nice evening out with them. While they spent enough time together at their hideout, this is different, and probably does him some good despite his reservations.

They play another round, and Barry has more luck with his cards and keeping his face neutral. Len and Marco get themselves another beer, and bring him one back as well.

It is after their third game that Barry starts to feel pleasantly tipsy, and although he usually doesn’t really like to drink alcohol that much, he does enjoy the sensation tonight. It helps to quench the last of his worries about being here and makes it easier to relax and just have fun. There is another side effect as well, though, and he soon realizes that he needs a quick trip to the restrooms, which is one of the things he dreaded the most about coming here.
The idea to ask Len or one of the others to accompany him there is too embarrassing, and he decides
to wait. When Hartley and James get up about five minutes later for the same reason, Barry is quick
to tag along.

Feeling nervous once again due to leaving the rest, he probably sticks much closer to Hartley than
necessary, but his friend doesn’t remark on it. Barry falters a little when they reach a small crowed of
guys that are standing not far away from the restrooms. They have to pass them to get to their
destination, and for a brief moment he thinks about turning back. While not a single one of them is
familiar to him, they still remind him too much of the people he was locked up with in Iron Heights.

To Barry’s surprise both of his friends put him between them, shielding him from any unwanted
contact, and it is such an unexpected nice and mindful gesture that he is left pretty much speechless.

“We’ll be waiting for you,” Hartley tells him as they enter the restroom, knowing that Barry would
go for one of the stalls instead of the urinals.

“Th-thank y-you.” Barry gives his friend a grateful look and makes his way over to the toilets.
Knowing that Hartley and James would be there if he needed them helps him to relax a little, but it
still takes him a minute or so to get rid of enough tension so that his bladder could let go. There is just
something deeply disconcerting about being surrounded by the voices and sounds of the other men,
especially when it comes to this type of crowd.

The restroom was pretty full when they entered it, and is still so when he finally exits the stall again.

He gets some curious and funny looks from the men around as he is probably sticking out like a sore
thumb, which is ridiculously intimidating and causes him to keep his gaze on the sinks as he swiftly
makes his way over to them, his heart in his throat.

It is when he glances around and spots both Hartley and James near the exit that the fear starts to
subside somewhat.

Barry quickly makes his way over to them, but slows down when he notices that both of his friends
talk to another man…

It is not hard to recognize Roy Bivolo, seeing that the guy is wearing his usual getup sans the mask.

Hartley notices him, then, and his relaxed expression is replaced by a slightly concerned one.
“Everything alright?” he asks as Barry joins them and glances back to the other men behind him,
frowning.

“E-everyth-thing’s f-fine,” Barry assures him as he eyes the Rainbow Raider somewhat warily.

“That’s Roy,” James introduces, grinning. “But you’ve met him before, right?”

Somewhat reluctantly, Barry nods, not really wanting to recall his time in prison, especially not right
now.

Roy has been in the Heights a number of times over Barry’s stay, but they never really had any
contact other than working together in the laundry room for a while during his third year.

“Roy, you remember Barry?” Hartley asks.

“Sure, the former cop, right?” Roy agrees with a nod, obviously not considering where they are. He
promptly receives a hard punch to his shoulder from James in return.
“Will you watch it?” Hartley hisses, glancing around. “You do realize where we are, right?”

“Ouch…” Roy rubs his shoulder and shoots James a glare. He frowns when he turns back to Hartley but looks somewhat apologetic. “Sorry, didn’t mean anything by it.”

To Barry’s surprise, he turns to him then and smiles ruefully. “Seriously, don’t mean you any trouble.”

“That’s exactly the reason why Len doesn’t like you around,” Hartley points out and it sounds like that isn’t the first time he’s done so. “You always talk before your brain has time to catch up.”

“No,” Roy disagrees grimly. “Snart doesn’t like me around because he is a pompous asshat.”

“Well, maybe that too,” Hartley concedes with a chuckle.

“Don’t badmouth Len around Barry,” James points out, annoyed.

“I’m only joking,” Hartley says but when he glances at Barry and notices that he seems amused as well, he adds with a lopsided smile. “Mostly, at least.”

“I’m not.” Roy huffs and crosses his arms as he squints at Barry. “You’re impressed by Snart? Believe me, that will change as soon as you get to know him better.” He then turns back to Hartley, inclining his head to Barry. “He’s on your team now?

Before Hartley can reply or Barry can protest, James cuts them short. “Yes! He’s an honorary Rogue!”

Roy aches an eyebrow hearing that, and Barry feels pretty much the same way.

“He’s a very close friend,” Hartley agrees.

“As in ‘You mess with him, you mess with the rest of us’ kind of way?” Roy clarifies.

“Exactly,” James approves with a resolute nod.

Barry is pretty lost on what to say to that. He is aware that the Rogues see him as their friend, of course, but he didn’t think that they saw him as one of them. Lisa called him a Rogue before, but he put it down to her joking around.

He isn’t really sure how this makes him feel-

A very familiar and very agitated voice sounds from the bar, and Barry feels himself freeze up, all thoughts about his friendship to the Rogues gone as dread settles over him.

Izzy…

“What is she doing here,” Hartley mutters, looking towards their table, a grim expression on his face.

“Why?” Roy asks confused. “She finds her money in sleazy places like this one. Though, I haven’t seen her around much in the last couple of months.”

“She’s a bun in the oven,” James explains with a frown, apparently also less than happy about Izzy’s sudden appearance.

“Seriously?” Roy whistles. “Well, good luck to the guy who knocked her up, she already had a horrible temper to begin with.”
Barry shivers uneasily, turning the others out as his attention is drawn to where he can see Izzy standing, looking utterly livid, and with the first sign of a baby belly. The target of her anger is Len, who has gotten up from his seat as well, apparently, he is having a heated discussion with her.

Or Izzy is having the heated discussion, for the most part, as Len’s stoic demeanor doesn’t really show any emotions at all.

“- didn’t think you’d be there all the fucking time! But I assumed you’d at least show your damn face every once in a while! It’s your damn brat as well!” Izzy is seething.

Len is too far away for Barry to make out his reply, but he can see on Izzy’s face that whatever it is, it doesn’t do anything to ease her temper.

“Fuck that damn money! It’s not about the fucking money of yours! You wanna be just as much of a deadbeat dad to our child as your father was to you?!” Izzy demands, and this gets a reaction when Len actually flinches as if the words were a physical hit.

“Fuck you!” Lisa jumps in, having gotten to her feet now as well. “You have no right to demand anything! You brought this upon yourself-”

“You know nothing, you bitch!” Izzy fires back. “The only reason you’re a part of the Rogues is because you’re Len’s little sister and because you’ve a nice ass for the rest to enjoy!”

Lisa looks ready to climb over the table and fling herself at that woman just then, but Roscoe gets a hold of her before she can actually do anything stupid.

“That’s enough, Izzy!” Len’s voice cuts through the air, and he sounds like Izzy has finally succeeded in getting a rise out of him.

Izzy doesn’t seem in the least intimidated, though, as she turns her attention back to Len, nostrils flared and eyes blazing with fury.

“It’s because of that damn fag of yours, isn’t it?!” She screeches. “The ugly little son of a bitch who can’t even get a single word out straight-”

Izzy is cut off when Len grabs her and starts to urge her towards the entrance of the bar. Barry’s heart skips for a moment, afraid of what the other man has in mind, though he quickly notices that Izzy doesn’t seem in the least bit afraid or worried but still just outright pissed.

“Yes,” Roy says next to him and points towards Len’s and Izzy’s leaving figures. “That’s the temper right there.”

“Roy, we will talk to you later,” Hartley tells the other man with a faint smile and turns to Barry. “Let’s go back to the table.”

Barry hesitates for a second but eventually nods quietly. He would much rather leave, but a part of him also wants to wait for Len, just to make sure that he is okay.

Len tries to play it down for his sake, but Barry knows that he likes Izzy and that the whole thing with her pregnancy gets to him more than he lets on.

The other visitors have turned back to their own business after watching the spectacle uncoil in front of their eyes and while some are looking amused by it, the majority seems to pay it no further mind. As Barry follows Hartley and James back to their table, he is grateful that none of the other patrons seems all that curious about what just happened or wonder who Izzy was talking about. It’s already
embarrassing enough that the Rogues definitely know that she was going on about him.

Lisa still looks quite ruffled when they rejoin them, while the rest seems mostly just annoyed about the whole affair.

“No idea why he keeps that woman around,” Marco remarks with a scoff as he studies his cards.

“She certainly isn’t a dog, mate,” Digger points out which causes Mick to laugh and agree. “Yeah, but that piece of eye candy will claw your eyes right out their sockets if she gets moody.”

“He doesn’t really have a choice anymore, does he?” Roscoe asks with a grim, mocking smirk. “He knocked her up, and Len may be a bastard in most areas of his life, but he won’t leave her to her own devices now that she’s bearing his child.”

“If it’s his child,” Lisa points out and takes a long drink of her beer, exhaling an annoyed sigh afterwards. “That nasty woman probably got knocked up by some other john and is now trying to save her own stupid ass by telling Len that it’s his.”

“The Sheila says she was exclusively fucking your brother,” Digger points out as he picks up his cards again and studies them without any real interest.

Barry flinches slightly at the other man’s crudeness, but he knows that he is only saying the truth. Frowning unhappily, he turns to study his mug of beer.

“Yeah, and I’m sure she’d never dream of lying about that,” Lisa replies sarcastically.

“She’s got it bad for Len,” Sam reminds them and lights his cigarette. Mick notices this and asks, “Can I have one?”

“Sure.” Sam hands him the package while Lisa is glaring daggers at him. He shrugs and smirks lopsidedly. “Just saying as it is. It’s not my fault your brother has such a crappy taste in women.”

“Maybe that’s why he decided to turn queer,” Digger comments and yelps in pain when James boxes the side of his head in response.

“Ya bloody wanker!” Digger gets up on his feet, one hand still rubbing his ear, while the other one is clenched into a fist, and Barry, whose heart is once again beating up against his throat, hopes dearly that this won’t turn into an actual fight. “Fuck in’ ‘ell! I’ll knock your bloody teeth out!”

“Don’t,” Hartley warns him while he has a grip on James as if to keep him from doing anything else stupid. At the Australian’s annoyed and incredulous expression, he rolls his eyes and huffs in exasperation.

“You deserved that one,” Sam points out and nods to Barry. “Watch what you’re saying, jackass.”

Digger turns to Barry as well and grows still for a moment before he mutters a soft Oh.

Barry, who has watched the Australian so far with a worried look, smiles bitterly and shrugs. He averts his eyes back to his drink and tries to ignore how embarrassing it is that everybody of them knows about Len’s and his feelings for each other… or that Len still needs Izzy because Barry is terrified by the simple notion of even just letting the other man see him naked.

“Ignore him,” Lisa advises him, concerned.

“Yeah,” Mick agrees. “Digger’s brain has hardly any cells left since he baths it in moonshine every
“Fuck off,” Digger grumbles and shoots his teammate a dirty look but doesn’t actually start up a spat with him.

“Let’s just go back to the game,” Marco suggests and starts to collect the cards for another round of poker.

“Right, so I can mop the floor with you losers again,” Sam remarks cheekily.

“Like hell.” Mick snorts. “The only reason you won the last two is because you’re a fucking cheat, asshole.”

“Sure, pin it on me cheating if that makes you feel better,” Sam agrees with a blasé smirk.

“You are cheating,” Hartley points annoyed, frowning. “You’re just good at not letting yourself be caught while doing it.”

“All I hear is bitching and moaning,” Sam comments amused. “If I’m really cheating, I’m sure you guys have some proof for it, right?”

“Oh, shut up,” Lisa tells him. “You’ll be banned for life from any future poker games if Len catches you.”

“It really is insulting how you seem to think that the only reason I’m so good at this is that I’m cheating.” Sam’s indignant face is so obviously fake that Barry can’t help but crack a small smile as he watches his friend.

“That’s because you are,” Marco says unimpressed as he starts to deal the cards.

A small smile is on Barry’s lips as he watches his friend’s quarrel, amused and relieved by the familiarity of it. It helps him to feel a little better again, and he decides to concentrate on the new game. He picks his cards up and is pleased to notice that he actually got really good ones this time around.

“Or I’m just a god when it comes to poker,” Sam disagrees, which gets him a bunch of annoyed and incredulous glares.

“Whatsoever, jackass,” Marco returns and he glances over to the entrance of the bar. “You think Len will join in?”

“I think we should play this one without him,” Lisa remarks, glancing to the door with a small, grim frown. “It will probably take him a while to calm that fury down.”

“Yes,” Digger agrees, snorting. “He probably has to give it to her like three times before that Sheila will be sated. Pregnant women are supposed to be sex-crazy-”

“Will you shut it?!” Lisa cuts him off angrily, sounding ready to punch him like James did before.

Digger shoots her a dirty look. He is about to reply when he remembers that Barry is also present. He grimaces. “Uh… I’m not saying he’s shagging her in the alleyway right now, I’m just-”

“Please, just shut up,” Hartley interrupts him with an exasperated sigh.

Barry stares at his cards without really taking them in. His mind is reeling at the image Digger has just put into it, and the idea that Len can actually be having sex with Izzy right now is oddly
Would Len really do that?

A light tremor runs through him as he answers his own question.

Of course he would, why wouldn’t he? He has done so many, many times before, which is the reason why Izzy is with child in the first place…

It always hurts to imagine Len being with her; them sleeping together, but it is somehow much more upsetting right now, seeing that they were supposed to have a nice evening together.

Len is supposed to be here, with him, not with her. He is supposed to look out for him, he promised he would do so, that he won’t let anything happen to him… and now he is with that woman, again.

“Barry, don’t listen to what Digger says, he’s a tactless idiot who knows nothing,” Lisa tells him, and Barry nods numbly, not looking at her.

He feels sick…

“Let’s get started with the game,” Marco suggests, and so they do.

It’s about ten minutes later that Len rejoins them, a rather grim expression on his face that lightens momentarily when Barry looks up to meet his eyes. Barry quickly turns back to his cards, without a word, though, causing Len to frown in confusion and shoot Lisa a questioning look. His sister shakes her head grimly and shrugs.

Time passes, and Sam wins the game once again, causing the others to call him all kinds of names before Mick, Roscoe, and James make their way over to the bar to get a replenishment of beer.

Barry does his best to ignore Len while Lisa starts to deal the cards for the next round, and focuses on his now empty mug with stubborn concentration.

It’s either because Len isn’t sure what to do or say in response to his unexpected cold demeanor, or because he wants to give him his space, but he leaves Barry alone after he asked whether he’s alright and only got a curt nod in return.

After the others return with the beer, they start a new game, but Barry hardly pays any real mind to it as he tries to keep the misery and anger at bay that are currently fighting for dominance inside him. He can feel Len’s eyes on him every once in a while, and it is an increasingly uncomfortable feeling, that causes him to itch all over.

His second mug is empty when they finish the game, and when Hartley gets up to get himself another one, he asks him whether he could do so for him as well.

There is a moment of hesitance before his friend agrees, and it irks Barry, because he is no child the others have to look after when it comes to this.

They play another game, and Barry keeps ignoring Len. He doesn’t want to talk, and the others respect that and leave him alone for the most part.

It is when the game is over, Mick winning this time, and Barry asks Marco, who is on the way back over to the bar, whether he could grab him another one as well, that Len cuts in.

“I think you should slow down a little,” Len suggests. “You’re not used to drinking that much.”
“I c-can d-drink h-howev-ver m-much I w-want,” Barry retorts annoyed.

Len ignores him and turns to Marco instead. “Get him some water.”

“I d-don’t w-want w-w-water,” Barry argues and turns to Marco himself again. “D-don’t g-get m-me w-w-water!”

Marco looks clearly uncomfortable and says. “Look, don’t get me involved in this.”

“I-In wh-what?!” Barry’s face starts to grow uncomfortably hot and he glares angrily at the other man. “J-Just g-get m-me an-noth-ther b-beer!”

“Barry, calm down,” Len tells him, frowning both in slight annoyance and concern. “You have clearly had enough—”

“Sh-shut u-up!” Barry hisses. “Y-You’re n-not m-m-my b-bab-by-sit-ter! I’m a g-grown m-man, I c-can g-get an-nother b-beer i-if I w-w-want one!”

“You’re behaving ridiculous,” Len points out and turns to Marco again. “Just get your damn beer.”

“No!” Barry feels suddenly smothered by anger when he watches how Marco swiftly does as told, and it is ridiculous how betrayed he feels by the other man, seeing that he shouldn’t have expected anything else.

Of course Marco would pick Len’s side!

They all do!

“Turn it down,” Len tells him sharply. “You’re making a scene, and it’s embarrassing.”

It’s like a slap, and Barry stares at the other man for a second before he turns to the others, who watch him with a mixture of grim, uncomfortable frowns.

He’s embarrassing them…

Barry feels his insides grow cold, and suddenly the anger is gone, swept away by a much colder, painful sensation.

This shouldn’t be so surprising to him, what happened to him, what it says about him, it always filled him with a constricting shame, and he should have already known that he is nothing but an embarrassment to them, he is to himself after all, probably to everybody who was ever unlucky enough to meet him.

That’s why people never stick around.

He’s weak and nasty, used, and everybody eventually picks up on it.

Barry shivers as Iris comes to his mind, how she decided to leave him for another man as well because he couldn’t give her what she wanted. What she needed…

A child, or even just satisfaction in bed.

It’s the same with Len.

There is something fundamentally wrong with him, has been so since he was very little. That’s why this ugly stuff keeps happening to him, because he is somehow wrong.
He is an embarrassment and a failure…

“Barry.” Len sounds slightly distressed now and clearly uncomfortable.

It takes Barry a moment to realize that he has started to cry, and then he wishes the ground opened up and swallowed him whole.

Why does he have to always ruin things for himself?! He is disgusting, a miserable little person who deserves everything he got!

Len moves, causing Barry to focus back on him, and he watches him as he gets up.

“Come, let’s get you some fresh air,” Len tells him, voice low and clam once more, and Barry thinks about protesting, about curling up into a tight little ball and letting his misery consume him.

He doesn’t, though.

A sob passes his lips as he forces himself to get onto his feet, and he can’t bring himself to look at the others again, to see what must be disgust and irritation on their faces for how ridiculously he is behaving.

His legs feel unsteady, and he whimpers softly when Len grabs his arm to stead him but otherwise stays quiet.

The bar is still crowded, but Barry doesn’t pick up on the other visitors, for which he will be very grateful later on, as he doesn’t doubt that he had to look ludicrous to them. A grown man, bawling like a little child.

The night is chilly when they step outside, and the sudden amount of fresh oxygen causes Barry to grow even more dizzy, enough so that he would likely have fallen if it weren’t for Len who put an arm around his back to stabilize him.

“Come,” Len tells him as he starts to steer him away from the entrance.

Barry follows along, shivering and still crying quietly, and he wonders whether this is where Len took Izzy.

Where he had sex with her…

Len leads him to the back alley of the bar, a dark and dingy area, and comes to a stop about six feet from a dumpster. There he lets go of Barry and pulls back.

The streetlamp at the corner illuminates the area a little, enough so that Barry can make out the other man’s face as he glances to him briefly, still so very embarrassed by his earlier behavior. He returns his gaze to the ground, and bites down on another sob, hugging himself firmly in an attempt of comfort and also because it is cold outside and he forgot to grab his jacket.

A brief, uneasy silence settles between them, and Barry can feel Len’s eyes on him, studying him.

“You’re angry,” Len finally observes, and Barry squeezes his eyes shut, causing even more warm tears to run down his by now cold cheeks.

“Because of Izzy,” Len goes on, sounding less certain this time. “Because of the scene she made before?”
Barry shakes his head, frustrated and sad, but stays quiet.

“What is it then?” Len asks, uncertainly. “You were fine before she turned up.”

“I-It’s n-not…” Barry bites his lower lip hard, welcoming the pain that helps him to ground himself a little. He isn’t sure what to answer, or whether he really wants to at all.

The idea to discuss this with Len is upsetting, and the worst is, that he can’t even say for sure what exactly caused this all of a sudden.

“She was upset,” Len tells him. “You shouldn’t let what she said get to you. She’s pregnant—”

“Y-you’d s-sex w-w-with h-her…” Barry interrupts him, and reaches up to rub his eyes, huffing in frustration when only more tears follow.

Len is quiet for a moment. “You know that I had sex with her,” he points out, sounding a little lost and annoyed.

“N-No.” Barry shakes his head and sobs again, feeling ridiculously hurt. “E-earlier, y-you h-had s-s-sex w-with h-her—”

“What?” Len looks honestly confused, then.

“Y-You’d s-sex w-with h-her…” Barry repeats and hiccups.

“Tonight?” Len tries to clarify, knitting his brows in the still persisting confusion.

Barry nods, sniffling, and whimpers softly when another shiver runs through his body.

He shouldn’t make such a scene, he is being ridiculous again, and he knows that, but he can’t help it how upset he feels. He thought he made his peace with the knowledge that Len sees Izzy, even though the other man told him he would no longer do so, at least not for sex.

A part in Barry really wanted to believe this, but an even bigger one pointed out from the very beginning that this is only wishful thinking. He told himself that it is fine, that it doesn’t matter, that Len could go to Izzy to get what he needs, he has done so for years, after all…

Hearing Digger suggest that Len could have sex with Izzy tonight, when he promised Barry that he would be there with him, had been like a punch, though.

The worst thing is, that it is his own fault for getting hurt again, for letting himself be hurt again, and he shouldn’t be angry at anybody but himself—

“I didn’t have sex with Izzy,” Len argues sharply, causing Barry to lock back to him in surprise. “Where the hell did you get that idiotic idea from?”

“D-Digger s-said—” Barry starts, having difficulties to really remember what exactly Digger had said, but is cut off by the other man anyway.

“Digger is a fucking idiot who knows shit about what I’m doing or not!” Len snaps. “The jackass should keep his nose out of things that don’t concern him to begin with!”

The sudden anger in the other man’s voice causes Barry to startle, and he makes a scared step back as adrenalin floods his system, causing his heart to beat against his chest in alarm.

Len notices this and immediately forces himself to calm down as he adds more quietly but firmly. “I
didn’t sleep with Izzy, I haven’t since she told me she’s pregnant, and I’m not intending to do so again. I’ve told you so already.” The last part is spoken with some audible frustration, but the anger from prior doesn’t return.

Barry stays quiet as he watches Len, at a loss for what to say.

Slowly, as the other man’s words sink in, a mixture of relief and shame settles over him, and he starts to feel like such a moron.

“I’m not lying to you,” Len goes on. “I won’t ever, and I get that the whole thing is difficult on you, but it’s not easy on me either.”

“I-I kn-know…” Barry croaks and averts his eyes to the ground. He starts to feel dizzy again and closes his eyes. It seems that he really drank too much for his own good.

Len steps closer to him, and he flinches slightly when he cups his shoulder but he doesn’t pull away.

“I know that I haven’t given you much reason to trust me on this one,” Len admits and start to rub Barry’s upper arm soothingly. “I’m pretty overwhelmed at times by… by what I feel for you, and the idea that I hurt you…” Len huffs a helpless laugh and steps even closer as he proceeds. “I don’t want to cause you any more pain, Barry. I know that you’ve enough to deal with already, and upsetting you is probably the last thing on my mind. I’m not going to sleep with Izzy again, I told you so and I tell you so again. Okay?”

Barry bows his head and closes his eyes, lips pressed into a thin line. He leans forward, letting his forehead rest against Len’s shoulder and lets him put his arms around him, welcoming it.

“I-I’m s-s-sor-ry…”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about,” Len tells him firmly and pulls him closer.

“I-I… I-I d-didn’t m-mean t-to m-make a sc-scene o-or… emb-barrass y-you…” Barry insists, his own arms still hugging himself tightly.

Len tenses up briefly, before he exhales a weary sounding sigh and cups Barry’s head tenderly, nearly apologetically. “You were upset, and I shouldn’t have said that.” Regret rings with the words, and it causes the itch in Barry’s eyes to only grow worse.

“I’m s-still s-sor-ry…” Barry says quietly, pressing himself a little firmer against Len. “I’m n-not a p-peacef-ful d-drunk it s-seems.”

Len chuckles at that and turns his head so that he can press a kiss on Barry’s temple. “That’s not true. You’re usually an adorable drunk.”

Barry snorts and closes his eyes, resting heavily against his friend.

They stay like this for the next minute, taking and giving comfort in the dingy, dark alley, surrounded by the biting cold air of the winter night, and the noise that reaches them from inside the bar.

The moment isn’t perfect, but Barry still doesn’t want it to end, as he feels save in Len’s arms.

Eventually, Len pulls back and meets his eyes, still somewhat concerned. He reaches up to cup Barry’s face and brushes away the last traces of tears on his cheeks.

It is a tender, loving gesture, and Barry’s throat starts to close up in response. He lets go of himself
and rests his hands on Len’s hips, fighting the urge to step closer once more, back into another comforting embrace.

“I’m also sorry,” Len speaks softly, his breath turning into white mist the moment it passes his lips and touches the cold air. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

Barry swallows and smiles sadly. “I-I kn-know.”

They are both still new to this, and they are making mistakes, but he likes to believe that they are also progressing.

Len studies him wordlessly for a long moment, causing Barry to grow a little worried that he could have said something wrong by accident.

That is, till Len speaks. “Izzy isn’t the one I love.”

The air catches in Barry’s lungs and his eyes widen as he stares at the other man dumbfounded, unable to get his voice to work or even really come up with something to say in return.

_Izzy isn’t the one I love._

Love.

Does Len mean that he… could he really mean…

Barry has no idea how to react.

Len, thankfully, doesn’t seem to expect him to, as he instead goes on, looking somewhat nervous now despite his smile. “I’ve something for you.”

“I-Huh?” Barry blushes when he realizes how silly he sounds but can’t take his eyes off the other man, who takes his hands off him and reaches for something in the inner pocket of his leather jacket.

It is a small package, wrapped elegantly in thick red gift paper.

“Here.” Len offers it to him. “I wanted to give it to you tomorrow, but…” He breaks off and shrugs.

Barry stares at the small present, a myriad of feelings flashing through him, and he wonders what it could be.

Slowly, nearly hesitantly, he takes hold of it and shoots Len an uncertain look.

“It won’t bite,” Len assures him, amused, though there is also uncertainty in his eyes, as well as nervousness.

The wrapping paper is slowly unfolded, causing a small ring box to surface, and Barry’s mouth goes suddenly dry.

“It’s just a gift,” Len explains quickly, probably expecting what else the gift could be mistaken for, no matter how silly that idea is under these circumstances.

At Barry’s questioning look, he proceeds, looking both a little uneasy and embarrassed. “I wanted to get you something for Christmas.”

Still feeling pretty taken by surprise, Barry turns back to the box that is now resting in his hand and studies it for another couple of seconds.
“Open it,” Len urges, sounding nearly anxious, and after another brief glance at him, Barry does so.

It is a ring, as expected, with a simple but beautiful design, made of what is either white gold or silver, which is hard to tell in the faint light. A slim band of what seems to be deep red wood is running along its surface, and Barry can only stare at it, utterly taken by both the gift itself and its look.

There is no doubt in his mind that it had to have been expensive, and he is reminded of his birthday two years ago, the last time Len got him a gift.

He also remembers how he didn’t accept it, and for a brief moment the notion to do so again crosses his mind, but Barry knows that he wouldn’t decline it this time.

This is different than back then, still wrong because it was bought by stolen money, but there is another meaning behind it, and the thought of Len giving him something like that to carry around with him, something for him to remember that there is really something between them, that his feelings are returned…

Barry swallows and looks back up at Len, feeling deeply touched by his gift, especially after his words from before.

*Izzy isn’t the one I love.*

“Th-thank y-you.” Barry watches how the tensed expression eases off Len’s face, along with the apprehension, as if he was just waiting for his gift to be turned away again. A relaxed smile settles over his lips instead as he asks. “You like it?”

“V-very,” Barry agrees, smiling. “It’s… it’s r-really b-beautif-ful.”

“Good.” Len nods, looking very pleased with himself just then, which causes Barry to chuckle fondly.

Turning back to the ring, Barry hesitates briefly before he picks it up carefully, feeling the cool smooth metal under his fingers. He inspects it, so entranced with the present that he forgot all about the cold. When he starts shivering, Len starts to rub his back again.

The band of wood feels as smooth as what he has no doubt is white gold but less cool to the touch, and Barry is surprised by its deep red color that causes him to conclude that it’s probably Cardinal Wood.

It is when he turns it between his fingers, studying it from different angles, that he notices the engraving on the inside.

Reading the words, Barry feels himself choke up again.

*I won’t leave. – Len*

He bites his lower lip, forcing the sob back as he squeezes his eyes shut once more, and leans into Len who readily pulls him closer.

“So that it’s easier for you to remember,” Len tells him, his breath hot on Barry’s temple, “that you won’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Th-thank y-you,” Barry utters, overwhelmed by the closeness and love he feels for him just then. He lifts his head slightly and turns it, so that he is facing Len. They look each other in the eye for a
long moment before Len’s gaze drops a little, to his lips.

Barry’s heartbeat starts to speed up again, but he doesn’t pull away when Len moves closer.

The kiss is soft and harmless, nothing more than lips touching lips. Even so, it feels intense to Barry, and he is left a little shaken when Len finally pulls back.

“Are you okay?” Len asks, cupping Barry’s neck tentatively as he studies his face with a searching look.

“F-fine,” Barry agrees with a small smile, and it’s the truth, as the fear and slight self-disgust that tried to latch onto him soon after he allowed himself to get closer to the other man last time doesn’t seem to be around now.

Len returns the smile, visibly relieved, and pulls him closer again to brush his lips against his forehead. After a minute passed, he says, “We should probably go back inside.”

Barry hums in agreement but doesn’t move, and neither does Len despite his words.

It is then that it starts to snow, causing them both to finally pull apart, reluctantly.

The band of metal feels cold and smooth against his skin when Barry puts it on his left ring finger. Len is watching him, and he wonders whether he notices it and remembers the significance of putting it there.

If Len does, or maybe even mind, he doesn’t show it, but instead steps closer to him and brushes another kiss against his cheek. Barry flushes in response, a warmth settling into his belly that follows him when they make their way back inside the Saloon.

Chapter End Notes

So, I was honestly looking forward to post this chapter for a while now! I think I finished it around end of September, and I really like how it turned out. Barry and Len slowly but surely start to get a hand of the whole relationship thing – they still aren’t all the way there yet, but they have pretty much made it official towards each other at least. They still edge around it, less unwilling but more unsure of how to handle it, but Len’s present and words made it pretty clear to Barry how serious he is about this, and Len took Barry’s reaction as a confirmation that this could really work.

I love rings with wooden elements in them, I don’t know why but the combination of metal and wood is just so interesting and beautiful to me. I found it fitting that Len would get a ring for Barry that is one part cool, pale metal and one part warm, red wood. It is just fitting. Who knew Len has an eye for such things. ;)

It is not a meant as an engagement ring, though, not in the usual sense at least, since both are not even all that sure how to make just being in a relationship with each other work. It is meant more as a symbol of them now having made a step towards being a couple.

Aside from Len giving Barry his Christmas present a little early, we also got to meet Charlie, the barman (very briefly), and Roy aka Rainbow Raider (not Chroma, he sticks
with his initial villain name in this one). Both will appear more later, and I’m so looking forward to it, because they are ridiculously fun to write. Also, if anybody of you read the Saloon, another of my fics (still a one-shot), you will have heard of Charlie before, and while the Saloon and Singularity take place in different universes, the barmen are pretty much the same guys.

Izzy also made a brief appearance, and I know that some of you have been wondering what is going on with her and the baby, so you got a glimpse of it here. Len is trying to keep is distance to her, support her, but still don’t let himself get to close, which may or may not be a jackass thing to do, depending on how you look at it. It really comes down to him not being sure how to handle the situation and wanting to make things with Barry work.

Izzy is still pregnant, the baby is healthy, and everything seems fine with her so far, other that she is hurt and pissed to no end about Len’s ongoing absence. She too will make her next appearance rather soon.

It is annoying that my uploading schedule didn’t allow it for me to upload this chapter at Christmas, it would have been a fitting little gift, I think, but even so I hope you enjoyed it! :)

Thank you all so, so much for your amazing feedback, I love getting your comments and see how much you care for this story! It is just the greatest thing for me to read through them, and I can’t tell you how appreciated it makes me feel! <3

Next chapter will be up in two weeks as usual (hopefully on time then), and have Bart and Max in it again, as well as quite some feels! :)

Till then!
It’s the second day after Christmas that Max and Bart arrive at Barry’s apartment shortly after noon. The older man passed by briefly a couple of days ago to tell him about their plans to visit him on Boxing Day. It wasn’t a surprise since Jay mentioned that Max had been planning something like that, and Barry readily agreed to the meeting, since he was looking forward to seeing Bart again. This time of the year is about family, after all, and despite everything that is currently going on in his life, he has been thinking of Bart as such for quite a while now and wants to let him know that. The knock that cuts through his otherwise quiet apartment and signalizes the arrival of his guests startles Barry a little since he still feels a little hungover from his celebration with the Rogues two nights ago. He gets up from his seat at the kitchen table, grimacing slightly and pauses for a moment. Rubbing a hand over his eyes, he hopes that it wasn’t too visible that he overdid it with the alcohol during his first official visit to the Saloon. It seems that he really was getting too old to have more than two beers at a time, not that he ever was much of a drinker.

Despite his slight discomfort, Barry opens the door to both Bart and Max with a welcoming smile a moment later.

His relaxed demeanor is gone the moment Bart jumps at him, and his body tenses up in response to the unexpected but not surprising contact. The brief panic only lasts for a heartbeat before Barry can shake it off, and he tries not to show how unsettled he feels while Bart seems intent on hugging the life out of him again, a huge grin plastered over his face.

“Grandpa!” Bart exclaims excitedly, looking up at him with bright, happy eyes. “We’re going to invite you to some amazing meal today! And you’ll also get presents!”

Caught off-guard by this piece of information, Barry finds himself at a loss of what to say, since he is unsure what to make of or how to feel about what he just heard.

Max only told him about them passing buy to wish him a belated Merry Christmas, nothing about going out to get lunch somewhere. Barry prepared some coffee for Max and bought a couple of cherry sodas for Bart which are the boy’s favorites.
“Bart thought it would be nice if we three could have a Christmas dinner of our own,” Max explains, not missing the unease with which Barry is glancing at him.

“Yes,” Bart agrees quickly as he steps back and let go of him, nodding enthusiastically. “Because we’re family and if you can’t join us with Wally around” – the boy’s expression darkens for a second as a frown settles over his face, but he shakes it off quickly and grins once again – “we’re just going to have an awesome dinner all by ourselves.”

“Lunch is more like it,” Max points out amused, but the humor vanishes again when he meets Barry’s eyes and adds. “It is up to you, though, Barry. We can also just spend a nice afternoon here if you prefer that.”

As Barry considers the offer, unconsciously biting his lower lip, he doesn’t miss how Bart is less than happy by that suggestion but refrains from protesting and instead watches him hopefully.

The idea of being invited to lunch by Max doesn’t sit well with him. It isn’t because he would mind spending time with them, even with the other man, but he isn’t sure what to make of the invitation in the first place.

A familiar voice of doubt and concern whispers that this could cause him serious trouble later, and Barry agrees. He doesn’t like the notion of Max spending money on him, it just makes him feel uncomfortable, vulnerable. It isn’t the same as being invited over to some homemade dinner like he was a couple of months ago, and even then, he felt like a freeloader.

“You’ll like it,” Bart tries to assure him with a pleading look. “It’s a really nice place with awesome food! Max took me there before, and they’ve the best lasagna ever!”

“It is an Italian restaurant,” Max explains. “In Central, it opened just last year and has a really good and authentic Italian cuisine.”

Barry shifts his weight nervously from one foot to the other, as a nagging worry is weighing down on him. He can’t help but feel bad for his lack of enthusiasm about the invitation since it is obvious that Bart is very much looking forward to the restaurant visit and spending time with him.

“H-H this invitation comes unexpected, Barry, so it’s no problem is you prefer to stay here,” Max reminds him, ignoring Bart’s reproachful glare he gets in return.

“I-I p-prob-bably w-won’t e-eat m-much,” Barry says, speaking for the first time since his guests arrived and coughs awkwardly when his voice nearly breaks. He cautiously studies Max expression, wondering whether this invitation isn’t a present for Bart in all actuality. It would make the whole situation less troubling, at least.

Though, Barry knows that it would be a lie to say that Max has been anything but kind to him so far, and it is probably the lack of suspiciousness the older hero displays towards him that causes a heavy wariness to settle in the pit of his stomach in the first place.

Jay comes to his mind, then, and he remembers the conversation they had the last time he passed by. Is Max also considering the possibility that he could be innocent? Did Jay talk to him about it? Or is he just being nice because of Bart?

Barry frowns slightly, annoyed at himself for how nervous he feels right now, since he knew that Max and Bart would pass by, and he probably should have considered that something like that could happen. Max is a kindhearted man, and when he sees Barry and his situation, he probably wants to do him some good just because of the time of the year.
Fearing that Max could use his acceptance to the invitation to cause him troubles later on is very farfetched because of that, and Barry is aware of that, despite the heavy wariness nestled in his guts.

He is being paranoid, maybe more than usual, since a stranger restlessness is holding onto him he isn’t sure what to make of when he notices it. It is when he shifts and feels the thin chain beneath his shirt move, that the ring he is wearing around his neck comes to his mind, causing him to still.

Len’s gift, which he put on the necklace he got from Mrs. Ming for his 41st birthday, is resting under his button-down shirt, next to the Kyanite.

He put it there because he didn’t want to part with the ring despite his visitors, and he still feels slightly ridiculous for how reluctant he felt about the mere idea of letting it out of his eyes even for just a couple of hours.

His nervousness doesn’t stem from the fear of Max or anybody else picking up on the piece of jewelry, though, he wouldn’t have left it on if he was worried about that.

No, it isn’t the ring he is worried about, not really, the problem is much more what it reminds him of.

The last two days were some of the happiest he had in a very long time.

After his talk with Len and getting the ring, a heavy weight was lifted off his shoulders that had been bearing down on him since he learned about Izzy’s pregnancy. Learning that he really seems to mean just as much to Len as it is the other way around left him feeling light and oddly elated.

On Christmas Day, when he stayed over at the Rogues to spent the day with them, it was like he was filled to the brim with warmth and cheerfulness, despite his hangover or how grouchy some of the other were because of the same reason.

Most of the people he cared deeply about were there with him, Sam even picked Axel up whom Barry had invited, and while the boy kept complaining about having to spend his day with a bunch of old people, Barry knew that he was also pleased to have someone to spend that day with.

It was a nice day, nearly surreal in how content Barry felt as he helped Lisa and Hartley to prepare a simple Christmas dinner while most of the Rogues played poker or watched TV. He allowed himself to just enjoy the fact that he among people he considers close friends, even family, despite what the rest of the world saw in them.

Barry remembers how relaxed Len was too, and how he kept touching him whenever they were alone. A fleeting touch to the small of his back, a grasp of his wrist, or brushing of his shoulders against Barry’s, and while it was unexpected, he didn’t feel intimidated by it. It was a sweet and unusual display of affection for Len, and his friend was careful not to linger too long or cause him any other kind of discomfort.

The others probably noticed as Sam kept shooting him amused looks, and Mick did the same with Len, but none of them mentioned anything. Only Axel seemed somewhat grossed out by the whole affair, though he kept quiet and only told Barry later that evening that he could do much better than that old grumpy ass.

The whole experience had something nearly foreign to it, but Barry ignored it then, and instead welcomed this kind of normality he usually didn’t allow himself.

Even Eddy remarked on how he looked unusually happy and relaxed when they met up at Mary’s for cookies and hot chocolate, and to watch A Christmas Story last night.
It was an incredibly nice experience, and it lasted till this morning.

When Barry woke up today, it was as if he had returned to reality. He hadn’t exactly forgotten about Max’ and Bart’s upcoming visit, but he had preferred not to think about it. The break from his usual everyday life is now over, though, and he has to face things once again.

Being confronted with that, causes a slight misery to settle in the pit of Barry’s stomach, and while he is honestly happy to see Bart again, he can’t say the same when it comes to Max.

The other man’s mere presence is a reminder that things don’t really go so smoothly for him, and a part of him fears that he would have to pay in some way for how good he felt over the last couple of days.

It is a stupid fear but hard to dismiss.

“You don’t have to eat much,” Bart assures him, causing Barry to turn back to him. “They have great starters too; you can pick just one of them.” There is a pleading quality to the boy’s tone, and Barry is reminded once more how much Bart seems to want him around.

There is nothing to worry about, Barry tries to assure himself, somewhat worried that could cause Bart to think that his reluctance to come along could be because he doesn’t want to spend time with him.

Bart isn’t having it all that easy either, and rejection hurts, especially from people you are considering family…

“Ok-kay,” Barry agrees with a small smile and chuckles when Bart cheers in return, bobbing up and down in open excitement.

“You’ll like it for sure!” Bart promises him, and Barry isn’t surprised when he finds himself in the boy’s arms again, being hugged just as enthusiastically as earlier. “Thank you, grandpa.”

The honest gratitude in the boy’s words tugs at Barry’s heart, and he returns the hug firmly, suddenly flooded with an intense affection for the young boy. It is when he remembers Max that he tenses up and pulls back, but the older man watches them calmly, no trace of anger or worry on his face.

They leave for the restaurant soon afterwards, and the drive there is filled with Bart’s chatter about the presents he got. Barry listens fondly, glad that he has something to concentrate on as the apprehension from earlier lingers around despite how he tries to accept that no second shoe going to drop.

“You’ll get your presents when we’re at the restaurant,” Bart informs him, reminding him about the gifts the kid mentioned when he arrived at his apartment. The thought causes a familiar unease to settle over him since the idea of getting something from Max doesn’t sit well with him.

Bart misunderstands his frown, as he quickly adds. “The restaurant is really good. I’ve been there a couple of times with Tim and Kon before, and they like it too, although Tim is a really picky eater.” He seems to consider something for a moment and adds. “Kon’s opinion doesn’t really count, though. He eats like anything you put in front of him.”

Barry has to smile despite himself as he listens to the boy and relaxes a little. “Are th-they y-your f-friends?” he asks, not surprised when Bart starts to nod enthusiastically in agreement.

“Yes, my best friends!” Bart informs him brightly, and Barry is glad to hear so, as he learned from Max and Jay about the young boy’s difficulties to fit in among his peers at school.
“Are th-they f-from y-your c-class?” Barry inquires and doesn’t miss how Bart seems about to answer but suddenly freezes instead.

“Uh… no,” Bart explains, fidgeting nervously when he shots a concerned and guilty look to Max. “Just friends…”

Max doesn’t seem worried about their topic of conversation and doesn’t let it show if Bart’s words hold any actual significance.

Even so, Barry can easily guess what the likely reason for Bart’s nervous behavior is, as he saw it before, with Wally when his nephew was still just a kid and not allowed to share too much about what he is doing in his alleged free time to anybody outside the superhero community or close family. Tim and Con are most likely sidekicks, probably members of the Teen Titans.

It is odd to be reminded of how Bart spends most of his weekends, of the dangers he puts himself in. Even with the way the boy displays his powers at times, Barry tries not to think about anything superhero related when he is around. All that is no longer part of his world, after all, and being reminded of how very much Bart is really connected to it, is daunting, no matter that he knows that Max and the others are watching out for the kid.

Looking back at his own time as the Flash with Wally as his sidekick, Barry has been asking himself many times over the last decade whether one of the reasons this horrible tragedy happened to him and his family was due to him allowing his nephew to become Kid Flash. In retrospective, even though it was beneficial to Wally to have peers who dealt with the same problems as he did, Barry does regret it.

The world is a dangerous place, enough so without putting kids in costumes and letting them take on maniacs who often have no qualms about hurting or even killing them.

Barry pushes that thought away when a well-known guilt digs its talons deeply into his guts, and forces himself to concentrate back on Bart, who is now sitting in the back of the car, head low and looking much less cheerful than just a minute earlier.

He can see Max looking at him out of the corner of his eyes, but he ignores him, not willing to meet the older man’s gaze just now.

“How d-did y-you l-like th-this y-year’s Ch-Christmas?” Barry asks, hoping that a change of topic would lift Bart’s mood again. “D-Did y-you enj-joy th-the p-party?”

Jay told him that Joan and he would stay with Wally and his family for Christmas, and that Max and Bart would also come over, something the older man was quite looking forward to since Joan and he always love to have the people they consider family close-by on that day. Back when Barry still had Iris and Wally, they and the Garricks would alternate between their houses to celebrate together, and he can recall very vividly how nice it always was to spend that holiday with each other.

Both Jay and Joan have a lot of love to give and despite not having any children of their own, they have enough people they hold dear in their lives for it not to go to waste, and he doesn’t doubt that they put a lot of effort into making this Christmas special for everybody involved as well.

Therefore, it comes as a surprise to Barry when he watches how Bart’s expression morphs into a scowl as he glares down at the car floor in response to his question.

“Wally was a mean prick,” Bart grumbles and crosses his arms.

“Bart,” Max chides him and frowns back at the boy via the rear-view mirror. “We’ve already talked
about this. I don’t want you to use these kind of language, especially when it comes to family.”

“He isn’t family,” Bart replies icily, glaring back at Max. “He’s mean, and he hates me.”

“He does no such thing,” Max argues, and his exasperated tone isn’t lost on Barry. This seems like an argument they’ve had many times in the past, and the idea is daunting.

“He does!” Bart hisses, looking very upset all of sudden. “You and the others just ignore it because of what you think happened to-”

“Enough,” Max cuts him off sharply. “We’re not going to have this discussion again right now.”

Bart seems utterly livid for a second, until his eyes start to shine with unshed tears, and he lowers his head once more, his expression both upset and hurt.

Barry watches this quietly, finding himself unable to speak as his throat closes up due to the sudden tension in the air. He feels utterly horrible for the young boy who is clearly fighting against the urge to cry.

Wally’s lack of love for Bart was predictable because of who the kid is, and Barry expected them not to get along too well, but he didn’t think that there would be so much bad blood between them. Bart isn’t at fault for who his relatives are, he didn’t choose them, and Barry wonders how badly Wally really has to be taking the young boy’s presence to react with such animosity towards him.

“We’re here to spend a nice afternoon with your grandfather,” Max adds in a much calmer voice, and he too seems to have picked up on how close to tears Bart is. “You’ve been looking forward to this, let’s concentrate on that. We can talk about Wally later, okay?”

Bart’s lower lip is trembling briefly in response to these words, and Barry is reminded of how the boy visited him at work for the first time. How upset Bart got over very similar words back then, and he feels bad for both Max and him, as he doesn’t doubt how difficult this whole situation must be for either of them.

How difficult it also must be for Wally…

Jay never outright mentioned Wally’s rejection of Bart when he came to visit, but it was never hard for Barry to understand that his nephew’s dislike for the kid was probably also the reason why it is mostly up to Jay and Max to deal with him and his powers even though he is the new Kid Flash.

Barry wonders at times why they would allow Bart to take up this name, considering how much this is hurting and angering Wally, but he isn’t going to ask. In all actuality, he probably should know nothing about what is going on concerning any of the heroes.

The rest of the drive to the restaurant passes by in an uncomfortable silence, with Bart watching the world passing by his window with a moody frown and limiting himself to grunts and one-word answers when Max tries to talk to him.

Barry himself stays quiet too, since he is not sure what to say or do to ease the tension a little.

Fortunately, the mood lifts again as soon as they reach the restaurant, and the outlook for the upcoming meal helps Bart to temporarily forget what upset him earlier.

“Y-you kn-know wh-what y-you w-want t-to eat?” Barry asks Bart as they exit the car, and, much to his relief, Bart beams up at him once again and answers, “Yes! A pizza Capricciosa, and a lasagne, and pasta, and-”
“You did remember to eat the nutrition bars before we left, didn’t you?” Max interrupts Bart’s enthusiastic countdown of dishes he is going to order and receives an annoyed frown in return.

“Yeah, I did,” Bart mutters, arms crossed again and a pout on his face. “And they were as disgusting as usual.”

“They help us to keep you fed without me ending up bankrupt,” Max reminds him, causing Bart’s frown to deepen and argues, “But you said I could eat three dishes.”

“As far as I recall, I said two,” Max points out, but despite his stern expression, Barry can easily make out the amused glint in his eyes.

“Two is way too little.” Bart huffs. “I’m still growing.”

“Thus the nutrition bars.”

“But they taste awful!”

“They don’t,” Max disagrees with a chuckle as they enter the restaurant. “You told me you like the ones with hazelnut flavor.”

Bart pushes his lower lip out and glares wordlessly at his guardian, obviously aware that he is not going to win this argument.

Barry watches them with a fond smile, glad to see Bart in a better mood again, and turns his attention to the restaurant they just entered.

Thankfully, it doesn’t look like an especially expensive location, despite its tasteful and homely atmosphere.

Max tells the receptionist that they have booked a table, and it takes next to no time for a waiter to appear and take them to it. They are left with the menus, and Max reminds Barry once again that he is invited and can pick whatever he wants.

That still doesn’t easy any of the apprehension Barry feels about the fact that Max would be paying for his food, but he tries not to show it around Bart. The boy has been looking forward to this, and he is not going to ruin it for him because he tends to expect the worst.

Their waiter returns, and they order their drinks and food. Max is having Gnocchi di ricotta and a soda, Bart a calzone and a coke, and Barry a minestrone and a soda as well.

“You can try some of my calzone,” Bart tells him as they are alone at their table again, and he already looks excited about the food, fidgeting relentlessly as he grins up to Barry. “It is delicious.”

“I’d l-like t-to,” Barry agrees warmly.

“Can we give him the presents now?” Bart asks Max, shooting him a masterful puppy eyed look that speaks of long time practicing. Max sighs in fond exasperation and nods in agreement, causing the boy to cheer happily and reaches for the bag he brought with him from the car.

“Here!” Bart pulls a wrapped package out and pushes it towards Barry who is sitting next to him, grinning broadly from ear to ear. “This is from me! I picked it myself!”

Barry accepts the gift, noticing that it is something soft hidden below the layer of bright yellow and
red paper. It occurs to him that it is most likely a piece of clothing which causes his curiosity to spike, as he has no idea what Bart could have gotten him.

He glances back to Bart, who is watching him expectantly, clearly eager to see his reaction to whatever he picked for him.

The notion that Bart would go out of his way to get him something at all is touching, and Barry suddenly feels rather bad for having gotten him nothing better than a coupon and a t-shirt.

Carefully, as he doesn’t like the idea of ripping the bright paper, Barry starts to unwrap the gift slowly, much to Bart’s frustration who cheers him on to just tear into it.

“That’s the best part about getting something,” Bart tells him firmly, frowningly, a slight note of impatience clinging to the words, as he observes him slowly loosen the tape that hold the paper in place. “You aren’t supposed to be careful about it, you throw the paper away anyway.”

“I-it’s a v-very n-nice p-paper,” Barry points out amused and doesn’t miss how Bart’s expression brightens at that.

“I picked that too!”

It hardly takes any time at all to unwrap the gift, and Barry finally holds a hoody in his hands that has the same brash color combination as the red and yellow paper. He doesn’t have to ask about why Bart picked the piece of clothing in that color scheme since he still remembers Wally’s Kid Flash costume quite well and is also aware that Bart’s version looks very similar.

A faint sadness wraps around his chest at that memory, but Barry pushes it away stubbornly, not willing to reflect on anything like that right now. Instead, he gives Bart a bright smile. “Th-Thank y-you, i-it’s an am-mazing g-gift.”

Bart’s grin seems to grow even wider then, and Barry expect it when the kid throws his arms around him this time. He welcomes the hug despite the tinge of panic that originates from the fact that they are in public where anybody can see that he is touching someone underage.

Eventually, after a couple of seconds, Bart pulls back, much to Barry’s relief, and turns back to Max, a triumphant expression on his face. “I told you he would like it!”

Max smiles good naturally and nods in agreement, briefly shooting Barry an amused look.

“He’s just as good of a taste as I do,” Bart declares, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Even if he always wears old people clothes.”

Barry frowns slightly but doesn’t feel particularly put off by the remarks, partly because Bart clearly didn’t mean anything by it, and partly because he decided to make his peace with the fact that other people don’t seem to think all that highly of what he chooses to wear.

“Bart, that’s a very impolite thing to say,” Max admonishes the young speedster, who looks honestly taken aback for a second.


It stays unspoken that he does have new shirts and pants at home, a Christmas gift from Lisa, and that he eventually would have to start to wear them if he doesn’t want to catch her ire. Right now, he will stick to his clothes a little longer, though. He is used to them, as silly as it may sound, and...
Despite what others may say or think, he feels comfortable in them. Not to mention that having Lisa spend at least two hundred dollars on him and he still hasn’t wound his head around that.

“Your taste in fashion is fine,” Max disagrees firmly. “Bart just tends to speak without thinking about what he is going to say and doesn’t consider that he could hurt another person’s feelings that way.”

“Hey!” Bart protests but does look somewhat guiltily at Barry. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“Y-you d-didn’t,” Barry assures him and turns to Max. “It’s f-fine, r-really.”

Max doesn’t seem to agree with him there judging by his deepening frown, but the waiter returns with their drinks then, taking the older man’s opportunity to reply right away.

“I’ve s-someth-thing f-for y-you t-too,” Barry says the moment the waiter is gone again, intending to steer the conversation to a different topic. He reaches for the plastic bag he brought along. Bart has been eyeing it curiously and hopefully since he took notice of it on their way in, and straightens up as his eyes fall upon it again.

“H-Here.” Barry picks the wrapped gift and hands it to Bart, who accepts it eagerly.

As expected, Bart has no qualms about ripping the paper off in no time and quickly has both gifts unwrapped. Barry is glad when the boy studies both the t-shirt and the gift certificate with an utterly gleeful look.

“Thank you!” Bart turns to him with a broad smile. “I love the shirt, it’s so cool! And I’ve been wanting to buy Silent Evil VII for months, and now I’ve enough money to do so!”

Barry is briefly confused what Bart could mean by Silent Evil till Max sternly reminds the boy. “You are not going to buy that game, it isn’t fit for children your age.”

“But at the Tower-”

“It doesn’t matter,” Max cuts him off. “You won’t get this game for another four years.” He adds somewhat darkly. “I really have to talk to Victor about what he lets you have access to.”

“That’s not fair!” Bart complains annoyed. “The game isn’t even that gory!”

“Lower your voice, we aren’t the only people present,” Max tells him sternly and sighs in exasperation, shaking his head. “And you’re really not helping your point there.” He then turns to Barry, signifying that their discussion is done, for now at least. “I’ve something for you as well.” He offers him an envelope then Barry hasn’t noticed so far.

Uneasily, Barry eyes the unexpected present, and he recalls Jay’s gift, the cell phone that is still resting in its box, unopened so far. He doesn’t like the idea of Jay or Max, or really anybody spending money on him, especially if it is such a high amount.

Barry grew up being indebted to other people, and he knows how vulnerable this can make him.

“You don’t have to accept it,” Max remarks, obviously noticing his reluctance to accept the envelope. He meets Barry’s wary eyes with an understanding expression. “It is okay if you don’t want to keep it, but see what it actually is before you make your decision, okay?”

It doesn’t sound like it would be money, which is a relief, as Barry just payed Max back for the medicine when he passed by a couple of days ago, and even though this would be different now, as it is meant as a gift, he still would feel like he owned him. He got Max nothing, after all.
“Just take a look,” Max urges him lightly, smiling. “I think you’ll like it.”

Barry meets his eyes for a second, still unsure what to make of the gift or how to feel about getting any present at all by the other man.

Eventually, he accepts it with a curt nod. The paper of the envelope feels thick and smooth under his fingers, and he studies it briefly, noticing how light it is. After shooting another uncertain look at Max, he finally turns to open the gift, not missing how expectantly Bart is watching him. The boy probably knows about this and is curious about how he will like it.

It comes as a surprise when Barry pulls a folder about the museum of art in Keystone City out, and he studies it with a confused frown for a second, not sure what to make of it.

“Open it,” Bart tell him excitedly. “There’s something inside!”

Barry does so and finds and annual pass for the museum tucked away inside the folder.

This is an entirely unexpected present. Barry stares at it bewilderedly, trying to understand why Max would get him this, especially considering that these passes aren’t exactly cheap.

Bart, who mistakes Barry’s subdued reaction for him not liking the gift, shoots Max a dark look. “I told you it’s a boring present.”

Max ignores his charge and instead seems to consider Barry’s reaction thoughtfully. “Jay told me about your interest in art, and I’ve picked up that you’re painting as a hobby, so I thought that could be something for you.” He doesn’t mention that he also knows about Barry’s last visit to Gilbert’s, thankfully, as the memory of it is still making Barry feel uncomfortable.

When Barry keeps studying the present, looking more concerned than happy, Max proceeds. “As I’ve said before, you don’t need to accept it, but I think it is something that you can enjoy, and, to be honest, I was hoping that you could take Bart and me along on one of your trips. It surely wouldn’t be bad for him to be exposed to a little bit of culture every once in a while.”

Bart bristles at that, and for a moment he looks ready to protest. Then, he seems to realize that this means Barry and he could spend some time together, and his scowl is quickly replaced by an elated expression instead.

“I-I d-don’t kn-know…” Barry glances uneasily to Max but turns his attention to Bart when the boy starts to reason with him. “You’ll like it! Joan took me, Tim, and Kon to the museum once and it really isn’t that boring!”

Despite the knot in his guts, Barry can’t help but smile at Bart’s attempt to convince him to accept the gift. He watches the boy fondly but turns back to Max when he notices the older man’s gaze stay on him, patiently but waiting.

“Th-this i-is a v-very th-thoughtf-ful and e-exp-pensive g-gift. Th-thank y-y-you.” Barry has been to the KC art museum in the past, once as a child during a school excursion, a couple of times as an adult with Iris, and once due to a criminal investigation. He hasn’t seen the place in more than a decade, though, and he couldn’t deny that a part of him is looking forward to visiting it again, even more so should Bart really accompany him.

“I’m glad you like it,” Max tells him earnestly, and Barry notices again the thoughtful way the other man is studying him.

It is a little disconcerting, and he is glad when the waiter returns with their food just a minute later,
allowing him to focus his attention on his meal.

Bart seems to notice his discomfort as he tries to involve him into a conversation about chemistry, something the boy knows he enjoyed. “I got the highest score on my class’ last chemistry exam again,” he tells Barry proudly, puffing his chest out. “Mrs. Johnson said that I’m doing exceedingly well, and that, if I go on like this, I’ll definitely be able to become a scientific investigator one day.”

Barry’s smile dims a little at the last part since it seems the kid is still hellbent on his decision to become a CSI, and he himself has grown no fonder of this idea so far. Even so, Barry replies warmly, as he knows that Bart is most likely experiencing enough discouragement from others. “Y-you’re a s-smart b-boy, B-Bart, y-you c-can b-bec-come anyth-thing y-you w-want as l-long as y-you w-work f-for it h-hard en-nough.” He reaches for the boy’s shoulder and gives it a light squeeze. “I’m r-really p-p-proud of y-you.”

A beaming expression settles over the kid’s face, and Barry doesn’t protest when the kid hugs him for the fourth time today.

The air turns more comfortable as their meal proceeds, and Barry starts to enjoy himself thanks to Bart’s cheerful nature and the stories he provides him with. Max also takes part in their conversation, mostly pointing out when Bart is exaggerating or when he adds some praise to one of the boy’s achievements, and Barry notices once more how well these two seem to get along.

It is good to know that Bart is with someone who really cares about him, and as Barry watches them both, a sudden sensation of gratitude for the older man overcomes him. Max is a good guardian, he will make sure that Bart doesn’t miss anything and gets the care and love he needs.

The other man is a good person in general, someone who has found his calling in helping others, and Barry starts to feel somewhat bad for how he is always expecting the worst of the people he once knew. Max has been nothing but decent and kind to him so far, even though they both didn’t really have much to do with each other back when Barry was still in the hero business. He even came to hear his side of the story regarding the events of that horrible night…

That thought causes an icy somberness to settle over his shoulders like a lead-filled coat.

It hurts to think that someone who didn’t really know him that well before the whole tragedy with Iris’ murder and Wally’s abuse is more inclined to give him a chance than the people he had worked with on a nearly daily basis for years. People he didn’t only see as colleagues for the most part but considered friends, even family, and he really thought they felt the same way.

Barry doesn’t really hold it against them anymore how they handled everything and that they put him into Iron Heights. He probably never really did. They wanted to protect Wally, and that is all that matters in the end.

Still, he can’t help but wonder what he did wrong, what caused them all to turn away from him so easily.

All Barry ever really wanted was to fit in, to be normal, to have place among people who accept him despite of what happened to him.

Something is wrong with him, though. Eventually, everybody seems to turn away from him, and he can’t help but wonder why that is the case.

What is the cause of it? Is it really him? Is he-

“Are you feeling alright, grandpa?” Bart asks as he eyes Barry worriedly. It is then that Barry
realizes that he let his thought drift off again, and like usual, they took him places he doesn’t want to go.

“Y-yes,” Barry assures Bart but doesn’t meet Max’s eyes he can feel on himself as well. “I’m j-just a l-little t-tired.”

“Maybe you should drink coffee,” Bart suggests. “And eat some Tiramisu, it’s delicious.”

“Yes, you ok-kay if w-we sh-share a p-portion?” Barry asks and smiles warmly when the boy immediately agrees. He isn’t hungry, but he has realized by now that one way to assure Bart that he is alright is by eating as the kid seems convinced that if he still has an appetite he should be fine.

All in all, they stay nearly two hours at La Tavolozza’s, and Bart is allowed a pizza before sharing a Tiramisu with Barry, while Max himself gets another plate of Gnocchi.

The air is cold when they finally leave the restaurant, and Barry welcomes it, as he has started to grow seriously drowsy over the last half an hour in the warm restaurant.

On their way back to his apartment, Bart keeps chattering away, clearly working on full batteries again after their lunch, and while Barry stays mostly quiet, he still listens attentively.

When they finally reach his street, Barry realizes that he doesn’t want Bart or Max to leave right away, and he turns to them, asking. “W-Would y-you l-like t-to j-join m-me in m-my ap-partm-ment f-for s-some c-coffee and h-hot ch-chocolate?”

Max can’t even get a word out as Bart already cheers in agreement, causing Barry to meet the boy’s happy expression with fondness, grateful for his love.

They enter his apartment soon afterwards, all of them glad to get out of the cold air, even though Barry notices with some embarrassment that it is much colder in here than in Max’ car. Neither of his two guests seem to notice it, though, and instead Bart offers to assist him with preparing the drink.

“Joan showed me how to make hot chocolate in a pot,” Bart informs him, and Barry lets him warm the milk up on the stove by himself but reminds him to keep stirring it while he gets the bar of Swiss chocolate that was part of Mary’s Christmas present for him. He breaks half of it to pieces and puts the rest away. Then, he heats some water up for the coffee and pretends not to see it when Bart sneaks a piece of chocolate away, letting it vanish in his mouth.

They end up playing Checkers when Bart spots the deck of cards on the kitchen table after they sit down, and it turns out that the boy is really good at it.

“I like card games,” Bart tells him. “They aren’t as fun as video games but they are still pretty alright.”

Barry smiles, amused about that statement, and Max adds while he contemplates his cards since it is his turn. “He’s a knack for these kind of games.” He snorts. “Ted would likely take him to Vegas if he wasn’t still a minor.”

It takes Barry a moment to realize of whom Max is talking, but then he remembers Wildcat, or Ted Grant, and he isn’t really surprised that Bart would know the member of the JSA, considering who Jay is.

“I’m so good that I’d clean all of them out. Ted told me so,” Bart agrees proudly, clearly repeating the older hero’s words.
“Let’s hope you find something better to do with your time than gambling,” Max remarks drily though it is obvious that he is more entertained by that farfetched idea than annoyed. He nods to the walls of Barry’s living room. “You could try to pick up art like you grandfather.”

Bart’s attention is piqued at that, and he turns to look at the paintings that are hanging on the otherwise naked and bleak looking walls.

“You made them?” Bart asks in astonishment and studies Barry with wide eyes. “I didn’t know you are an artist too!”

“It’s j-just a h-hobby,” Barry says, somewhat surprised that the boy would find that especially interesting but also amused by how amazed he seems by that fact.

“You really can do everything. You’re amazing,” Bart states with the most matter-of-fact tone one could imagine, and both Barry and Max can’t help but chuckle at that.

“Th-that’s v-very g-generous o-of y-you,” Barry replies with a smile. “B-but I’m h-hardly th-that g-good at p-painting, and I’m c-certainly n-not ab-ble t-to d-do everyth-thing.”

There is clear doubt in Bart’s eyes as he considers him, frowning. “But you are amazing.”

Barry isn’t sure how to reply to that, seeing that he understands that this is about more than just his skill of sketching a tree. Bart believes, has always believed and likely will always believe in him, without a doubt, and this in itself is a gift, worth much more than anything money could ever get him.

He eventually settles on a smile. “Y-you w-want m-me t-to sh-show y-you h-how t-to sk-sketch?”

Max and Bart stay till the evening, and Barry enjoys their company and being able to spend some time teaching his grandson something, even if it is just some very basic things about sketching out a person.

When they finally are about to leave shortly after eight, Bart makes him promise that he would take them along the next time he goes to the art museum.

“Of c-course,” Barry agrees easily and welcomes Bart’s hug, feeling less nervous as he does so now than he did at noon despite Max still being around.

“This was way better than the stupid Christmas party with Wally,” Bart mutters against his shoulder, which gets an exasperated sigh from Max who lets it slip, though.

“I l-love y-you,” Barry tells Bart quietly, nearly just a whisper as he is still not that comfortable around the other man. “Th-thank y-you f-for…” He swallows, unable to find the words to express the gratitude he feels for just having the boy in his life, for him believing in him despite everything. “Th-thank y-you.”

“I love you too,” Bart assures him and the arms around Barry firm their grip for a moment, nearly painfully so, but he doesn’t protest.

When they pull apart, Barry brushes over the boy’s head and gives him an encouraging smile. “J-just t-try t-to b-be a l-little m-more p-patient w-with W-Wally. H-he w-will event-tually r-realize wh-wh-what a g-great k-kid y-you are, h-he’s j-just h-hurting t-too m-much r-right n-now.” He hopes so at least, for both Bart’s and Wally’s sake, as he doesn’t doubt that they would benefit greatly from having each other in their life.
It is clear that Bart doesn’t believe that that could ever happen, but he doesn’t protest and just nods with slightly pinched lips.

Barry and Max shake hands, and the older man tells him again that he can call him anytime should he need his help or even just someone to talk to.

“You’ve my number,” Max reminds him. He gave it to Barry sometime over the last couple of hours, asking for his in return and learning that way that the cell phone had still been pretty much untouched over the last week. It caused Barry to feel bad and ungrateful for that clearly expensive gift, but, unlike his own mind, Max didn’t point that out or make him feel guilty in any other way.

“Don’t worry about bothering me,” Max goes on, meeting his eyes firmly. “And that also goes for Jay and Joan.”

This change in the two speedsters’ demeanor towards him still is something Barry is uncertain how to feel about, but he agrees anyway with a slightly doubtful smile. It is something he doesn’t have to worry about right now, anyway.

When Barry is alone again in his apartment, he realizes how exhausted the day actually left him feeling. Contrary to usual, it is a good kind of exhaustion, though, and he decides to go to bed soon afterwards.

Barry dreams of running again this night, for the first time in years.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the lunch with Bart. I noticed that some of you started to miss him, which is awesome because I love writing him, and I think our junior speedster does deserve all the love he can get.

To be honest, I’m not entirely satisfied with how the chapter turned out, it just felt a bit clunky while I wrote it. I usually have a certain flow to my writing, but here it was a little off. Still, after snipping and chipping away on it, I hope it turned out alright for you!

The next couple chapter are ones I’m really look forward to post, simply due to how satisfied I’m with the way the turned out, and I hope they won’t disappoint you either. Something big(ger) is about to happen.

Next chapter will have the Rogues back, and we may see the very classy establishment from our dear friend Charles the barman again! ;3

I want to thank my dear readers who left me feedback once again, I’m always so excited when hear from you, and I love reading every single one of your comments. You make me smile even on days that may seem rather grey and glum otherwise. <3

I hope you all are safe and doing well, and I’ll be back with the next chapter on Sunday in two weeks!
Smiles Are Not Supposed to Last Forever Part I

Chapter Summary

Barry celebrates New Year with his friends at the Saloon.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my marvelous and very talented friend Quintessenzza!
<3

Congratulations to your exams going well, my dear! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Travelling through the mirror verse is something Barry likely will never completely get used to, not even after years of using it on a nearly daily basis. It generally causes his stomach to turn a little due to what a disorientating experience it is. Not so much because of the actual passage through that pocket dimension that seems to join any reflecting surface on earth together, though.

No, the actual problem is stepping in and out of it – especially the latter.

There is a noticeable difference between how things feel out in the real world and how they do inside the mirrorverse. It is hard to describe, and while it doesn’t seem like Sam takes any notice of it, Barry knows that the strangeness of that place is not lost on the other Rogues. Contrary to Barry, they don’t seem to have any real problems with handling it, other than an occasional light queasiness when they’re using it while being drunk.

At times it isn’t even so bad for Barry himself, and he is able to step out without much of a stagger, but then there are moments like now…

Mick, who already stands inside the dingy and rather crowded men’s restroom of the Saloon, grips Barry’s arms firmly and saves him from tumbling over the sink and landing face first on a dirty tiled floor.

“Careful,” Mick grunts and eyes him with a frown. “You don’t wanna end up with a broken nose, do ya?”

“S-sor-ry,” Barry mutters, shaking slightly, and is grateful when his friend lets go of him again.

“Everything okay?” Hartley asks as he pulls him lightly to the side so that he wouldn’t be in the way of the others who still have to exit the mirror.

“You look as pale as a ghost,” James agrees as he steps to Barry’s other side, effectively shielding him from the other men currently inside the restroom. He is sucking on a lollipop he brought along and studies him with a somewhat concerned expression. “A sick ghost at that.”
“I’m ok-ky,” Barry assures them and glances back towards where Mick and Marco are standing, wondering where Len vanished to as he got out first of them all.

Relief replaces his apprehension when he notices the other man just outside the entrance to the room, talking to a beefy black guy, whom Barry immediately recognizes as the owner of the bar, Charlie. It only takes him a second to pick up on how neither of them bears a particularly friendly expression, much to his concern.

It is as if Len felt his gaze then, as he glances back to him, and while his expression stays grim, Barry doesn’t miss the concern that flicker in his eyes.

Len turns back to the owner of the bar, saying something Barry isn’t able to make out but which causes Charlie to scowl down at Len with a withering glare. It is strong enough that Barry worries briefly a fight could break out between them, something that is probably not all that farfetched. To his surprise, the taller man settles on heaving a very exasperate looking sigh, and while he still seems pretty pissed, the intensity from before is gone.

After saying something else to Len that most likely is a warning for the man to keep his friends in check, Charlie turns around and makes his way back behind the bar counter. Barry doesn’t miss how the watching patrons quickly give the man space as he passes them, making it clear that nobody here would want to start trouble with the barman, even though the present clientele consists nearly entirely of criminals that don’t seem like they are easily intimidated.

It is a little curious, but Barry lets go of that observation and turns back to Len instead, who is already walking towards him.

“Is everything okay?” Len asks as he steps closer to him, and Barry shudders in response to the touch to his upper arm.

“Y-yes,” Barry murmurs and ducks his head, feeling his cheeks grow warm as the need to step closer to Len is suddenly ridiculously strong. He forces himself to stand still, though, and tries to ignore how overwhelming all the noise, the many people – men –, and the little space really are.

He suppresses another shudder and swallows before he shoots Len what he hopes is a at least somewhat reassuring look. “I’m ok-ky.”

Len furrows his brows and clearly doesn’t buy it. “You don’t have to be here,” he reminds Barry, and adds when he notices the hurt in his eyes. “We can leave.” He squeezes his arm lightly, comforting. “We could play some poker at your place, or you can tell me about the book you’re currently reading.” Len shrugs. “There’s other stuff we can do tonight other than spending the next hours getting drunk.”

“But where’s the fun in that?” Eddy’s booming voice cuts through the cacophony of noises around them, causing Barry to flinch and even Len to grow stiff for a second.

Barry turns to Eddy somewhat warily, still unsure what to think of his friend joining them here tonight. Eddy is someone who fits in very nicely with the Rogues, his temperament is similar enough that they get along just fine. In theory, at least, as Len and the others are still not really convinced that they can trust Eddy considering that they still remember how he helped them to resolve that situation with Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet. He came to the Rogues’ aid in the end, but him being a speedster and what he did to Blacksmith’s goon certainly doesn’t help Len and the others to trust him.

Not that Eddy seems to mind, seeing that he has made no real effort whatsoever to change their
picture of him so far, and even seems to enjoy the idea of making the infamous group of criminals feel uneasy.

Len shoots Eddy an icy look but otherwise ignores him and instead turns back to Barry. “We can leave,” he reminds him once more calmly and pulls his hand back. The sudden lack of the comforting touch nearly causes Barry to make a step closer to Len. No matter how silly it makes him look, right now it is the only thing that really can give him a sense of security in this crowded, still foreign, and very much intimidating place.

The more seconds tic by, the more alluring the idea of leaving is…

“N-no.” Barry shakes his head firmly and tries to muster up a smile. “I w-want t-to s-spend t-tonight w-with y-you g-guys.”

Len’s frown deepens, and once again it is obvious what he thinks of that.

“Is everything alright?” Lisa, who must have just entered the restroom via the mirror, joins them with Roscoe following close behind. Her eyes immediately are on Barry, studying him with a slightly concerned expression.

“Y-yes-” Barry starts but is cut off by Eddy, who pushes past Len rather brusquely and slings an arm around Barry’s shoulder, grinning. “Of course, pretty doll, everything’s peachy.” He then turns to Barry, grinning, and bops his forehead against his temple in a display of affection that certainly has to rub Len the wrong way and thus probably is intended to do just that. “And you stop being so damn tensed up all the time, Bar, if you don’t start to relax a little you’ll turn into a blank of wood.” He snickers, pulling back and winks at him. “And what fun would that be? I mean, have you ever heard of a blank of wood that got drunk?”

“I-I’m n-not g-getting d-drunk,” Barry mutters but knows that his protest is falling on deaf ears.

“Why haven’t anybody got us a table yet?” Sam asks as he hobbles up to them, still using the crutches to take some of the weight off his still not entirely healed legs. His appearance signalizes that everybody is now here, and as Barry looks briefly around, he spots Digger talking to Marco closer to the exit of the restroom.

When Sam notices Barry’s state, and how pale he likely looks, he huffs in annoyance and points out. “I’m not climbing into that shitty excuse of a mirror again anytime soon; my legs are already hurting like a bitch, and I’m not leaving before I’m too drunk to feel them anymore.”

“Oh, shut it,” Lisa tells him with a glare. “I can use that damn toy of yours as well if-”

“It’s no toy,” Sam interrupts her, irked. “And I told you, you’re not going to touch any of my babies again anytime soon. The only reason I allowed you to use them before was because I couldn’t fucking move.”

“Whatever,” Lisa waves him off and looks back to Barry. “I can get you two home if you wanna leave, so don’t worry about the crybaby back there.”

“Screw you too, missy!”

“N-no, I’m f-fine,” Barry repeats once more, and slowly starts to grow frustrated over how everybody here seems to expect him to be unable to handle it. They are concerned, he understands that, and he is grateful that they care and worry, but he is no invalid.

Len and the others seem to sense his change in mood as they don’t ask him again, even though most
of them are still palpably doubting that it is a good idea for him to join them again in the first place. It annoys Barry, seeing that he has already been here with them once prior, and he was able to handle it just fine back then.

Well, mostly…

Thinking back to how badly he took Izzy’s presence is still rather embarrassing, especially the part where he started to cry in public.

Uneasily, Barry glances around, noticing the other men that are also in here once more, most of whom throw the Rogues and him rather curious looks. He can’t help but wonder whether some of them had been present that night and seen him break down.

The thought is rather humiliating, causing his cheeks to grow hot, and he is glad when the others finally start moving so that he doesn’t have to stay in here any longer.

They get a table for themselves pretty much like last time, and Barry feels somewhat bad for the guys who get up to make space for them after Mick and Roscoe made it clear that it would be better for them to scram. It doesn’t help when he notices that some of these thugs throw rather nasty looks in their direction as they leave to search for a sitting accommodation elsewhere.

“Ignore them,” Hartley tells Barry unconcerned as he sits down next to him. “They won’t cause us any trouble.”

“Yeah,” Mick agrees easily, taking his seat opposite to Len who sits on Barry’s other side. “They wouldn’t dare mess with us.”

“Why’s that?” Eddy asks curiously as he pulls his bag of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket.

“They’re a bunch of nobodies,” Marco explains with a shrug. Eddy clearly finds that quite amusing as he huffs a laugh and glances to Barry. “You’re aware that your friends are bigheaded jackasses, right?” His grin is all teeth. “I like that.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?” Lisa snorts and turns to Barry. “You want me to get you a beer?”

Barry nods, and is glad when she asks Len next, which means that his friend would stay seated next to him.

As Lisa, Roscoe, Digger, and Mick leave to get the first rounds of beers, Hartley pulls out a deck of cards and starts to shuffle it for a game. Eddy, who lit up a cigarette, becomes quite excited when he notices that and shoots a hopeful look around. “We’re playing poker?”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees and nods to the pack of cigarettes that’s still resting on the table in front of Eddy. “You’ve one for me?”

“Sure.” Eddy hands him the pack, looking rather giddy all of a sudden. “What sums do you usually play for?”

“With Barry around?” Sam asks, an amused glint in his eyes. “Depends, but mostly between five to ten Cents.”

Eddy, who just pulled his wallet out, halts and keeps staring at the Rogues for a moment as if he wasn’t sure whether he heard him right. Then, he cocks his head and narrows his eyes. “You’re shittin’ me.”
“Nope.” Sam smirks, and takes a drag from the now lit cancer stick. “Cents it is.”

“The fuck?” Eddy glances over to Barry, frowning. “Why don’t you borrow money from your honey bun?” He nods to Len, either missing or ignoring the sudden mixture of embarrassment and rage that flares up in the other man’s eyes. “He has enough cash, tell him not to be such a stingy bastard!”

Barry flushes crimson and sinks a little lower in his chair. He ducks his head but still glares daggers at Eddy. “N-not s-so l-loud.”

“Uh…” Eddy looks between Len and him, and grimaces. “Sorry.” He then glances around and adds. “Don’t think anybody pays us any attention, though.”

“You’re here because of Barry,” Len tells the other man coldly, not appeased at all. “But if you insist on behaving like an idiot, you can piss off right away.”

A scowl settles over Eddy’s face, and seeing that he is never the one who refrains from an argument, Barry quickly interferes. “P-please, l-let’s n-not f-fight,” he asks his friend and also turns to Len with a pleading look. “W-we’re h-here t-to have a n-nice e-evening.”

Both men’s glares dim at that, and Len studies him once more, concerned, probably picking up on how tensed up he has grown again.

The idea of a scuffle between his friends never sits well with Barry, and them fighting among themselves here in the Saloon is even more worrisome to him. He already feels uneasy in such a crowded location, and the fact that its clientele mostly consists of lowlifes makes it only worse. Barry tries not to think about it, but he is certain that some of the former inmates of Iron Heights that spent their times during his own stay there have to frequent this place as well.

So far, Barry hasn’t spotted any familiar faces, but that can very well be the case because he tries not to look at anybody but his friends.

The possibility that someone of his former abusers could be here is sickening…

“Sure thing,” Eddy agrees, cutting short the uneasy silence that has settled over their table momentarily. “We want to have a fun evening.” He winks at Barry but his expression grows very much hostile for a second when his eyes move on to Len. Thankfully, he refrains from egging the Rogue on anymore, and instead turns his attention to the cards Hartley starts to deal out.

Lisa and the others return with their beers shortly afterwards, and they start their first round of poker. Eddy keeps grumbling about the ridiculously low wagers they are using, but goes along with them nonetheless.

The mood turns more relaxed as they play their first game, and Barry, much to everybody’s surprise – especially his own – actually wins it.

“The heck,” Mick says, huffing a chuckle as he passes his cards back to Hartley. “That’s the second time in two weeks? Do you think we’ve to worry that it’s a bad omen or something?”

“Nah,” Sam disagrees, smirking. “Everybody gets lucky once in a while.”

“Yeah, is about bloody time he started to get better at this,” Digger throws in, leaning back in his chair, shooting Barry an amused look. “It was like two years since you won a round before last Saturday, wasn’t it, mate?”

“It h-hadn’t b-been th-that l-long.” Barry frowns, somewhat embarrassed by the fact that Digger isn’t
“Yeah, we let him win on his last birthday!” James throws in happily but his grin dims a bit when he notices the annoyed looks he gets from the other Rogues in return.

“Shut it, idiota,” Marco grumbles, but Mick adds with a snort. “I’m surprised he was able to keep quiet about it for this long as it is.”

“Our dear Tricks is a lost case when it comes to keeping his mouth shut,” Sam agrees as he picks up his beer and takes a sip.

“I’m not!” James protests, upset. “I can keep a secret!”

“Like hell you can,” Mick objects as he studies the cards he got from Hartley. “You’re worse than a toddler when it comes to babbling out whatever crosses your mind.”

“I’m not!” James looks like he is about to grab his mug and fling it at the other man. Hartley, who sits next to him, grabs his lower arm and tries to calm him down again. “Ignore them, Tricks. I know you can keep a secret if you want to.”

“Yeah?” Digger leers, glancing between both of them. “Wonder what kind of secret that would be.”

“Keep your mouth shut, Digger,” Hartley replies unimpressed. “The room starts to get too warm from all the hot air that’s leaving it.”

“ Asking Digger to stay quiet is like asking for a lottery win,” Sam adds amused. “It’s something that’s just not meant to happen.”

Digger snorts. “You’re one to talk, wanker.”

Barry watches his friends bicker with a familiar fondness settling over him. He is a little surprised that they really seem to believe that he didn’t know that they let him win back then. It was kind of a giveaway how they insisted on playing for their usual wagers that one time while they usually are willing enough to change to Cents. They pretty much went out of their way to let him win seeing that he is well aware of how badly he is at keeping a poker face.

It didn’t sit too well with him at first, and he asked Len about it later that day, who pretty much told him to just take it as their birthday present.

Despite his qualms about being given nearly 200 dollars, Barry didn’t press it since he did and still does understand that his friends meant well. It was just their way of being supportive, even if Barry would have preferred it to be not such a big sum.

In all honesty, thinking back to that day, he is less bothered by their excessive gift and still mostly just surprised that Roscoe went along, seeing what kind of sour loser that man usually is.

Len wins the next game, and they change from cents to dollars when Barry decides to pass the next round, much to Eddy’s delight, who quickly gets up to get himself another beer so he can break his Benjamin into smaller bills.

“You want another one as well?” Len asks and nods to Barry’s empty mug as he gets up.

“Sure,” Barry agrees and watches how Len make his way over to the bar along with James and Mick, then.
“You’re having a good evening so far?” Lisa meets Barry’s gaze with a smile but there is still something thoughtful to how she studies him.

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees. “C-could d-do w-with a l-little l-less s-smoke in th-the air b-but oth-therw-wise it’s f-fine.”

“It’s your friend who keeps fogging up the air,” Sam points out just as he reaches for the pack of cigarettes James had left at his place. “Bad habit, really.”

Lisa snorts and rolls her eyes. “You know that you’re going to bitch all of tomorrow about how miserable you are doing if you don’t cut down on these, Sam.”

“Like hell,” Sam argues, lightening up his cigarette and taking a deep drag. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Pretty sure you’ll remember tomorrow when you’ll keep moaning about how you’re going to die till our ears start bleeding,” Mick throws in, a somewhat disgruntled look on his face.

“I’ve utterly no idea what you guys are babbling on about,” Sam says rather haughtily and turns to Barry. “Come to my defense, Allen. Tell these pansies that I can hold my liquor and nicotine better than them on any day.”

Barry aches an eyebrow at his friend in response. “S-sorry, b-but th-they h-have y-you th-there, S-Sam.”

Sam does complain a lot when he mixes up drinking with smoking more than one or two cigarettes, something he thankfully doesn’t do too often as the Rogues generally make do with alcohol. Len tends to smoke quite a bit when he is stressed out, much to Barry’s concern, but the rest of them not so much.

“Good friend you are,” Sam grouses and shoots him a fake glare. “Don’t know why we even keep you around.”

“Because we need someone else other than Hartley, James, and me to balance all the stupid,” Lisa reminds him amused.

“Who’s stupid?” Eddy asks as he and Len return to the table. “Scudder? Because I totally approve of that observation.”

“Screw you,” Sam returns amused, not ruffled by the other man’s words, and Barry is happy to notice how much more relaxed his friends are around Eddy now. It seems that sharing a couple beers and playing poker is really the best way to get the Rogues warm up to someone.

“Watch it, you leech,” Eddy says and nods to the cigarette in Sam’s hand. “You know, that costs you a beer.”

“In your dreams, speedy.” Sam snorts and leans back into his chair. “I’m being your chauffeur tonight, so I’ll take this as your kind of payment.”

“So you charge Barry as well?”

“Nah, but I like him.”

Eddy laughs outright and turns to Barry with a glint in his eyes, fake whispering to him across the table. “Hey, I think someone here has hots for you, make sure your worse half doesn’t notice it.”
“Eddy…” Barry sighs in a mixture of exasperation and annoyance since he doesn’t understand why his friend can’t just keep quiet about Len’s and his relationship in their current location. Not to mention that such implications don’t sit well with him, no matter that he knows that Eddy is just trying to be funny. He glances over to Len, noticing how his expression has darkened again, but relaxes a little when their eyes meet briefly. Thankfully, Len doesn’t seem as livid as Barry feared he would.

“You fit right in with how little tact you have, Edward,” Lisa remarks, smirking when Eddy actually makes a face at that name.

“Your name is Edward?” James asks as he takes his seat next to Hartley, eying Eddy quite gleefully. “That’s a stupid name.”

“You’re stupid,” Eddy returns with an amused huff and aches an eyebrow. “What the hell did you think does Eddy stand for?”

“Don’t know.” James shrugs and nods to Barry. “Thought it’s your real name, like Barry is Barry’s real one.”

This is clearly news to Eddy, as he turns to Barry, curiously. “Your full name is Barry? Really?”

Barry shifts uneasily, suddenly all too aware how everybody is looking at him, and can’t help but shrug nervously.

“’s that even a real name?” Mick wonders. “I mean, today you’ve names like Moses or Odysseus, but you were born in the seventies.”

“Well, Hartley was born not much later and look at his name,” Sam points out, earning a frown from the man in question.

“Don’t know what you mean,” Lisa interjects, narrowing her eyes. “Barry is a normal name, and Mick is hardly any better in that regard.”

Mick chuckles and lifts a hand in an appeasing manner. “Right, doll face, didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I initially thought that it’s short for something like Bartleby,” James remarks, causing Eddy to nearly choke on a gulp of beer as he guffaws, and he is not the only one who breaks out in laughter at that. Barry feels his face grow hot once more while an uneasy heaviness settles into the pit of his stomach.

“Shut up.” Sam makes a face, a grin still on his lips. “That’s a horrendous name, who would call their kid that? I mean that’s like literally putting a target on their back for later when they have to endure school.”

“Parents can be vindictive assholes. Something like that says a lot about them, like that they probably didn’t want their brats in the first place,” Marco agrees with a smirk as he puts the first wager down, but the amusement vanishes when his gaze falls upon Barry.

Barry lowers his eyes quickly, realizing that the hurt he is currently feeling is plain to see on his face. The others fall quiet as well, and he isn’t surprise that they’ve picked up on his reaction. He is really horrible when it comes to masking his emotions, after all, not only when it comes to poker.

He tries to ignore their looks and keeps his eyes fixed on his cards, his mouth pressed in a thin line.

The uneasy silence stays as they play the next couple of rounds, as nobody really knows what to say.
or really wants to touch upon the topic of Barry’s parents, as they all know that he was pretty much abandoned as a child.

Things relax somewhat when Digger accuses Sam of cheating again, and another spat breaks out between Barry’s friends that is more amusing than concerning to watch.

Like last time, Barry uses the chance to tag along when Hartley and Marco get up to use the restroom. Eddy joins them as well, and Barry doesn’t miss how he eyes some of the prostitutes at the bar that entered the Saloon about half an hours ago. He wonders whether his friend would go for one of them, especially with how hungry Eddy’s gaze suddenly seems.

The others wait for him again, and while Hartley and Marco do so outside the entrance, Eddy stays close to the sinks. Barry gives him a curious look after he exits the small stall and watches how his friend frowns unhappily.

“Sorry about the thing with your name,” Eddy apologizes as Barry steps up to wash his hands. “I didn’t think; I should have known that it’s because… you know.” He shrugs helplessly, and Barry shakes his head, smiling sadly but fondly. “It’s f-fine, I kn-know y-you and th-the others d-didn’t m-mean anyth-thing b-by it.”

Barry is aware that he is just too sensitive at times, especially considering who he chose to become friend with. Eddy and the Rogues aren’t exactly the most sensible kind of people to be around, except for Lisa and Hartley, and he should have grown accustomed to it by now.

The problem is, some things just don’t stop hurting, no matter how much time passes, and his parents…

He wishes he knew what happened to them, that he had at least names to the faint silhouette of their faces he still carries around with himself.

Why did they vanish? Did they want to get rid of him? Or was it an accident-

Barry shakes his head, pushing the questions away, unwilling to mull over them any longer. He made his peace with the fact that he has no parents, that he would never know whether they wanted to have him or not.

At least, he tries to.

Fact is, no matter how much he wants to know more about where he comes from, he won’t find any answers.

“Are you alright, Bear?” Eddy asks and still sounds concerned and somewhat guilty.

“Y-yeah,” Barry agrees and gives him a reassuring smile. “J-just getting a little tired.”

Eddy nods sagely and studies him with a look of fake pity. “People your age just can’t handle to stay up this late.”

“Y-you’re g-getting c-close t-to y-your f-forties as w-well,” Barry points out amused as they both make their way over to where Hartley and Marco are still waiting.

“Nah, like, I know from very reliable sources that I probably won’t have to worry about wrinkles anytime soon,” Eddy argues quite smugly, and Barry thinks that his friend is likely right, seeing that he is a speedster.
The words also cause him to recall Dr. Elias, but he quickly pushes the man out of his mind. The thought that Eddy is an acquaintance of the doctor and accepts his help still does worries him, but his friend’s trust in the doctor is strong. He defended Dr. Elias’ involvement with the Blue Velvet as an unfortunate mistake on the doctor’s part, and made a point by reminding him that it was Elias who let him know where Barry and the others were. Barry doesn’t want to start a fight over it; seeing that his friend is not entirely wrong, and even though he doesn’t trust that man, he does know that he pretty much owes his life to him.

Back at the table, Barry joins in for another game that drags on for quite a while, till it is just a little under two hours till midnight and the start of the New year. Barry sits the next game out, as he is feeling rather tipsy from his third beer and has started having trouble focusing. He makes do with watching the others and listening to them bicker and laugh while he sips on his beer. He doesn’t refuse when Eddy brings him back another one in between games, along with one of the prostitutes and two of her friends, who make themselves comfortable among them.

Barry quickly grows uneasy in their presence as he doesn’t miss the hostile glares they shoot him whenever he glances in their direction. They are likely friends with Izzy…

After the game ends, Len turns to Barry and asks whether he wants to join him as he is going to catch some fresh air outside.

“S-s-sure,” Barry agrees readily since the idea of getting out of that crowded place even just for a moment is more than welcome. He notices how heavy his tongue is starting to feel, and is somewhat annoyed by the fact that he really can’t hold his liquor at all.

Len helps him up, and Barry gives him a grateful smile.

The others go for another game, with Mick, Digger, and Eddy each having one of the prostitutes on their lap now, and while he knows it is not a good idea to let himself be intimidated by them, they are still another reason why Barry is glad to get away for a little while.

“Don’t forget that we’ve to toast soon,” Lisa reminds her brother with an amused and knowing glint in her eyes as she watches them that makes Barry fidget somewhat embarrassed.

“Let’s get another round before you start your next game,” the ginger woman on Digger’s lap says, and Barry doesn’t miss how she grinds down onto the other man, who grunt in response and looks more than pleased.

“Yeah, it’s getting pretty dry here,” the blonde woman with a pixie cut agrees. She gets up from her spot on Mick’s lap and smirks down at him when he doesn’t let go of her ass. “I’m thirsty, big guy.” She leans down to him, and whispers something in his ears. Then, she bites his earlobe cheekily, causing him to dig his fingers in her buttocks and huff an amused laugh. Mick’s pupils are blown, and it is obvious that he already decided to be that woman’s john for tonight.

Barry nearly wants to point out that they should slow down a little, as this is the second time that these women got them to refill in under an hour, and while he is certain that they do so to get the guys smashed enough that they would end up in bed with them tonight and his friends know so, he has noticed how they don’t seem able to stomach the alcohol as well tonight as they usually do.

He stays quiet, though, and instead follows Len through the mass of visitors, that seem to have nearly doubled since they arrived earlier, so much so, that many are just standing around with their drink in their hands, chatting.

The air outside is bitingly cold and clear, a welcome change to the stagnant air inside. Len holds the
door open for him as he steps outside, and Barry shoots him a grateful look as walking alone seems like a challenge right now.

Then, the oxygen hits him, and if Len hadn’t grabbed him quickly, Barry would have landed on the ground with how everything starts to spin for a couple of moments.

There are other people around, not many due to the cold weather, but Barry can hear them snort in amusement over his clumsiness, and he utters an apology to Len, who doesn’t reply but instead steers him away from the entrance.

“You feeling okay?” Len asks him as they make their way slowly to where Barry still remembers lies the back alley of the bar.

Barry hums in agreement. He leans heavily against Len, still in a good mood despite how difficult it is for him to walk on his own right now.

It is nice, he thinks, having Len this close. His gaze wanders to the hand of his arm that is slung around his friend’s shoulders, and he studies the ring that is glinting in the light of the street lantern they pass. He has been wearing it whenever he was alone or over at the hideout, and he didn’t miss how pleased Len seemed with its presence.

A giddy feeling settles over him at that thought, and he wishes he could get his friend a present that is just as nice.

“Th-th-thank y-you…” Barry murmurs when Len helps him to sit down on one of the bottle crates that are scattered around the dingy back alley. He reaches for one of Len’s hands when he pulls back, and smiles up at him. “I-I’m g-g-glad I h-have y-y-you, L-Len-ny.”

Amused fondness glints in the other man’s eyes, and he crouches down in front of him, so that he is looking a little up as their eyes meet. “So am I.” His thumb starts to caress the back of Barry’s hand that is holding his, and he lets his other hand rest on Barry’s upper thigh, causing him to shudder lightly.

They watch each other quietly in the dim light, and Barry feels how the adoration he feels for Len only grows more intense.

“I-I’m…” Barry’s tongue feels heavy, making him even more clumsier than usual when it comes to speaking. He swallows and gives Len a shy and nervous look as he squeezes his hand. “I-I’m r-really g-grateful I c-can s-spend t-tonight w-with y-you.” He smiles and shows Len his free hand, the one with the ring he got from him. “Th-though I-I’ve g-got y-you alw-aways w-with m-me th-these d-days…” His smile grows when he hears the other man chuckles softly and, after he quickly looks to the entrance of the alley, Len grabs his hand and pulls it closer to press a kiss on its knuckles.

Barry hums pleased and bows down to press a rather clumsy kiss on Len’s forehead that somehow ends up on his nose. Len doesn’t seem to mind, though, since he is still watching him with the same unusually soft eyes that make him feel all warm inside.

“D-did I t-tell y-y-you h-how m-much I l-like th-that r-ring?” Barry asks, pressing his cheek against Len’s as he slings his arms around his back. He feels Len move his head, probably looking towards the direction of the street again to make sure that nobody is there, before he returns his embrace.

“Maybe once or twice,” Len replies, audibly bemused, and starts to rub his back.

“I r-really l-l-like i-it,” Barry reminds him just in case, letting himself melt into the other man who
feels warm and solid, just plain comforting. He pulls back a little and moves his head so that he can brush his lips against his cheek. “Th-thank y-you.”

It is a silly thing to wonder about, but Barry sometimes tries to imagine how their lives would have worked out if they had gotten to know each other earlier, prior to them becoming enemies. Barry knows that Len didn’t grow up too far from where he spent the last couple of years with his final host family, and even though he very much doubts that the other man would even had so much as looked at him back then, he still likes to pretend that things would have gone a lot nicer that way.

“Y-y-you m-make m-me h-happy,” Barry murmurs into Len’s shoulder, meaning every word of it, and he starts to feel drowsy, as he is wrapped in his coat and scarf which keep him warm despite the icy weather.

“So do you, Barry,” Len says and cups his head tenderly. “You can’t even understand what you—”

“Aww, that is adorable.” A voice that is utterly oozing with bite and mockery cuts through the cold air, and causes Barry to freeze partly due to surprise and partly because there is suddenly an odd feeling to the air surrounding them. Len quickly gets up and steps in front of him, fists clenched. While Barry can’t really make his face out, he knows that his friend is glowering threateningly at whoever disrupted them now.

He turns his attention to the source of-

His heart seems to stop for a second and his eyes grow wide as he sees the person, the stranger, who is wearing a green costume, and has the speed force flickering and cracking in faint bouts of lightning around him.

“My, my, my,” the speedster says, his grin all teeth. “Barry Allen and Leonard Snart, who the fuck would have thought.” His grin widens, and it takes Barry a moment to realize that Len has been reaching for his Cold Gun that no longer was attached to his belt to understand what the stranger finds so funny.

A chuckle he can’t describe as anything but menacing fills the dark back alley, and Barry feels dread settle in his guts when he lifts his gaze again and spots the gun in the speedster’s hand.

“You’re looking for something?” the masked stranger asks, gleefully.

Len steps further in front of Barry to shield him as good as possible from the man’s gaze. His voice is harsh when he speaks next. “You don’t want to mess with me, boy. If you try to attack us, you won’t live it down.”

“Big words for a guy without a weapon,” the speedster remarks amused, then he turns to Barry. “What do you say, Flash? Do I’ve to be worried about him?”

Barry grows utterly still in response, and the confusion nearly can keep up with the terror that is currently making it hard for him to breath.

Who is that man?! He’s another speedster, that is obvious, but Barry has no idea who the man behind that oddly modified Flash mask could be.

And how does he know him or his past as the Flash!? 

“Don’t look so horrified,” the speedster says but halts as if to consider something. Eventually, he grins nastily and shrugs. “Or you know what? I think I like that look on your face, Allen, it really suits you.”
Barry shivers, knowing all too well what the cruel expression means which he can make out in the man’s yellow shimmering eyes. He has been on the receiving end of such malice many times before, after all. He stumbles to his feet, since he feels even more vulnerable sitting down, and fights the urge to grab Len and…

There is nothing he could do, nowhere they could run, not with the back entrance of the bar being behind a chain link fence that goes up nearly eight feet, and the speedster standing between them and the exit of the back alley.

Not that running from a speedster is anything but an idiotic idea to begin with.

“How is he?” the stranger asks Barry, nodding towards Len. “Is he good in the shack? I heard that you’re going for cocks these days, Flash, after you were too much of a pussy yourself to even satisfy your own wife.” The man laughs at that, enjoying his own joke, and Barry nearly grows sick with fear as he hears that. He never told anybody about…

“And the infamous Captain Cold is probably well hung to give a little bitch like you what you need, isn’t he?” the speedster goes on cruelly, clearly enjoying how Barry flinches and grows even paler at those words.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Len throws in, and while Barry can’t see his face from his position, he still is able to make himself sound calm and in control. “You seem to be mistaking my friend for someone else which can happen.” He shrugs but his voice grows colder, more intimidating. “I’d advise you to piss off if you don’t wanna end as a corpse before the end of tonight.”

“Are you threatening me, Captain Cold?” the stranger asks and looks to the Cold gun still in his hand, eying it considerately, as if he was going through his options.

Barry’s heart jumps up his throat when the man points the gun straight at Len, then, not that he didn’t already fear something like that could happen.

“N-no!” Barry pushes past Len, who curses angrily, and grabs him to stop him. “Don’t be an idiot!”

“D-don’t h-hurt h-him, p-p-please,” Barry stammers, still having difficulties to talk with how damn heavy his tongue feels. The powers of a speedster can do a lot of harm if they aren’t careful, something Barry learned early on, and the notion that there could be a speedster out there that is actually intending to hurt others is outright terrifying.

“Isn’t that drolly?” the man smirks, gaze cruel but clearly pleased. “The great Barry Allen begs me not to hurt a dangerous criminal because he loves the taste of his Cock.” He chuckles and slowly lowers the gun. “Really, you should be ashamed of yourself, Flash. I mean, weren’t you a hero yourself once? Didn’t you fight to get guys like our Captain here back to prison where they belong?” The nasty glint returns to his eyes as he proceeds. “Or did the guards really fuck any decency out of you?”

A shudder runs through Barry, and a soft whimper passes his lips, but he is unable to formulate any other reply.

How does he know that?

Who is he?

Len pushes him behind him again, and this time Barry doesn’t fight it.
He feels sick…

“This is not worth the trouble you’ll face in case something happens to us,” Len tells the stranger calmly.

“You mean your friends are going to hunt me down?” the speedster asks unimpressed. “Well, I doubt they’re going to be much of an aid to you for the next couple of hours.”

Barry frowns in alarm hearing this, and he hopes that none of the others have gotten hurt by this guy.

“If you hurt them—” Len’s snarl is cut off by a cry of pain when the beam of cold engulfed his right lower arm for a moment. He makes a staggering step back against Barry, who quickly grabs him and helps him onto his knees as he holds his now frozen arm against his chest.

“Your threats are getting tedious,” the man remarks in a bored tone but meets Barry’s terrified look with another smile. “Don’t look like that, I could have aimed at his dick instead, which was rather considerate of me if you think about it.”

Barry can’t speak, his voice is gone. He wasn’t even able to cry out when Len got hurt, and he doubts that calling for help would do them any good anyway. He can feel Len shake under his touch, no doubt due to the pain and the shock his body is going through, and he wishes he could do something for him.

“Well, Flash,” the stranger finally says, “It was fun, but I think we’ve wasted enough time. I’m actually supposed to get you somewhere.”

With that, the man lifts the gun and points it again straight at Len’s head.

Barry wants to scream at that maniac to stop, he wants to push Len out of harm’s way, but he knows that a speedster would never miss—

Someone crashes into the stranger, and Barry’s scared and still inebriated brain needs a moment to understand where the person came from.

He watches with wide eyes as Eddy, who just phased through the wall next to them, wrestles with the speedster, and briefly he allows himself to hope.

Till, Eddy lands hard on his back, and Barry is suddenly grabbed by his throat.

Then everything goes black.

Chapter End Notes

So… to be honest, I kind of expect stones being flung my way for how this chapter ended.

A lot of you commented on how glad you are that things seem to finally get better for Barry, and I worry a little how you’ll take what is going to happen over the next four chapters.

Things are going to get dark, the repercussions of what is going to happen will last for a while, but this is only a part of Barry’s journey that still lays ahead of him, and I don’t
want it to appear like it will always be like that, that for every good thing that is
happening to him, something bad will follow close behind, because that is not the case.
We are just not entirely out of the shadows yet, but we are on the way there.

This story is just so long and complex, I’ve been working on it for years now, which
allows me to really explore its world and the idea I have in mind, and due to that there
are still some ups and downs ahead of us as we accompany Barry, with some downs
being steeper than others, especially in this first part of Singularity.

I do intend for Barry’s life to improve, for him to be able to be happy again and to get
justice for what happened to him. I want him to eventually get to a place where he is
really at peace with himself and the world around him and just plain happy to be alive,
despite what was done to him in the past.

Anyway, this is something I wanted to touch upon, just so you know that you can put
the stones away again. :)

That aside, I really like how this chapter turned out, the Rogues, Barry and Len, their
trip to the Saloon, and Eddy joining and interacting with them – it was just so much fun
to work on. The whole little storyline ahead of us is one I feel very confident about
regarding how I’ve written it, so I’m really looking forward to sharing it with you, even
though it will be a heavy bite to swallow. I will make sure to put warnings in the
beginning of the chapters, so you don’t get any bad surprise heading in blind.

I don’t know why or what that says about me, but I feel the most confident when
writing dark, depressing stuff… I probably should not try to look into that too much. xD

Once again, to all of my amazing readers who left me feedback on the last chapter (or in
general), thank you, it is always just great seeing that you are interested in this story, and
I love reading your opinions or takes on what is going on. Getting your messages just
make me happy. :)

Next chapter we will start with the descent by meeting a past acquaintance again, and
we will learn a little more about this mysterious new speedster who seems to be quite a
dickish fellow. :)

See you in two weeks! <3
Barry wakes up when someone slaps his cheek, hard.

His mind feels foggy, unwilling to clear up and leave the safety of unconsciousness, but then another slap follows, more forceful than the last one, and the sharp, burning pain that spreads over the right side of Barry’s face is too potent to be ignored.

He makes a small noise that is something between a whimper and a groan as he tries to move but immediately freezes when a sharp pain digs its claws into him in response.

Everything hurts, absolutely everything, but the worst is his head that throbs like it is about to split open-

Barry whimpers as a horrified shiver runs through him when he notices that he is bound, unable to move at all.

There are voices, someone is talking, and his scared, disorientated mind tries to make out where it is coming from, whom it belongs to, and what is said.

It is cold, he realizes, and as if on a cue, he starts to tremble.

He has no idea where he is, or how he got here.

The last thing he can remember is… his friends, Len, the Salloon…

Len!

Barry forces himself to lift his head, causing a sharp, biting pain to flash from his scull down his back, intense enough that his eyes tear up. It makes focusing even more difficult, but he is able to make out the shape of someone in front of him. Someone who is much too close for his comfort, and he tries to move back, but is reminded once again that he can’t.

As his thoughts are slowly starting to make more sense, he realizes that he must be bound to a chair,
tightly enough that he has next to no mobility.

Someone grabs his hair, violently enough that his scalp screams in pain, extracting a whimper from him, which earns him a chuckle. Another slap follows, causing the already hurting side of his face to explode in agony once more.

They are talking to him again, Barry is certain of it, but he still can’t make anything out. It is as if his ears were stuffed full of cotton.

He starts to feel sick…

This doesn’t seem to go past the person who has still a painfully tight grip on his hair either, as his head is suddenly free to move again just in time as his stomach starts to force its content out of him.

The acid taste of vomit fills his mouth as he retches; it burns at the back of his throat, and despite how miserable and confused he feels, he is still deeply grateful that he didn’t eat much for dinner due to how nervous he was prior to the trip to the Saloon.

Even so, it takes a while till the sickness retreats, leaving him shaking and crying, with his shirt and part of his pants being soaked in his own vomit that quickly cools in the cold temperatures of wherever he is.

A shiver runs through his body, his breath heavy, and he knows that he is close to a panic attack, has been skidding along the abyss of one since he woke up.

Barry feels utterly miserable, but his last ordeal has also made him feel more awake, and while he has his eyes still closed, he is pretty certain that he will be able to finally make out whoever is with him here.

Not that he doesn’t already have an inkling of who it is, considering that he finds himself in a very similar situation to the one about a year ago.

Barry shivers and swallows thickly, his throat hurting and the disgusting taste of sick still lingering in his mouth.

Someone touches his head again, making him flinch, which in turn forces a pained groan across his dry lips due to the pang that goes through his skull in response.

“There, there,” an all too familiar voice says and fills Barry with cold dread. “I’ve to apologize for my friend’s rather brutish behavior.” The hand starts to pat him lightly, nearly comfortingly, and he wishes he could just vanish, be anywhere but here…

“No need to be afraid, Barry,” Cameron goes on, shifting his touch slightly so that he is lightly caressing Barry’s cheek. “I’m not angry with you for how our last meeting ended, it clearly wasn’t your fault that Snart thought it was a good idea to mess with me.” The tips of his fingers trace Barry’s cheekbone tentatively. It is an incredibly intrusive touch, causing Barry to shiver, and the amusement is plain in the other man’s voice since he doesn’t miss his reaction. “You’re a clever man, Barry, so unlike these idiots you tend to surround yourself with. There’s no fake courage to you, you don’t hide your weaknesses, how fragile you really are, and I can appreciate that.”

Barry forces himself to keep still as Cameron cups the side of his face, partly because he is worried about infuriating the man, partly because his whole body feels like he was run over by a truck.

“I’m truly sorry that my acquaintance thought it necessary to attain you in such a crude and unnecessarily violent way.” It is strange, nearly scary, how calm and honest this maniac can sound,
and Barry can’t help but be even more unsettled by that, as it makes it difficult to gauge the man’s every reaction.

“But where are my manners?” Cameron asks, chuckling, and makes a step to the side to allow Barry to look past him. He does so unwillingly, his eyes drawn to the figure of the man who undoubtedly brought him here.

The speedster is meeting Barry’s eyes with a rather nastily amused expression, smirking.

“Ah, you see, this is a new friend I made, a rather special one,” Cameron goes on, inclining his head to the stranger. “And he was quite excited to finally meet you in person.” He turns back to Barry as he goes on, his eyes studying him curiously. “He told me that you’re actually quite an important someone where he comes from.” He huffs a laugh and shakes his head in bemused incredulity. “I don’t know which is harder to believe, someone insignificant like you actually holding any potential at all or the thought that parallel universes actually exist.”

Parallel Universes?

Barry frowns slightly, the expression enough to cause the pain to flare up in his head, and he turns his attention back to the costumed man.

What is he talking about?

“It is hard to believe when you really see him in front of you,” the stranger agrees with a grin that shows too many teeth to be non-threatening. “Though I never really paid too much heed to all the ridiculous fanfare that was made about him.”

Cameron glances over to the man, rising an eyebrow. “You know, Thaddeus, it does start to get annoying that you won’t tell me who exactly he is supposed to be.”

The stranger, Thaddeus, shrugs, hands on his hips, smirking down at Barry. “It doesn’t matter in your world. Here he’s nothing but a sad, little rape victim, unable to protect even just himself.” He chuckles when he watches Barry flinch at these words. “I wish the others could see you like this, Allen, a weak, broken shadow of the legacy you were meant to be.” He steps closer, bowing down so that his face is closer to Barry’s, making him tense up in response. “Such a disappointment… knowing about you would certainly knock my version of you off his high horse.”

Barry shivers, and despite the restrains or the pain moving causes him, he tries to lean back to get some additional distance between himself and this man.

He doesn’t understand one word of what these two are going on about, not really, at least. There is an inkling to what they could mean since Thaddeus obviously is a speedster, and Barry did wonder in the past what the limits of his former powers actually were. When he moved fast enough that he started to feel disconnected to the world around him, when something started to tug at him like he was guided somewhere.

What happens when one moves faster than light…

But they are talking about parallel universes, which is something entirely different than the idea of time travelling and even more farfetched.

Could this Thaddeus be from another universe? Another Earth?

The thought alone is bizarre, unsettling even, and then his mind catches up on what else this man said, and his cheeks grow hot in shame and dread by the mere notion that a version of himself could
see him like this. Someone, who is not an utter failure…

“Don’t look so worried.” Thaddeus laughs and straightens up again. “I’m not really here for you, Allen, I actually need something else.”

“You see,” Cameron joins in again. “The little issue I had with your friends about a year ago is still not resolved, and while I was preoccupied with other things in the meantime, I’m still very much inclined to get what is rightfully mine.” He moves closer again, and Barry nearly whimpers in fear and dread when he crouches down in front of him, putting a hand on each of his knees.

“Shhh, no need to be scared, Barry.” The criminal gives him a reassuring smile that looks just wrong on his face due to Barry knowing what kind of twisted person he really is. “I hope you’re no longer holding it against me that I shot you.” He starts to rub his thighs lightly, careful to not touch the area Barry threw up on. “I acted a little rash, I have to say, and I’m truly sorry for the trouble that I caused you. I don’t want you to consider me your enemy, because I’m really not. I’m just someone who needs your help to get back what your friends stole from me.”

Barry wonders, his mind still clouded with both fear and pain, what exactly the other man wants from him. Is he supposed to be a bargaining chip again? That clearly didn’t work out all too well last time around, but there is no other use he could be for Cameron, seeing that he has still no idea what data he is talking about or what any of this even is about.

“Snart will want you back,” Thaddeus remarks, meeting Barry’s eyes with an amused, nasty smirk when he looks back up at him. It seems he picked up on what was going through his head. “He will give us what we want.”

“He better,” Cameron agrees, squeezes Barry’s knees painfully for a moment, causing him to wince. “Or else we’ve to start sending him you piece by piece till he gets that I’ve had enough of his idiocy.”

The pleasant way with which he says this is unsettling and sickening at the same time, and Barry has no doubt about how serious this man is with this threat. He would likely start sending Len his detached fingers one by one to get his way like in a bad horror movie.

“Well,” Cameron exclaims brightly, slapping Barry’s knees hard enough to extract another pained grunt from him, and gets up. “I’ve business to tend to, and while it is a real treat to see you again, Barry, I do have things I need to take care of.” He straightens out the collar of his expensive looking suit jacket and turns to Thaddeus. “I need you to join me for a little visit to a friend of mine, if you don’t mind.”

Not waiting for the speedster to reply, which causes said man to frown in annoyance; Cameron turns back to the two thugs standing slightly behind on either side of Barry unbeknownst to him. “You take care of our guest, get him some new clothes, and something to drink to help him settle his stomach.” He glances down to Barry, giving him another smile that makes him uneasy. “And I mean it, when I say that he is our guest, so should I find out you as much as harm a hair on his head, I’ll add your skulls to my collection.” He looks back at his man. “Are we clear?”

The men agree without hesitation, and Barry isn’t surprised that both of them sound a little freaked out as well. People like Cameron are all show and no show at the same time, and it is out of question that he means each threat to be taken seriously.

While Cameron makes his way over to the entrance of the small, dingy room they are in, Thaddeus addresses Barry once more, a predatory glint in his eyes. “I’m looking forward to having a more in depht talk with you later on, Allen.”
Barry stays quiet, forcing himself to return the other man’s gaze despite how vulnerable and scared he really feels. The speedster snorts, clearly amused by this flicker of defiance, and turns around to follow Cameron who is waiting for him in what seems to be a hallway.

As soon as the two men are gone, Barry is cut loose from the chair, and while Cameron’s thugs clearly intend to heed their boss’ warning, they’re still rougher than necessary when they urge him to get on his feet and move.

His head and back flare up in pain when Barry is partly hauled, partly pushed out of the room, and the bright, cold light of the florescent lamps that fills the bare walled hallways he is lead to, forces him to shut his eyes as he is unable to stand its brightness.

It doesn’t really matter that he can’t see where he is being dragged to, the throbbing in his head and the returning sickness would have made it impossible for him to keep track of where they are going anyway.

Their little trip seems to go on forever, they take one turn after another, making the area they are in appear a little like a maze to Barry, who is hardly able to stay on his own two feet. The air is cold, smelling stale and moist, and he thinks that they are likely in some basement of either an abandoned building complex or an abandoned factory.

When they eventually reach their destination, and he is shoved into another room and onto a chair, a grunt of relief passes his lips. He grabs the armrests of his current sitting accommodation with both hands, the room spinning around him despite his eyes still being squeezes shut.

The two criminals who are his temporary babysitters talk to each other, though Barry is unable to pick up what their conversation is about, not that it matters to him that much right now as he tries to keep his stomach from revolting again. Briefly, he thinks he hears another voice as well, a lighter one, but -

“Here,” One of the thugs says and pushes something against Barry’s chest which he takes hold of automatically. It is a bundle of rough fabric – clothes.

“Stay put, asshole,” The man goes on, the threat audible in his voice. “If you try something, I’m sure the boss won’t mind us breaking your nose.”

Barry whimpers, curling up on himself, around the clothes in his hands, and is incredibly grateful when the thug leaves him be without another word.

His body is hurting, all of him is hurting, and even if he actually could move enough to try and escape, he knows that it would be a reckless thing to do. He can’t even keep himself upright with how dizzy and sick he feels, and he senses the panic from before starting to return, trying to get a grasp of him, which he can’t let happen.

He needs to keep his mind clear, keep thinking straight, a panic attack, no matter how horrible his current situation is, would make things only worse.

There would be a way out of here, there has to be, and Len…

He will see Len again; he doesn’t allow himself to think otherwise.

Barry stays coiled up around himself, concentrating on nothing but his breath, shutting the world around himself out.

***
Barry groans softly, immediately picking up on the sharp aching in his back, neck, and head.

A shiver runs through his body, and he doesn’t dare to move right away, afraid to cause the pain to intensify.

The disorientation that accompanies his sluggish mind after waking lasts only a moment, then the events of the past few hours rush back to him, and he wishes he hasn’t woken up again at all.

Not that falling asleep in his current position was a brilliant idea, seeing that his limbs feel stiff and ache even without him trying to move them at all.

What a miserable night…

Barry swallows and makes a face as he can still make out the aftertaste of his own vomit. Otherwise, his mouth is dry like a desert, though, and he coughs slightly, reaching up to rub his temple lightly as he forces himself up back into a sitting position.

The expected pain rushes in with a vigor-

“You’re back among the living again?” A voice asks, and Barry freezes.

Slowly, reluctantly, he turns his head to face the other side of the table he just now notices he is sitting at. He hardly takes in the rather bare looking room they are keeping him in as his attention is on a person he hasn’t expected to meet here at all.

Izzy is sitting opposite to him; her face is pale and tired looking, and the dried streaks of smudged make-up on her cheeks show that Cameron probably didn’t find it in him to give a damn that she is pregnant.

The thought of the baby causes Barry to snap out of his surprise of meeting the woman here, and he asks without thinking. “A-are y-y-you alr-r-right?”

For a second, something flickers across Izzy’s eyes, too quickly for Barry to recognize the emotion, but whatever it was, it is quickly replaced by an all too familiar anger she directed at him every time they met in the past.

“Fuck you,” Izzy hisses lowly, the scorn causing her voice to deepen, and Barry briefly fears that she would get up and try to physically attack him. “You disgusting…” She grits her teeth hard enough that he can hear her molars grind against each other and balls her hands into fists.

A tense silence follows.

The air is cool, tasting stale and dusty, and Barry fights the urge to cough again as he watches Izzy glaring hatefully at him.

He doesn’t know what to do or say. He still feels pretty out of it and his body is screaming at him every time he as much as moves a muscle.

A part of him wants to offer Izzy comfort as it is obvious that there lies fear below all the anger and hate, but he doubts that she would appreciate any display of kindness that comes from him.

Another shiver runs through him, and he lowers his gaze to the dusty surface of the table.

It is then that Barry picks up on the fresh clothes he is still holding in his hands, and as if on a cue, he notices the faint sour smell of his own sick that has by now mostly dried on his pants and shirt.
The urge to change out of his sullied clothes is strong, and he would give anything for a shower…

Glancing up back at Izzy, his stomach sinks when he notices that she is still watching him, the fierceness from before mostly gone from her eyes by now. There is still anger, though, and a mean little glint that makes Barry quite uneasy.

“You look like a mess,” Izzy remarks, smiling. “More than usual, I mean.” She chuckles and leans back into her chair and crosses her arms under her bosom. Barry notices the bulge of her belly for the first time, then, and actually seeing it makes him feel like a bucket of cold water is emptied over him, causing him to get goosebumps all over. He quickly lowers his head, his fingers digging in the material of the grey, rough, but clean clothes.

“You aren’t shy, are you?” Izzy mocks. “There is no reason to be, I’ve seen girls naked before.”

Barry swallows and wonders tiredly whether asking her to stop would get him anywhere. The answer to it is obvious, though, and instead he starts to take the room around him in.

To his dismay, it is rather small, offering nothing but a dirty, dusty floor, cold walls the paint has started to chip off of, and the table they are sitting at.

The notion of taking off his clothes in front of Izzy, even if he would keep his underwear on, is more than unsettling. He doesn’t doubt that she would enjoy mocking him for how he looks, and while he has come to terms with the fact that he is anything but attractive, it is still different to be told so by someone else.

“Are you going to give me a show?” Izzy asks nastily as Barry gets up, turning away from her. “Don’t expect to get a ride from me in return, though, I’m lacking the right equipment.” She huffs a laugh, and Barry presses his lips into a thin line as he starts to unbutton his shirt.

The task is even more difficult than usual due to how cold and numb his fingers are, and how nervous he feels.

“It’s a pity we don’t have music,” Izzy goes on, amused. “I’d love for you to shake that scrawny little ass, maybe that way I will finally get what Len sees in such a skinny and ugly bitch like you.”

Barry shuts her out, shuts everything out, and concentrates instead on his breathing, the loud, quick throbbing of his pulse in his ears, as he slowly and carefully unbuttons his shirt, ignoring the pain in his fingers, or the pain in his back.

He is going to put dry clothes on that would hopefully help him to warm up. It is really cold here, he notices, and he has started to tremble enough that his teeth are chattering slightly.

Being forced to wear dirty clothing is something he hates, it reminds him of his childhood, of the Heights…

Barry takes the shirt off, and tries to quickly proceed to pull his undershirt over his head, which takes much longer than it should have due to how clumsy the motoric of his hands is right now and how difficult it is to lift his arms with how stiff his joints feel.

The long-sleeved shirt one of the thugs gave him is made of a thick, grey, and coarse material, not very comfortable, but Barry doesn’t mind. He is grateful as soon as his upper body is covered again, and swiftly proceeds to get rid of his pans after pushing his shoes off. He keeps his boxer shorts on, as there is no way in hell he would take them off outside the safety of his own four walls, but they aren’t as damp as his shirt has been anyway, and a feeling of immense relief settles over him the moment he put the fresh, somewhat too big pants on.
A shaky breath of relief passes his lips, and he sits back down again. His head is spinning slightly, but he hardly notices it as he leans forward to put his shoes back on and pick up the dirty clothes he dropped to the floor while changing.

Barry folds his pants slowly, concentrating on the movement he is more than used to, and tries not to worry about how he is still trembling as if he was standing naked in a snowstorm.

It is his nerves, he knows that, and he also knows that he needs to stay calm, that freaking out and breaking down can be very dangerous in this situation, no matter how horrible it appears to him right now.

After his pants are folded neatly, a task that took much longer than it had any right to due to his shaking hands, he does the same with his shirt and undershirt, and he is grateful for having something he can focus his mind on just now.

Noises come through the door, reaching him from the outside of the corridor, and he jumps in response.

“Just our guards,” Izzy says in bored tone, causing Barry to glance over to her. It is then that he realizes that she isn’t taunting him anymore, probably hasn’t for a while.

The way she meets his eyes is anything but welcoming, but to Barry’s surprise, the rage from earlier is no longer there, nor is the bitter scorn.

Not sure what to make of her sudden change in mood, he turns his gaze back to the table and instead listens to the men outside, who are still talking about something or another in heated but not angry voices.

Time passes, Barry isn’t sure how much, but his mind starts to drift off and go back to Len and the others.

He hopes they are alright…

Len was shot by his own gun when he tried to protect him.

Barry swallows, his throat closing up at the thought of his friend getting hurt because of him, because some crazy speedster is after him.

Thaddeus, Barry recalls the man’s name, and he can’t suppress a shiver as he thinks of him and how much he seems to know about his life.

Is that man really from an alternative reality? The idea is a little absurd, but at the same time, Barry can’t say without a doubt that it is nonsense. The speed force is a power he never completely understood, and theoretically, should someone be fast enough, they should be able to break the barrier of time, but travelling to other universes?

All of it reminded him of science fiction books he read as a kid, or the superhero comics Wally enjoyed when he was still young.

Could there be another Earth with different versions of them? With a different version of him?

Someone, who didn’t completely mess up his life?

*The great Barry Allen*…
Barry shivers and notices, as he starts to have trouble breathing, that he is hugging himself tightly again.

The mere idea of another him is unsettling, makes him feel uneasy, and he quickly pushes that thought away, instead forcing his mind back on the new speedster.

There was something incredibly off about being around that guy, and Barry couldn’t help but think that his costume, the green, somewhat modified version of the Flash outfit, is partly meant to be a mockery of the original one.

The red Flash suit is of a very simple design; he isn’t even sure where it came from, as it more or less just appeared when he used his powers to save a person for the first time. Barry had never been particularly fond of how tightly it fitted him, or how exposed that made him feel, but he recognized that there was something warm and welcoming to it and its color scheme. Bruce mentioned once that it was interesting how well he pulled off these aggressive colors, how they shouldn’t make him appear calming to people in need but they still did on him.

Thaddeus’ version, on the other hand, is anything but reassuring. The shades of green are darker, muted, and the yellow, bug-eyed googles he wears make him appear sinister, despite how silly they probably would look on anybody else.

This man is undoubtedly an evil version of the Flash, and the notion that a speedster like that can exist causes the same nagging worry from earlier to return.

Barry doesn’t know whether Wally, Jay, or Max ever encountered someone with a similar power set to theirs but who belonged on the other side of the law, but it is possible. Maybe they even knew this Thaddeus person, maybe he was one of their lesser-known enemies, maybe a crazy person who only fabricated these stories about their origins from another universe, who knew about him because of the other speedsters or some other less farfetched way.

In a way, this is preferable to the alternative, as he doesn’t even want to imagine what it could mean for them or any other Earth if there were villains with powers like that out there.

Feeling how his stomach starts to hurt over him worrying about Thaddeus and the possible repercussions his presence could mean for him or the Twins in general, Barry decides to try and steer his train of thoughts somewhere else.

Unfortunately for him, it isn’t all that difficult since, as soon as he lets go of the topic of the speedster and his questionable origins, he notices how full his bladder actually is.

He needs to use the bathroom.

… wonderful.

Frowning, Barry shifts and tries to find a position that would ease some of the pressure he feels.

He recalls that he drank quite a lot during their visit to the Saloon, feeling save enough with the others around that he allowed himself to do so, and while he threw part of it up again, there was clearly already enough in his system to make this situation even more taxing for him.

The sound of the door being opened pulls Barry’s attention away from his current predicament, and he turns back to it, his stomach already sinking.

Cameron enters, still looking pristine in his dark blue business suit, and, to Barry’s relief, Thaddeus isn’t accompanying him this time.
When the two thugs are about to follow their boss inside the room, Cameron lifts his hand, signaling them to stay where they are. “I’d like to have a small private chat with our guests, if you don’t mind, gentlemen,” he says and nods to the door. “Close it, and don’t bother me other than for an emergency.”

Both criminals nod, and the door is pulled shut, leaving Barry, Izzy, and Cameron alone in the small, cold room.

“Well,” Cameron starts, smiling. “I’m really sorry for letting you wait that long, Barry, I just had to make some arrangements with our dear Captain Cold about getting you back.”

Barry’s heart jumps in his throat, and he asks hopefully. “I-i-is L-L-Len alr-r-right?”

The other man studies him bemused, one eyebrow slightly arched, and shakes his head. “I don’t know whether anybody told you so before, but you two are like a picture book couple, all worried about the other, hardly showing any concern for your own safety.” He winks at Barry. “It will be interesting to see whether we can change that, won’t it?”

Goosebumps run down Barry’s body, and he feels his throat close up on him. Cameron didn’t really answer his question about Len’s state, but it seems that his friend is still alive, which takes some of the edge off the worry that has been eating away at him. Part of him feared what Thaddeus could have done to Len other than using his own gun on him.

“Don’t look so scared.” Cameron laughs, finding Barry’s reaction clearly amusing, and walks up closer to Barry. “I am just joking, I’m not going to torture you, Barry.” He says that with such a pleased expression, that Barry can’t help but shudder once more.

“You really are an anxious little fellow, aren’t you?” Cameron asks and crouches down next to Barry, his hands clasp between his knees. “I told you before, I’m sorry about hurting you back then. It was in the heat of the moment.” He frowns slightly. “My temper can get the better of me rather easily at times, unfortunately, and I know that this won’t mean much to you, but I did regret having shot you immediately after the confrontation was over.”

The way, the criminal studies him, makes Barry feel uneasy, and he shifts nervously in his seat but forces himself to return the look.

“There is something very alluring to you,” Cameron goes on, eyes holding Barry’s who forces himself to meet them in return. A long moment passes in silence between them, the tension tangible.

Then, the criminal smiles once more, nearly softly this time. “My grandfather was a doll-maker, you see, and he was amazing at it.”

Barry blinks, having expected about anything to come out the other man’s mouth but that. Cameron grins, not missing his confusion, but proceeds. “He started out back in Istanbul, before you could buy these cheap, mass-produced plastic things at every corner, and people loved them. They paid good money for them, and my grandfather’s business went very well for many years.” His expression turns a little sad at that, and Barry is surprised and not sure what to make of the honest emotion he can make out in it. “It broke his heart when he had to watch how his profession became redundant and unwanted in the end.” Cameron shakes his head slightly, as if to shake the memory of his gone family off, and chuckles once more. “He probably is haunting some Toys ‘R Us somewhere, he hated that big stores and what they’re standing for.”

When Cameron notices Barry’s still anxious and confused expression, he explains. “My grandfather
didn’t just like to make new dolls, his heart was really more in fixing old, broken ones that people brought to him.” Cameron lifts a hand and rests it on Barry’s thigh, the touch light but still threatening all the same. “You’re a broken doll too, Barry, one that was clearly smashed to a degree that others will think that you’re unfixable.” His hand starts to rub Barry’s thigh lightly, ignoring the way he tenses up in response. “I’ve collected dolls like you before, and not a single one didn’t turn out beautifully in the end.” Cameron’s eyes grow darker when lust creeps into them. “I love to play with them, treasure them, and I think you’d make a wonderful addition to my collection.”

The sheer horror Barry experiences at these words, at their implications, has to be visible on Barry’s face, as the lustful glint leaves his eyes and is instead replaced by a frown.

“I’m not going to force you to become one of mine,” Cameron clarifies, sounding nearly insulted. “You can’t fix someone who doesn’t want to be fixed.” His hand stills as he studies Barry. “You’ve been through a lot, clearly, the scars are all over you, not only in the physical way, but in how you shrink away from any physical touch, in how terrified you look at the sheer implication of someone touching you in an intimate way, of touching you at all.” He lowers his eyes and lets them wander over Barry’s body slowly, approvingly. “I knew that there was something special about you the moment I laid my eyes on you the first time, and if Zoom can be trusted, there is much more to you than anybody would think.”

*Zoom?* Barry’s mind, that is reeling from what is currently going on, needs a moment to realize that Cameron must be talking about Thaddeus.

Zoom… well, it fits.

Barry jumps and his attention is immediately back on the man still crouching next to him as he starts to move his hand again, upwards.

“I’d take good care of you,” Cameron goes on, and his fingers stop close enough to his crotch, that Barry thinks he can feel the warmth they are radiating off.

It is a terrifying sensation.

“Better than Cold ever could,” Cameron assures him and his voice is hardly more than a murmur by now. “Someone like you deserves to be looked after.” His eyes have darkened again as he meets Barry’s gaze firmly. “You’d wish for nothing; I’d get you anything you want.”

“N-n-no…” Barry utters, his throat tight enough that he can hardly get the word out, and he is well aware of how scared and pleading he sounds, but he doesn’t care. He knows that he could never stand up to a man like Cameron by force, he can’t hold himself against anybody, these days, and the notion that he could be-

“Hey.” Cameron’s voice gets a soothing quality, comforting as he goes on. “No need to cry, my little doll, I won’t hurt you.” He pulls his hand back and, to Barry’s relief, gets back up.

“At least for now,” Cameron adds as he leans against the table, his eyes still on Barry. “If you agree to become one of my dolls, I won’t hurt you ever again, at all, I can promise you that, but if you deny my offer, I will most likely be forced to cause you more pain as you won’t be much more than a bargaining chip for me.”

Not waiting for Barry to replay, he glances over to the other side of the table, and it is then that Barry remembers Izzy being also here.

“How are we doing today, my little harlot?” Cameron asks pleasantly and grins when Izzy’s only
response is a reproachful glare. He turns back to Barry and says, “Did our little resident whore tell you that she is the reason you’re here?”

Barry feels both surprised and not about that piece of information, and when he turns to Izzy, he kind of expected the cold, unremorseful look he gets in return.

“You see, she’s been the favorite whore for one of my top guys for about a year now, and she asked him to introduce herself to me, because she had an offer.” His eyes are glinting in the dim light, and there is something nasty to how he keeps smiling as he proceeds. “Let me tell you, she really doesn’t like you, though I think you are already aware of that, and while I usually couldn’t be bothered to give a fuck about such a woman’s love life problems, my interest got piqued when she mentioned that she would be willing to offer me a way to get to you, and thus to Len. In return, I should make sure that you are no longer a thorn in her side, so that Cold and she can become a happy little family with the mailman’s child in her belly.”

The implications of Cameron’s words are more than obvious, and Barry looks back to Izzy, who suddenly looks much paler than before, paler and close to tears.

Cameron seems to guess what is going through his head, as he goes on to explain in a light tone. “She wanted to get her Lenny back, and I made sure that this would work out for both of our sakes. You know our dear, honorable Captain Cold, and you know that he thinks that she’s a bun in the oven by him, he will keep her around for good, and he will do a lot to make sure that his unborn child stays save.”

A horrible sense of dread overcomes Barry, and he wants to ask what that man means he made sure that this would work out.

… and didn’t Izzy say she hadn’t been sleeping with other guys aside from Len before getting pregnant?

Barry glances over to Izzy, meeting her cold, hard eyes once again, and this time he doesn’t miss the desperation and fear that lie beneath those.

Izzy was willing to make a deal with the devil, and she got way more than she bargained for…

“Enough of that, though,” Cameron interrupts his thoughts, and Barry shivers when he notices that he has the man’s complete attention again. “She’s of no importance anymore, I have you, and while it was our dear little Teddy’s idea to get you involved in the first place, since he was able to take care of the speedster friend of yours, I know that I’ve someone Len will likely be even more hellbent on getting back at any costs.” He smiles. “The man has it bad for you, you should have seen him threatening me in case I’m going to lay my hand on you. His still half frozen arm didn’t keep him from making it more than clear that he meant every single word.”

Cameron snorts and shakes his head in bemusement. “That man can be so theatrical at times.” He moves and pushes himself onto the table to take a seat, then. “It really would have been so much easier if the stubborn bastard gave me the damn data last year. All of us could have left this mess far behind us by now if he wasn’t so intent to be such a damn pain in the ass all the damn time.”

Cameron pauses then and studies Barry for a second. “You’ve really no idea what data I’m talking about, do you?”

Shifting uneasily, his bladder by now feeling full and uncomfortably hard in his guts, Barry shakes his head wordlessly.

“That’s funny,” Cameron remarks, this time he doesn’t really seem amused as he watches him, but
instead thoughtful. “With what Zoom is going on about, I thought you had to know about it, but he too is a pain in the ass when it comes to sharing the history of where he is coming from, or what makes you so special.” The man shrugs. “Not that it really matters.”

It is a relief to know for sure that this man isn’t aware of what his powers were, or who he once was, as Barry fears that he would try to get information about the others from him. His former part in the Justice League was common knowledge, as was that he also tended to team up with people other than its members, and a person like Cameron certainly would find the information he could get from him in this regard useful, no matter how outdated it was.

“You know, Zoom is hellbent on getting his scrubby little fingers on you himself,” Cameron informs Barry. “Whoever you were or whoever his version of you is, he is clearly infatuated by you.” He lets his eyes slowly wander up and down Barry once more. “I told him that he could have you in return for helping me to finally get the damn data about VX-7 formula, but I can’t really find it in myself to keep that part of our deal.” His smile becomes all teeth, and there is a faint glint of something in his gaze that is honestly frightening. “I think he’s a little unhinged.”

Another shiver runs through Barry’s body, and he shifts uneasily again, his full bladder making this whole situation even more difficult to bear, especially with this dangerous man so close by.

“You need to take a piss?” Cameron asks, surprising Barry and causing an embarrassed flush to settle over his cheeks.

“Teddy picked you up in a bar,” Cameron remarks, bemused by his reaction. “It’s not hard to guess that all the beer eventually needs to leave your body.” He pushes himself off the table and signs Barry to follow him. “There’s a bathroom close-by.” He glances back over his shoulder at him as he makes his way to the door. “I’m sure I don’t need to worry about you trying anything stupid, do I? In case you hope to make contact with Scudder, I can assure you that you won’t find any mirrors there.”

Barry hasn’t really thought of trying to contact Sam, but the notion that Cameron is this prepared is disheartening nonetheless.

“You need a bathroom break as well, my little harlot?” Cameron asks Izzy, who gets up without a word and follows, her eyes still full with dull anger as Barry and she follow their kidnapper out of their little room into the just as dimly lit corridor.

Barry’s abdomen starts to hurt again, and he isn’t sure whether it is due to the increasing need to relieve himself or the situation itself, but he doubts that the pain would leave him anytime soon.

He listens to the slight echo of their steps and tries to think of nothing.

Chapter End Notes

And we found out who kidnapped Barry… or in this case, we can say who kidnapped him again, since Cameron did pull that stunt already once before. Seems that our poor Barry caught that maniac’s interest during their brief meeting a year ago, which probably isn’t going to bode well for anybody.

I was really looking forward to have Cameron return, he such a twisted human being, but he is also such fun to write – likely due to just that reason. And if anybody wonders,
yes, that man has a collection of ‘dolls’, which is quite an unsettling notion in itself, let’s hope Barry doesn’t end up meeting any of them. ;)

Anyway, we also learned more about what is going on with Izzy, and… oh boy, did that woman prove to have poor decision-making skills. It would really have been better for her to just stick to being nasty to Barry and try to scare him off that way.

I was really pleased that someone picked up on our new speedster addition being Inertia, I was wondering whether someone would remember that little turd. Also, Thaddeus villain name is Zoom here, he has been Inertia in the past, though. He simply grew out of that persona and decided to don a new mantle. He picked his Earth’s former Zoom’s one, and in case you wonder, it’s not the Hunter Zolomon Zoom we’ve already met once during Barry’s and James’ trip to the art gallery. This multiverse is big, and there are many speedsters out there, too many to count, and all of them are connected in a significant way. ;)

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter! It was fun to write, and I can’t wait to post the next one! This little arc will last till chapter 83 with 84 showing the immediate aftermath. I’m already excited to get there!

Once again, a heartfelt thank you to all of you who took the time to leave me feedback. It is always amazing to read your thoughts, and it is just so rewarding to know that you all care for this story and want to know where things are heading for our dear Barry. I love writing this story as it is, but you make it to an even better experience. <3

Next chapter will be up on Sunday in two weeks! Till then! :)
It is cold in the small room that is more or less Izzy’s and his cell, and Barry, who is generally prone to freezing easily due to his lack of muscles and body fat, has curled himself up into a tight ball on one of the two chairs that are the only seating options present other than for the floor.

It has been a couple hours since Cameron’s visit, enough so that Barry has started to grow drowsy again despite how unsettled their kidnapper’s little speech left him.

A doll…

Barry presses his lips together firmly, frowning down at the dirty ground in front of him, and tries not to think of the way the man looked at him as he said that.

Cameron is a psychopath, which isn’t exactly a new revelation to him, but it is still worrisome all the same, and for some reason the man seems to have gotten interested in him. The thought alone makes him shiver, and he pulls his knees closer, ignoring the pang it causes to flash through his hips.

It is likely that learning from Zoom that Barry was someone special once only intensified the man’s desire to add him to his collection of broken people, and Barry is aware that he can be grateful that this speedster didn’t tell the maniac any more about him or who he used to be.

The notion that someone with this knowledge, who clearly doesn’t stand on the right side of the law, is running around freely is scary, sickeningly so, and Barry wonders what else this man knows, not only about him but the others. If he knew about his past as the Flash, did he know about Wally as well? About Bart?

And why was he interested in him? He clearly said himself that Barry is a failure that doesn’t live up to the version of him that is from the Earth the speedster comes from.

The way Zoom looked at him had been different from Cameron’s but still similar. There has been desire, but likely not for the same thing…
Zoom clearly hated the Flash of his world, and Barry doesn’t doubt that he would love the opportunity to use him to get rid of his anger and frustration.

Barry swallows, his mouth dry, and he wishes not for the first time that they had something to drink.

His gaze wanders over to the other side of the table, where Izzy is currently sleeping with her head resting on her crossed arms on the table, and once again a mixture of anger and sympathy overcomes him.

Izzy clearly got in over her head, and while Barry is still taken aback by the fact that the woman would go so far as to ask a dangerous man like Cameron to get rid of him, he can’t actually say that he is really that shocked.

She loves Len, it has been obvious from the beginning, and before Barry turned up, she probably thought that things between them both could work out.

Barry studies her sleeping form, and wonders whether there could have been a way to prevent this from happening. He doesn’t like Izzy, she makes it hard to even be in the same room as her, but after having learned what was done to her, he feels sorrow for her and the miserable situation she is in.

He has no problem imagining that Cameron would use another human being in that way to get what he wants, and Izzy made it too easy for him, seeing that she was the one who went to him in the first place. Considering her profession, and how often she has to deal with dangerous people on a daily basis, he thought that she would be more careful and less likely than most to seek someone like Cameron out.

Then again, she clearly was desperate, and Barry isn’t sure what to think of the fact that he is partly responsible for another person feeling forced to go to such lengths.

What happened to her was her own fault, he reminds himself, but he does understand desperation and loneliness, and what it feels like when you realize that the person you love the most decides to move on with someone else while you are left behind.

He never meant to hurt Izzy, he never realized how badly his presence in Len’s life really hurt her.

She has to be in her fifth month by now, maybe sixth, which means that she got pregnant around June. Barry tries to think of something that happened back then that could have driven her to look for the crime boss’ help. Nothing really comes to his mind, and it is more likely that she just reached the point where she couldn’t take it anymore.

Barry is pretty certain that Len didn’t realize how much he really meant to Izzy, probably partly because he didn’t want to. Len clearly wanted Izzy to be someone he could have fun with, no strings attached, and it likely started out like this for both of them, but feelings can change, and Izzy obviously grew more attached to Len than either of them wanted.

An unwelcome image forces itself into Barry mind, of Iris and that man, her soft moans, how she cupped his neck in such a tentative way as he pushed rhythmically into her, unaware of the fact that Barry came back early from work that evening…

He squashes that memory forcefully, pushes it away, furious at himself and hurt.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Barry presses his forehead firmly on his knees and takes a slow, calming breath as he tries to ignore the burning pain in his chest.

He is not going to think about that. He has other things to worry about, and what happened,
happened. The past is gone, and he can’t change anything about it anymore, he can only move on and let bygone be bygone.

Did Izzy feel similar when she realized that Len feels for Barry what he never did for her?

Barry knows it is not the same, not by far, as Izzy and Len weren’t married, weren’t in any actual relationship, but even so he feels a nearly smothering guilt and sympathy for that woman, as he is just all too aware of how much it hurts to be replaced.

The possibility that neither of them would survive their stay here is high, but what if they are saved? What will happen to Izzy then? Her child is not Len’s, it is one of Cameron’s men, and it was forced upon her because that maniac wanted to have an additional bargaining chip when it came to Len, because he knew that Len would not let anything happen to Izzy or what he thinks is their child.

It is twisted and sick, and Barry isn’t sure what Len will do when he learns that Izzy went behind his back and betrayed him. Len can have a horrible temper, and he would likely not be able to forgive Izzy for what she did.

The most upsetting aspect of the whole situation is the child itself, none of it is its fault, it is just a victim of circumstances.

Barry exhales a shaky breath, memories of his own childhood flooding him, of what it was like to grow up among people who didn’t care about him, who saw him as a nuisance or at best as a way to get some additional money.

This is such a messed up situation-

“Your damn worrying could wake up the dead,” Izzy tells him, her voice low and slightly coarse, startling Barry out of his thoughts.

Her eyes look dull and tired when he turns to her, and she watches him grimly but with no anger.

“You should try and get some rest,” Izzy adds after the tense silence between them started to become too uncomfortable. “I think that crazy bastard is way more interested in you than me, and you’ll probably need it.”

Barry doesn’t know what to reply, surprised by that unexpectedly kind advice, and stays quiet.

Izzy, after studying him for another second, snorts and pushes herself back, so that she is resting against the back of her chair. One of her hands drops to her swollen abdomen and she starts to rub it slightly, absentmindedly, and Barry wonders whether the baby is the actual reason she is awake.

“I hate you,” Izzy says matter-of-factly, but the bite from earlier is gone, and she really just sounds drained.

Barry, again, stays silent.

“It’s always about you,” Izzy goes on, a humorless smile on her lips. “You’re one of the most messed up people I’ve ever met, and they still pick you.” She snorts derisively. “Len never looked at another guy twice before, other women, sure, but he never batted an eye at another man, and then someone as ugly as you comes by, and he suddenly is head over heels for you.” She grits her teeth and rubs her eyes. “You’re a fag, and not even a good looking one, and he picks you over me, even though we’ve been…” Pressing her lips into a thin line, she falls quiet for a moment, the hurt plain on her face.
“I’m no idiot,” Izzy proceeds finally, her voice thick with suppressed emotions. “I know that he doesn’t love me, and never will… and I was fine with that, because he didn’t love anybody else either. I thought he just isn’t the type to, I know many guys who just don’t want to settle, and Len has a lot of baggage he carries around with himself. It was okay, I could live with that…” She glares at Barry then, lividly. “Then you fucking asshole came around and had to mess everything up!”

Her fists slam onto the table, hard enough that Barry knows that it must hurt, and she hisses through gritted teeth. “You’d to ruin everything! Because you’re weak, because you are little bitch with a sob-story, and we both know what a sucker Len is for those, don’t we?!”

“I hate you,” Izzy goes on, her eyes squeezed shot and her face red with anger. “I hate you, looking at you makes me sick! Why couldn’t you stay in that dingy little hole you crawled out from?! You fucked everything up because you’re a weak, abused little pussy who needs someone to take care of you!”

Barry returns her glare unflinchingly, and while he knows that she is upset, it still doesn’t make her words any less hurtful or cruel.

“I hate you…” She repeats, more quiet this time, and looks away.

Nobody says anything for a long time afterwards, and Barry settles back with his forehead resting on his knees, trying to ignore Izzy’s presence. He is really starting to feel exhausted, and he is thirsty.

“Will you tell him?”

Surprised, Barry shifts his head so that he can glance over to Izzy who is staring at the table in front of her.

For a moment, he isn’t sure whether he has imagined her speaking, but then she lifts her gaze to meet his.

“Will you?” Izzy asks again, and Barry knows exactly what she is talking about.

“Y-you sh-sh-should b-be t-the o-one t-t-tel-ling h-h-him,” Barry points out quietly, his voice coarse and wary sounding.

Izzy’s eyebrows knit together and it is clear that she isn’t satisfied with his reply, but instead of lashing out at him again, she turns her attention back to the table. “He’ll leave me,” she points out and a pained smirk appears on her lips. “Not that he’s really been around for a while now.” Closing her eyes, she reaches up to rub her forehead. “I messed up.”

It is an unexpected thing for her to say, causing Barry to lift his head as he studies her in surprise, since this is the first time she didn’t try to paint him as the source of her problems.

“He’ll hate me… and I’ll be stuck with a brat I never wanted to begin with…” Tears start to slip through her closed eyelids and run down her pale cheeks. “I can’t do that on my own…” She chuckles miserably. “I can’t do that at all. I’m not the type of person to take care of brat… I hate kids.”

She’s too far along for having an abortion, and really the only other alternative would be giving the child up for adoption. Barry has a shaded view of kids growing up in foster families, but he knows that not all children have to have the same bad luck he or many of his foster siblings did.

“Th-th-ere’s th-the p-p-possib-bility o-of g-giving i-it u-up-” Barry starts pointing out, but is quickly cut off by her.
“You sound just as stupid and grating as ever, you know that?” Izzy sneers but the anger is only superficial and quickly drains as she proceeds. “And I know that adoption is one of my options, I’m not an idiot, but…” She breaks off and avoids his eyes in frustration.

“It is mine,” Izzy eventually explains somewhat reluctantly and shoots Barry a defiant look, as if to dare him to challenge her on that matter. He doesn’t.

Barry is not a woman, it is physically impossible for him to really understand what it is like to have a new life growing in him, but even so he doesn’t doubt that most going to be mothers will form a connection to their unborn children nobody but them can really fathom.

A part of him wants to point out that this is likely not the best for the child, that she shouldn’t only think of herself, but he knows that he really hasn’t any right to do so. He isn’t in her position, he isn’t pregnant, and while he had to deal with a lot in the past, he is truly grateful that he never had to worry about this kind of side effect that comes with sexual abuse.

“L-Len w-won’t j-just t-turn h-his b-b-back o-on y-you,” Barry points out, and while he tries to sound certain about it, he can’t really tell what Len would do in actuality after learning what a mess Izzy got herself and all of them into.

Izzy shoots him an incredulous look and scoffs. “You clearly don’t know Len half as much as you think if you really believe that. He won’t give a shit about me after he learns that the brat isn’t his and that I tried to get rid of you…” Something flickers across her face then, an emotion that is gone too quickly for Barry to recognize it, but when she lifts her gaze to meet his, there is the same dull exhaustion in them as before.

“I really don’t like you, I’m not kidding about that, but…” She hesitates, unsure how to go on but makes up her mind. “I shouldn’t have gone to Cameron, I…” She swallows and frowns unhappily. “I didn’t think it through, I don’t want you to get killed or… I didn’t know how messed up that guy is, I just wanted to get rid of you, for him to scare you off…”

This is probably the closest Izzy would get to apologizing to him about this whole mess, and Barry appreciates it, despite how little it is going to help with their current situation. He can’t say he expected her to feel remorseful at all about what she did, and it is somewhat reassuring to know that she didn’t intentionally get him into such danger.

“I-I n-never m-meant t-t-to g-get b-betw-ween L-Len a-and y-you,” Barry tells her, and it is the truth. He never intended for things between Len and him to grow in this direction, for them to develop feelings for each other that go far beyond platonic, nor did he ever mean to cause Izzy any kind of pain, no matter what a mean fellow she can be towards him.

Izzy watches him wordlessly, studying him with a thoughtful, slightly angry frown, but eventually snorts. “I hate people like you. You’re so fucking nice and decent all the time, it’s disgusting.” She huffs a laugh, and shakes her head, sounding bitter and defeated. “Would have never thought that Len of all people would fall for someone like you.”

Clearly worn out from their short but emotional conversation, Izzy rests her head on her arms again, apparently deciding to get some more rest if possible, and Barry doesn’t mind, seeing that he actually welcomes not having to talk to her anymore.

The room around them falls quiet again, and he too rests his forehead back on his knees, listening to the woman’s breathing that evens out and turns into a soft snore.

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“Relax,” Cameron tells Barry, his eyes not leaving him for a second as one of his men pushes Barry into the room the criminal is waiting for him in.

It is a much more spacious place, still rather bare, but clean, with a big desk and some cabinets that give it the feeling of an actual office.

The light is cold and bright, and while the temperatures are on a much more comfortable setting than down in the basement, Barry can’t keep from trembling as he is pulled to an abrupt stop just a couple of feet in front of the desk from behind which Cameron is watching him. The thug’s hand has a harsh grasp on his upper arm, enough so that it is going to leave a bruise, but right now, Barry is too scared to worry about something like that as he staring back at the other man, who seems like a cat that is about to sink its teeth into its prey.

“You look ready to snap,” Cameron proceeds, studying him with plain amusement. He gives the thug a slight nod that prompts the man to let go of Barry’s arm and retreat from the office without another word.

Barry shifts uneasily, his arms fidgeting indecisively for a second before he crosses them, and he doesn’t miss how the other man’s grin grows a littler wider at that.

“There is really no reason to be this nervous, Barry,” Cameron tells him and leans back into the rather expensive looking business chair. “I didn’t call you here to hurt you.” He steeples his fingers and smiles. “I was actually thinking we could have some fun, the both of us. To celebrate, so to say, as I talked to Cold, and he agreed to my terms and the little deal I offered him.”

Cameron looks very much pleased with himself, and this alone causes the uneasiness in Barry to grow even more intense. That man being in such a splendid mood can’t be good.

“You really mean a lot to him,” Cameron adds, meeting Barry’s wary expression with a bemused one. “He is putting on his show of being all cold and detached, but he really isn’t pulling it off too well this time around, and I’m not sure whether it is due to his injury or because of you.”

Barry swallows, his heart making a leap up his throat when he is reminded once again of how Len has been shot by Zoom.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure he will be as good as new in a couple of weeks,” Cameron waves his worry off easily. “He knows his own weapon, and I doubt he isn’t able to take care of the effects of getting shot by it just in case.” He sounds honest enough, and like he utterly doesn’t care. “Snart is a smart man, not as much as he likes to think, but smart nonetheless. You don’t need to worry about him.”

His gaze slowly starts to roam over Barry’s body, who grows even tenser in response and makes a small step back.

“I know there hasn’t exactly been much time, but have you been thinking about my offer?” Cameron asks and proceeds to explain when he notices Barry’s confusion. “About me helping you, taking care of you.”

The words have something undeniably intimidating to them despite the pleasant tone they are spoken with.

“I take this as a no?” Cameron inquires, amused, when Barry takes another small step back. He aches an eyebrow. “Though, is it a no to my offer, or a no to considering it just yet?” He doesn’t seem to expect Barry to reply, as he goes on straight away. “Well, you’ve still some time to think about it before we’re done here, and I can assure you, that while I may appear cruel to you for what
I’m going to do to you now; this is solely due to you still being nothing more than a bargaining chip for me, Barry. As soon as you agree to become mine, I will make sure that you’ve the most comfortable life imaginable, with anything you wish for.”

A shudder runs through Barry, accompanied by dread and panic. He doesn’t know what Cameron is talking about, but he has no doubt that he will learn so soon, and that it will be something nasty.

Cameron proceeds to study him quietly for a long minute, his gaze slowly and unabashedly going over every inch of Barry. There is a greed glowing behind those hazelnut colored eyes that make Barry feel like he is actually naked, despite the layers of clothing on his skin. It is an unbelievably disturbing sensation, so much so, that the urge to try and run nearly becomes unbearable to withstand, no matter that he knows of the thug likely waiting just outside the entrance.

“You were in Iron Heights for nearly eight years, weren’t you?” Cameron asks, his voice shattering the tense silence like it was thin glass, causing Barry to jump in response.

The right corner of the crime boss’ lips flickers up, but he seems to withstand the urge to smile. Instead, he gives Barry a surprisingly sympathetic look, and shakes his head. “I’ve heard what a horrid place it is supposed to be, horrible to spend your sentence in, especially with the guards the warden seems to keep around.” His eyes lock with Barry’s, a glimmer of something knowing in them. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Barry stays quiet. He couldn’t talk even if he wanted to or knew what to reply.

Cameron doesn’t seem bothered by it; instead he leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk, hands clasped. “I’m sure you do, considering how many stays you’d in the hospital ward during your time there. They undoubtedly pinned it on something like your bad immune system when asked.” He chuckles derisively. “Don’t know many who’ve ever developed a good immunity towards gang rapes, though, so maybe they’ve a point there.”

The air in the room suddenly seems much too thin to Barry, and he feels himself grow utterly rigid.

“They singled you out early on, didn’t they?” Cameron goes on, watching Barry attentively. “You were a perfect victim for them, a cop fallen from grace due to your disgusting urge to fuck little boys. Well, that and killing your own wife.” He chuckles. “But we both know that the latter one would hardly get anybody to bat an eye these days.”

Barry returns the criminals amused but curious look with wide, panicked eyes, feeling like a mouse trapped in a corner by a hungry feline.

“Not that I really think that you fucked your little dear nephew, Barry,” Cameron remarks after another brief silence. “I mean, people like you, good people, honest people, have been set up before, and nobody gives a fuck about it in the end. Isn’t that true?” He shakes his head in bemusement and gets up, causing Barry to let out a soft frightened whimper which in turn gives him a pause.

Cameron smiles, truly amused, as he meets Barry’s gaze. “I’m not going to manhandle you in such a way.” His light expression is replaced by a darker, somewhat disgusted one. “I’ve never found joy in forcing someone in having sex with me.” He shrugs and moves on to one of the cabinets behind his desk, opening it, and grabbing one of the handful expensive looking whisky bottles that are stashed in there. “I mean, I do appreciate it as a way to get things done, it is probably one of most successful ways to break another person’s willingness to defy me, but I never acquired a taste for it.” He returns to the desk with the alcohol and takes a seat again while reaching for the empty glass that is resting next to a stash of slim folders.
“So don’t worry,” Cameron assures him. “I’m not going to rape you, and I really have no reason to have you raped by my men either, seeing that this would hardly get my anywhere with Cold, now it would make my former offer really appealing to you, wouldn’t it now?”

Barry doesn’t reply, thought Cameron pauses this time to give him the opportunity to. This doesn’t seem to dissuade the man, as he proceeds with a smirk when he realizes that no answer is forthcoming. “No, it wouldn’t,” he answers his own question. “Though I’ve to be honest with you, Barry, I would love to see you come for me.”

Another soft, frightened whimper passes Barry’s lips, and this time the horror over what this statement insinuated causes him to stagger back another small step, the fear he experiences nearly smothering.

“No need to be afraid,” Cameron quickly adds, moving the glass in his hand, that is now holding about an inch of the amber liquid, in slow circles. “I won’t touch you, I told you so already, nor will my men.”

The words don’t do anything to ease the coil of fear in Barry’s guts, nor does the confusion that comes with them. He doesn’t understand what Cameron wants from him, his words are clearly contradicting-

“Take your clothes off,” Cameron tells him, the order cutting through his jumbled mind like a hot knife through frozen butter. He leans back into his chair, looking perfectly comfortable, and takes a sip of his whiskey. “I want you to start with your shirt for now.”

Barry doesn’t move, he can’t.

Flashes of memories assault him, of Michael, of others, of pain, humiliation, and utter, oppressive hopelessness whenever he realized that he could do nothing but follow their orders, could nothing but take what they dish out, and just like that, he is back in prison, back in his foster homes, and he feels thin and fragile again, like he is made of glass that is about to be shattered.

“No…” Barry thinks, panicked, I can’t, he’ll see my scars.

It is a silly thing to worry about under these circumstances, and it doesn’t matter as his body proceeds to betray him as it seems to work on its own terms when he pulls the rough material up over his head.

The air in the room that touches his now naked skin seems icy, and he shivers, whimpering softly in
a helpless display of distress as his fingers dig into the material of the shirt he is holding onto, and his
eyes flicker around with the throbbing of his pulse loud in his ears.

“You are really a scrawny fellow,” Cameron points out with a soft laugh. “Are you eating anything
but a slice of bread a day?” When Barry fails to answer, he simply says. “Turn around once, slowly,
I wanna get a better look at you.”

The idea to show him his back causes something in him to baulk, enough so that he hesitates for a
second. The fear wins out eventually, though, and he does as he is told.

“The idea to show him his back causes something in him to baulk, enough so that he hesitates for a
second. The fear wins out eventually, though, and he does as he is told.

“Stop.” Cameron’s order gets him to halt again just as his back is turned to the man, and Barry’s
stomach sinks, his trembling gets worse, and he grits his teeth to keep them from chattering as he
hears the other man get up.

He listens as Cameron makes his way around the desk towards him, and he can taste the bile at the
back of his throat, his fists clenched painfully.

Cameron stops closely behind him, enough so that he thinks he can feel him, and it is just utterly
disturbing. He flinches when there is a slight touch of fingertips on his shoulder-

“Hold still,” Cameron tells him, not harshly so, but Barry nonetheless freezes.

The scares on his back are pronounced enough that one could also feel them through a layer of
fabric, Barry knows that, which is one of the reasons why he doesn’t like Len or anybody else
touching him there. They are his personal, disgusting memorial left behind by his abusers, something
that makes it impossible for him to ever forget them as he carries their marks around with him
everywhere, no matter where he goes.

Not that their physical presence really matters. The scars from his youth vanished with him becoming
the Flash, and even to this day they are still just as real to him as the ones he can feel right now, with
every move, the tightness that comes with badly healed skin and that is omnipresent to him.

He hated getting naked around Iris for this reason, that’s why he preferred to keep his undershirt on
whenever they got intimate, and even though she didn’t know of them, he still was convinced that
she would be able to see them somehow, realize what happened to him, how tainted he really is…

Cameron hums behind him softly, and Barry squeezes his eyes shut, forcefully keeping the distressed
sob locked behind his lips as he feels the man trace the badly healed skin slowly, attentively.

His stomach rolls as the man slowly works his way from his lower back upwards, following the
long, tick lines that intercross and stop at random to the one scar that is the most horrid one of all, the
one that makes it nearly impossible for Barry to look at himself in the mirror even today.

“What an ugly word,” Cameron murmurs, and Barry shivers violently when he feels his fingertips
move above the tick scar tissue. “They really hated you, didn’t they?”

Barry bites his lower lip hard, nearly enough so that he breaks the thin skin there, and he whimpers
helplessly, hopelessly, as the criminal goes on tracing the word that was carved into him again and
again.

“I wonder why,” Cameron says quietly and presses his warm, rough palm against the spot, causing
Barry to utter a small, pained cry. “You make no sense to me, Barry. At all. Why would anybody put
so much effort into making your life miserable?” The palm slowly moves down, over the rest of his
back, following his spine, and it is as if it leaves a trace of blazing fire. “Zoom clearly thinks that you
were meant to be someone great, and I believe him, but I don’t get why someone would mess with
your life this much without wanting to reap what they sowed.”

Cameron steps back, and Barry exhales a shaky breath he hasn’t even been aware of holding.

“Come, turn back to me, we don’t have all the time in the world,” Cameron tells him, moving away from him again, and adds. “Not tonight at least.”

Barry swallows around the painful lump in his throat, blinking rapidly as he opens his eyes once more, though he can’t prevent the tears from falling, and does as he is told.

It is a small relief when he sees that Cameron went back to the desk, not behind it, but is now leaning against it, his hands resting on its edge next to his hips, out of his immediate reach.

“Take your shoes and socks off, and your pants. I want you naked.”

Barry doesn’t move.

He is going to be sick…

“I told you,” Cameron repeats his words from earlier, and again something threatening, sinister flickers across his eyes as he does so. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Barry can’t move, he can’t-

“Barry.” His name, the way it is said holds so many unspoken promises of horror, that a panicked sob is wrenched from Barry’s lips, and he utters a wordless protest, but even so his hands start to move, his body betrays him once again.

No…

Don’t, please…

He starts to feel lightheaded, oddly out of himself, and there is a painful familiarity to it, to the sense of no longer being really one with himself.

“You’re a good little boy,” Jacob tells him, brushing Barry lovingly over his head. “My good little boy.” He smiles, and Barry’s heart flutters with hope and need, because he wants his foster father to love him. He wants to stay and not be put back into the orphanage again. “This is going to be our secret.”

“Good,” Cameron says approvingly, smiling, though Barry can hardly make him out through the tears. “Now stand up straight, let me see you.”

“I think he likes it,” Puckett says, amused. There is a mean gleeful glint in the man’s eyes as he watches how one of the guards forces their stiff cock down Barry’s throat, ignoring his distressed noises, while another one is holding his hands behind his back in a painfully hard and secure grip.

“Of course he does,” Michael agrees, the smirk audible in his voice. “The cunt was born for this. Weren’t you, Allen? You little bitch need to feel a real man’s cock.”

Cameron hums appreciatively and says. “Take your cock in your hand. Just hold it for now.”

“Barry, it is okay,” Iris tells him, the concern clear as day in her voice, but Barry doesn’t miss the slight frustration that lies underneath it. “We can just cuddle, that’s fine. You know that you growing upset over this won’t help.”
Barry groans softly, as if in pain, and the feeling of his own limp penis in his hand fills him with nothing but shame and disgust.

“It has a nice size,” Cameron remarks amused. “You think you can show me how big it is when it’s standing at attention?”

Barry sobs, eyes squeezing shut, and utters a protest.

He doesn’t want to do this.

He wants to go home.

He wants to be in his bed, under his covers, far away from any of this.

“Move your hand, Barry,” Cameron orders him, voice still calm but no longer as pleasant. “Jerk yourself off for me.”

Barry whimpers, he feels like he is about to drown in the helplessness he experiences right, and starts to do as he is told, because he knows he has no choice, and he knows he is weak.

He hasn’t felt this revolting in a long time.

The flesh in his hand is alien, it is repulsive to the touch, and not for the first time in his life he wishes it wasn’t there, that nothing was there instead.

His penis doesn’t grow hard, it is difficult for it to grow erected under any situation, and while Michael had been able to get him there with a frightening success rate as the man may be a sadist but one who grew ridiculously quickly attuned with Barry’s body, Barry himself hardly ever was able to do so on his own, even when he was relaxed and willing to explore.

Not that that had been the case in a long, long time…

“I don’t know whether I’m supposed to be insulted,” Cameron remarks. “Do you find me that repulsive that you can’t even get hard for me?”

Another frightened sob passes Barry’s lips, afraid of what the man will do with him now that he is failing his task.

“Don’t stop.” Cameron suddenly hisses. “Did I tell you that you can stop?!”

Barry is startled by the unexpected change in his tone, and whimpers in distress. He tries to make himself smaller, pulling his shoulders together and lowering his head, while he goes on to try and get himself erected, even though he knows that it will not work.

He wants this to end so badly…

“You seem to have some severe erection problems,” Cameron notes and adds as if an afterthought. “Not that I’m surprised, considering what was done to you. It is a little disappointing, though.”

Barry whimpers and glances to the other man without lifting his head, his chin still resting on his collarbone, when he hears him move.

The coiled up ball of fear eases a little as he watches the criminal retake his seat behind the desk.

“I feel sorry for your wife if that is what she had to deal with during your marriage,” Cameron remarks lightly, amused once more, and Barry flinches as the words are like a slap.
“I see,” Cameron says. “So you were a disappointment when it comes to satisfying your pretty woman.” He chuckles. “Well, she had to see something in you, you two stayed married long enough, after all. What do you think it was?”

Barry tenses up and automatically stills the movement of his hand.

“Stop one more time and I’m going to break your damn fingers again,” Cameron informs him, sounding only slightly annoyed, but Barry doesn’t doubt that he means it.

The stimulation of his penis start to become uncomfortable, especially as he is using his dry hand, but he gets back to it, knowing that the consequences of disobeying will not be worth it.

“So,” Cameron says after a minute. “What do you think? Why did your pretty lady stay at your side despite you being an utter failure in bed?”

Barry doesn’t want to think of Iris, he never really does, but certainly not now, not while he is forced to do this, not while he is naked in front of another man.

He wants to go home.

He wants to go home.

He wants to go home-

“Barry, stop bawling,” Cameron orders him, the displeasure from earlier has crept back into his voice. “You’re not a fucking toddler, and I’m not willing to listen to a grown man behave like one because he can’t keep it together when I want to have a conversation with him.”

A fist hits the surface of the desk, hard enough that it causes a loud bang to cut through the room, making Barry jump frightened in response.

“Move your fucking hand!” Cameron bellows. “If I’ve to tell you so one more time, I’ll rape you with this fucking whisky bottled here! Do you understand me!?”

Barry utters a weak, scared croak, his eyes wide in terror and his throat closed up enough that he can’t say anything even if he had the clarity of mind to do so.

“Are you trying to make me angry?!” Cameron jumps up from his seat, and moves around the desk quicker than Barry has thought is possible.

A harsh slap connects with Barry’s left cheek, with enough force that he stumbles to the side and loses his balance. He lands on the floor hard, making his hip and side explode in a burst of pain.

“Are you really too stupid you can’t do what you are told?!” Cameron screams at him, and Barry rolls himself into a tight ball, hands over his head, knees to his chest, his body knowing all too well how to react to this kind of threat.

It is hard to breath, his lungs won’t take in enough air, and he is crying so hard that it is impossible to try and get himself to take slow, deep breathes.

He just wants to go home.

He just wants Len…

Hands grab his hips harshly, and Barry is forcefully pushed into a kneeling position. Cameron is still speaking – screaming – at him, but Barry can’t hear him, there is sharp whistling sound in his ears,
drowning everything else out.

A fist slams into the back of his head, causing his forehead to collide painfully with the ground, but he hardly notices it, he starts to feel lightheaded, heavy, and… detached.

His right buttock is smacked, hard, then a second time.

Cameron is still screaming.

Barry squeezes his eyes shut when he feels that something is forcefully pushed in his ass, causing a nearly blinding pain to shoot up his spine and down his legs.

For a second he can’t breathe as the awful and all too familiar pain is nearly choking in its intensity. He is certain that it is the other man’s cock until he realizes that it isn’t big enough for it.

A finger…

Cameron hits his buttock again, angrily, and Barry realizes that the man has positioned himself behind him in such a way that Barry legs are forced on either side of his.

A hand grabs his limp penis and starts to work it with vigor, while the finger in Barry’s rectum seems to look around for something.

Barry knows what it is, and he expects the flash of arousal that courses through him when his prostate is finally found.

Cameron laughs, says something… Barry doesn’t listen.

Barry doesn’t feel.

His mind retreats, far, far back, to where it is quiet and dark, and safe.

Another slap to his buttock, then another one, and another, but he hardly notices it.

A low, unwanted groan is wrenched from his lips when Cameron’s fingers return to assaulting his asshole, this time finding his prostate in no time, while his other hand moves quickly, certain strokes over his slowly hardening cock.

Barry thinks of his latest sketch, the one he started just yesterday. It is a silly one, just a funny piece he made to get a chuckle out of Len later on.

It shows a Penguin wearing Len’s Captain Cold Parka and his shades…

It just kind of came to be when he doodled around, already nervous about his second trip to the Saloon.

Len likes his sketches; he always seems honestly impressed when Barry shows him one of them.

Barry moans, hardly realizing that the soft sound stems from his own throat, and starts to tremble when Cameron’s grip on his now erected cock starts to tighten a little, while the pressure against his prostate becomes more pronounced and even.

He wonders whether Len will like the sketch of the little penguin. He hopes so.

Barry closes his left hand, feeling the smooth band of gold and wood on his ring finger there, and thinks that a little bit of Len is with him just then.
Len isn’t going to leave him, he promised, and Barry believes him.

Len won’t leave him…

The climax hits Barry like a fist, and he gasps breathlessly as his erection start to shoot the first string of semen. He whimpers and shivers through the hot-cold waves of orgasm, but doesn’t really experience anything but detached repulsion.

Cameron is talking to him, slaps his buttock once more when he is certain the orgasm is over, and gets up again.

He tells Barry to put his clothes back on, looking pleased and smug while whipping off his hands with some wet tissues he has stashed in one of his desk drawers.

When Barry is done, he calls the thug from earlier and tells him to get Barry back to Izzy.

Barry follows wordlessly, exhausted and slightly nauseated.

Chapter End Notes

What do your write after such a chapter? I hope you enjoyed it? Well, I do, but I also know that it ended on a really depressing note, and what happened to Barry is just outright horrible, probably like a gut-punch to anybody with a lick of empathy.

Cameron is a very dangerous and unsteady person, and Barry had to experience firsthand because he caught the interest of him by accident. Writing the assault was easily enough but left me feeling rather awful for the rest of the day, and I hope I was able to convey the emotions of desperation and helplessness I was going for - Barry was once again pulled back under icy water, after he hardly broke the surface as it is, and it will take him a while to pick himself up again. As sad as it sounds, he is experienced when it comes to abuse, though, since bad luck really has been following him around like a second shadow from early on. Things don't look good for him right now in any case, though, at least Len and the other Rogues will return next chapter, and the whole affair with Cameron will come to a conclusion.

I would like to recommend a story to you, one that was just finished today, and is very dear to my heart. It's by LittleRed_92, called Winter on the Weekend, and such an amazing, heartbreaking read at times that I urge you to keep a stack of tissues close-by while reading it.

A huge thanks to all of you lovely readers who left me feedback, and know that it means a lot to me to have so many of you join me on this amazing journey that is writing Singularity! :)

Next update will be up in two weeks, and things may start to look a little up again!

Till then! <3
Barry’s left feeling hopeless and exhausted from his ordeal with Cameron. Help is closer than he thinks, though.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited by my amazingly talented beta Quintessenza, who once again did a great job and improved its quality noticeably! Thank you so much for finding the time to help me out with this, my dear! <3

Warning: Violence, Sexual Assault, Murder

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Barry doesn’t know what time it is, whether it is day or night, or how long he’s been here already, locked away in the small dingy room.

Cameron’s men brought them food once, and two bottles of water, but he touched neither. He did take the chance to use the restroom again when they offered, but only because he wanted to move around a little.

Izzy is sitting opposite to him again, he can feel her eyes on him, but he doesn’t bother to pay her any attention. He remembers that she tried to talk to him a couple of times, but he just couldn’t bring himself to listen or even to care.

He feels exhausted, there is a heaviness to his body that makes the slightest movement a task, and he really just wants to be left alone.

The temperatures in the room seem to have dropped some more over the last hours, causing his body to tremble constantly.

A part of him wonders whether that is solely due to the cold-

It doesn’t matter in the end.

He just has to wait some more before he gets out of here.

Len will come for him.

He knows so.

Len will come for him, and then Barry will take a shower, one that lasts for days…

He wants Len at his side so badly right now.
A harsh shiver runs through him, and Barry pulls his knees closer, burying his face deeper behind his knees, and concentrates of the pain in his hips and knees, and his lower back. This way, he is able to ignore the burning, pulsing sensation in his rectum, where Cameron…

Barry squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth.

As soon as this is over, he will take a shower that lasts a whole evening, doesn’t matter if the water turns icy, doesn’t matter whether his bill is rising ridiculously because of that, he will scrub himself clean of that awful touch.

He also won’t leave his home for the next few days till… till he feels a little more like himself again. He knows that he can’t hide forever after something like that happened to him, but he is going to need some time to regain his equilibrium, then he can go back to work and function like any other normal human being again.

This is something he had to live through so many times already, he knows what to expect but…

The burning of his eyes gets worse as does the aching sensation at the back of his throat.

Barry wishes Len was here. Not touching him, he can’t stand the thought of anybody touching him right now, but simply being here with him, because Len… Len…

Tears start to squeeze their way out of his closed eyes as Barry wonders how this would affect Len’s and his… relationship.

Will Len get angry at him if he doesn’t want to be touched for a while? Will he grow fed up with him and decide that he isn’t worth the wait till physical contact becomes even just feasible for him again?

_Things have just started to get better_, Barry thinks in helpless frustration.

He doesn’t want to be scared of Len, he doesn’t want to find his touch repulsive, but the mere notion of anybody laying a finger on him is utterly sickening to him right now.

Why does these kind of things have to happen to him again and again? Why can’t he just be allowed to move on?

Clenching his fists, Barry forces himself to focus on the pain this causes to flash through his joints there.

He can’t allow himself to feel self-pity, he can’t let himself go down this path, he has to move on, he has to look forward and-

“Allen.” Izzy’s voice cuts through the thick veil of tumbling thoughts in his head, startling Barry enough that he turns his attention to her, eyes wide and fearful.

Izzy meets them with a frown, looking both annoyed and concerned.

“You should drink something,” Izzy tells him and nods to the bottle of water he hasn’t touch yet. “We’ve probably already been here for a day, you can’t just shut down, idiot.”

Barry watches her owlishly, surprised about her display of worry for his health.

Then, he moves his gaze to the bottle in question that stands next to him on the table.

He isn’t thirsty.
In slow, mechanical movements, he reaches for it and pulls it towards himself.

The plastic feels cool in his hands despite how cold they are right now. He studies it absentmindedly and tries to assess whether he will throw up should he try to drink.

If they have been here for about a day, not drinking could be dangerous, though, and despite how little a part of him cares about it, another part wants to get out of here.

With aching fingers, he unscrews the top and, after hesitating another moment, takes a small sip.

The water is icy and tasteless.

It isn’t refreshing, and he doesn’t feel thirsty, but he still takes a couple more small sips before screwing it shut again and putting it aside.

Izzy’s eyes are still on him, studying him. He pulls his knees closer and rests his head back on-

The door is unlocked, causing Barry to freeze, and the breath to catch in his throat.

It is not Cameron who steps in, but this is hardly a relief when Barry’s gaze falls upon the speedster, Thaddeus.

Zoom.

The man is still wearing his green costume, his eyes still behind the bug-eyed, orange tinted goggles, and they immediately find Barry, focus on him just as a smirk settles over his lips.

“Aren’t you supposed to be with the boss and the others? He didn’t say anything about you-” One of the thugs who are currently standing guard in front of the door is shut off by Zoom making a short, impatient hand motion, and Barry doesn’t miss the fear flicker across the criminal’s face who doesn’t utter any more concerns but instead seems to decide that the best thing to do is to make himself scarce.

Thaddeus’ eyes doesn’t leave Barry’s for a second, and the smile that is plastered on his lips grows when he watches him shudder as he makes himself even smaller under his penetrating gaze.

“Barry Allen,” Thaddeus says, voice loud and clear, and full of amusement and glee. “I’ve to say, I really like the look you’ve going for yourself on this world.”

Barry stays silent and worriedly watches the unquestionably dangerous man as he moves closer to the table.

“Scrawny, pitiful, and scared,” Thaddeus proceeds. “It suits you so much better than the self-righteousness of your counterpart on my world…” He sneers. “Well, on really any other world.”

Again, Barry briefly wonders about that, about the possibility of other worlds like his out there, but he quickly pushes the thoughts away, not wanting to split his attention. The man before him is dangerous, and he would do good to focus on him, especially considering the way the speedster is watching him.

“You probably can’t imagine how hilarious it is that you of all people were put into prison,” Thaddeus tells him with a bemused little smirk. “I would have paid good money to see that, and what they did with you there afterwards.” His laughter is sharp and sinister, and Barry wishes the man would not have stopped so close to him because there is something undeniably threatening about him.
“A spouse murderer and a pedophile,” Thaddeus muses. “I wouldn’t have thought that you’d had it in you, Flash.”

Barry feels his stomach drop, and before he can catch himself, he glances over to Izzy who is returning his gaze with a confused and incredulous expression.

The speedster notices his look, of course, and follows it to the woman on the other side of the table.

“Oh, did I give your secret identity away by accident?” Thaddeus asks with a chuckle. “Not that it really is your secret identity anymore.” He turns back to Barry, eyes laughing with unabashed amusement. “You know, Flash, all of this is on you, every single thing that ever happened to you, all because you think you’re so much better than the rest of us.” He crouches down, so that he is looking slightly up at Barry who is still coiled up into a tight ball and hiding himself away behind his knees as good as he can.

“You look scared,” Thaddeus observes again, clearly enjoying this fact. “The look really suits you well.”

Barry wishes the man would back off, he is much too close, and he doesn’t doubt that the criminal is very aware of it, seeing that he seems to relish in his unease.

“The great Barry Allen,” Thaddeus says, the scorn oozing off his words. “The hero of hope who everybody adores…” His hand reaches up, touches Barry’s calf, and it is like Barry is electrified for a second, like a shock is running through him and causing his whole body to cramp up. “Reduced to nothing more but a common criminal, a shell of a man, who couldn’t even protect his own family. An utter failure.”

A bright, happy laugh slips past the speedster’s lips, and Barry feels both horrified and sickened by how utterly delighted he appears.

“What do you think the Justice League would say if they knew that you weren’t even able to keep yourself safe? That you were too weak to keep people from raping you?” Thaddeus’s smile grows, showing two rows of white teeth, making it look a little like a snarl. “I wish I had been around to see that, you being put in your place, Barry. Oh god, I would give my right arm to see how your self-righteousness is leaving you while some thug fucks you bloody!”

A soft, frightened whimper escapes Barry, and he starts to grow sick, his stomach revolting.

“I think I’ll get some of Cameron’s men and let them have a go with you,” Thaddeus muses. “I’ll record it, and, damn, I wonder what Wally would say, what Bart would say, to see you like that! Disgusting, weak, and utterly at my mercy!”

Barry’s breathing becomes uneven as he listens to these threats, as he can’t but think back to the times he was abused, to the pain and humiliation-

“You’re a masterpiece,” Thaddeus proceeds gleefully. “You’re exactly what you miserable fuck were always supposed to be!” A harsh, mean glint appears in his eyes as he keeps studying Barry. “Does Snart know about that? Because Snart is now your boyfriend, isn’t he? Does he know what a dirty little bitch he has at his hands? Does he know you were the Flash? Does he make you suffer for it? I would, hell, I’d make you wither in pain and wish you were never born!”

The speedster bares his teeth, his eyes flickering up in a bright, crimson red, and Barry cries out in pain as the man digs his fingers deep into his flesh, not enough to break skin, but enough for it to really hurt.
“I don’t think I’ll let Cameron have you. The arrogant idiot thinks he can order me around, but who cares? He can die in this little meeting of his, I’d have gotten rid of him myself soon enough anyway, I’d have broken his neck… no, I’d have ripped his intestines out of his gut and found out how far across the city they could be pulled before they snapped!”

Barry, through freshly flowing tears, watches the maniac in terror. This man is unhinged, possibly more so than Cameron, and the thought that he could want to get some ill placed retribution from him nearly causes him to throw up.

“I’ll make you live through horrors you can’t even imagine,” Thaddeus promises him. “You’ll yearn for your days in the Heights. I’ll pick you apart, bone for bone, and then I’ll show Bart what his famous grandfather is really made of.”

Bart, again…

It is as if someone adjusted his sight, then, as if somehow the other man’s face shifts, and suddenly Barry notices with growing horror and confusion that this stranger doesn’t look all that strange to him anymore, that there is something awfully familiar to his features even with the ugly mask on.

He looks like Bart, like someone Bart could become once he is an adult, and Barry’s frightened mind wonders whether this man is Bart’s brother, whether he is somehow related to them as well. The notion alone leaves his mind numb.

“You and your damn family,” Thaddeus proceeds. “You mean nothing, you all think you are the greatest, that you’re meant for bigger things, that you all are so much better than I am.”

Barry utters a pained cry when the speedster tightens his grip on his calve some more.

“I wish they could see you, that they could realize that you are nothing—” Barry is grasped by his throat, and then he is no longer sitting on the chair but with the back on the table, the impact harsh enough that it steals his breathe away for a moment.

“Cameron wants to use you for his stupid little plan, because Captain Cold apparently likes his fuck-toy, but I’m sure he can get him to play along another way too,” Thaddeus tells Barry, the hand on Barry’s throat keeping him in place, while the other one is going between his legs, cupping his loins through the pants he is having on. “You wanna show me what a wanton little whore you are, Flash?” The hand between Barry’s legs starts to vibrate, and the sensation it causes is nearly suffocating in its intensity.

It is not arousal, not really, and Barry tries to cry out in protest around the fingers digging into his throat that cause him to grow increasingly lightheaded.

“I don’t need Cameron, and he won’t get you as his toy,” Thaddeus states firmly. “I don’t need him, I don’t need the fucking data from Snart, I’ll just grab Elias and convince him to make the serum for me again.” He laughs sharply, his grin so wide that the skin of his lips is pulled taut. “I’ll keep you, Flash. He won’t like it, but I’m powerful, too, and you’re just too perfect to pass up on.”

Barry croaks wordlessly around the grip on his throat, horrified by the words despite how little sense his slowly suffocating brain can really make of them. He doesn’t need to understand the speedster word to get what he wants to do with him, what he has planned for him. It is more than obvious, that Thaddeus would go on where Michael stopped, would cause him a whole new dimension of suffering, and the fear this thought causes, coupled with the adrenalin that is currently coursing through his body, makes the intense stimulation between his legs more effective.
To Barry’s own horror and disgust, he feels thick, hot arousal flash through his body, and Thaddeus doesn’t miss it.

“You like that? You little whore enjoy it?” Thaddeus laughs and the vibrations become more intense, causing Barry to struggle against the grip fruitlessly once more, because he can’t let this happen again! He can’t let his own body betray him like this again, not so shortly after-

A half-full bottle of water hits the speedster, who has watched Barry with his uttermost attention, square across his face, and for second everything stops.

Thaddeus looks up, back to where Barry just now realizes Izzy still is. He tries to glance to her despite how the hand on his throat is still holding him in place with an iron grip, and he spots her a couple of feet away from the table, standing there with wide, horrified eyes, even though there is a familiar angry sneer on her face.

The grip around his throat is gone then, as is the man leaning over him, and Barry’s mind needs a second to catch up on what has happened, it is as if it can’t compute what is going on, why the speedster is suddenly in front of Izzy-

There is a sharp exhale, a sound that is more taken aback than pained, and Barry watches over Thaddeus shoulder how Izzy’s eyes grow unnaturally wide, an expression of utter confusion and disbelief flickers across them before they grow dull.

Lifeless…

Her body drops to the ground.

Barry can’t move, he can’t breathe, he can’t-

She is dead.

That man killed her… her and the unborn child.

He…

“Stupid cunt,” Thaddeus mutters in annoyance, though the sadistic amusement in his eyes returns quickly. “What a joke.”

Barry is trembling, he notices it when he picks up on the sound his chattering teeth are making, and he knows he has to do something, that he has to try and get away, but he can’t bring himself to move.

That man killed Izzy.

She is dead.

Because she put herself between Barry and that maniac. She tried to help Barry.

Now she is dead…

Why would she do that?

“Don’t look so horrified,” Thaddeus tells Barry when he notices his look. “Cameron told me that she was trying to get rid of you, so why give a fuck about what happens to her?” He barks a laugh and slowly makes his way back around the table, where Barry is still lying, paralyzed.
“You don’t seem to make the best choices when it comes to allies, do you?” Thaddeus asks, not breaking eye contact with Barry once. “The Rogues, prostitutes… seriously, you actually seem to try and give yourself a bad rep here. What do your little hero friends think of that? Or your former friends would probably be more like it. They turned their back on you, after all.”

The man retakes his former spot between Barry’s still open legs and smiles down at him. “Poor little Barry Allen, all alone in this big bad world.”

Barry watches the man, unable to make sense of what he is feeling right now. There are too many emotions, filling every cell of his body, and they are fighting for dominance, effectively making it impossible for him to really experience any of them.

A strange numbness overcomes him, and he doesn’t even flinch when the speedster puts his hand flat on Barry’s stomach.

“You are like a gem, hidden in this backwater universe, and I can’t believe that I possibly could have never found you.” The glee in his gleaming eyes burns itself into Barry’s. “We’ll have so much fun, Flash.”

Slowly, Thaddeus’ gaze lowers, runs over his body lazily, till it settles on his right shoulder. “Hmm, getting you off against your will would be satisfying,” he murmurs. “But I think I’ll prefer to hear you scream in agony.” His hand reaches for Barry’s shoulder, cupping it with his thumb lightly pressing against the actual joint. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

There is no time for Barry to prepare of what he immediately understands is going to happen. The pain slams into him, forces anything else out of his mind as it floods his whole conscious, and he is screaming, just as Thaddeus wants him to, desperately and in agony.

He hasn’t felt pain this bad in a long time, white and hot, as if a knife was pushed into shoulder and repeatedly twisted.

Barry is certain that he is going to pass out from it, that he can’t stand it any longer, but then something shifts, it is as if his body suddenly grows hot all over, as if his joints were heating up and he feels electricity dancing on his skin – no, just below it.

The world around him seems to slow down, the pulse in his ears growing louder, more pronounced and-

The man leaning over him is suddenly gone. Barry needs a second to notices so.

Confused, scared, and relieved, he rolls onto his side, the hand of his good arm lifted in an attempt to shield his shoulder, and focuses on his breathing. He needs to get some air into his lungs, to calm down, to keep himself from going into shock.

Where is Thaddeus?

Why did he let go of-

A loud crash cuts through his jumbled thoughts, the table he is on is pushed to the side, toppled over, and he falls to the cold ground with a grunt.

Another crash, the dull thud of a body hitting a wall, another crash, and it is then that Barry, who is coiled up on himself, trying to breathe through the pain of his hurt shoulder he landed on, noticed the other noise as well.
An all too familiar noise, the sound of energy crackling in the air, of bodies moving around at ridiculously high speed – the sound of speedsters.

Barry’s eyes go wide, and he pushes himself up, forces his good arm to bear his weight as he turns to look in the direction of the fight.

There are flashes of light, yellow and red, and he can make out the forms of two bodies going at each other, snapping in and out of existence from second to second.

His first thought is that it’s Wally, maybe Jay, but then Thaddeus smashes the other speedster up against a wall, his forearm squeezed tightly against his throat, immobilizing him momentarily.

It’s Eddy.

Eddy’s appearance is utterly unexpected, and while Barry is initially relieved to see his friend, the feeling quickly dissipates when he realizes that it is clearly not Eddy who has the upper hand in this fight.

Barry makes a soft, weak noise in protests.

“You think you can take me on?” Barry hears Thaddeus ask and doesn’t miss how the man is glowering at Eddy, who looks pretty out of it, like he is having a concussion.

“I’ve no idea who you fucking joke are,” Thaddeus proceeds, teeth bared. “And I don’t care.” He lifts his free hand and starts to vibrate it. “You interrupted my fun, though, and you’re going to make up for it.”

Eddy tries to speak but the forearm pressed against his throat prevents it, and Barry notices the fear that flickers up in his friend’s eyes, the knowledge of what is going to happen.

Eddy is going to die; this maniac is going to kill him!

The realization seems to grab Barry by his neck and push him under water because he can’t breathe, he can’t- he can’t-

_Eddy is going to die_, Barry thinks. The thought is chilling and painful, and it reaches down deep inside him, shakes something awake, a part of him he forgot about a long, long time ago.

Then, everything happens too quickly for Barry to even just understand what is going on.

A surge of energy, a flash of power course through his body, and he feels himself move and collides into Thaddeus’ side.

_Hard._

The man is pushed off Eddy, slammed into the other wall, alongside Barry whose body reacted purely on instinct.

His heart is drumming in his chest, the pulse loud in his ears, and for a second he feels… _alive._

Then, the sensation is gone, with it the energy that seemed to have consumed every single one of his cells, and Barry feels like a marionette whose strings have been cut. He slumps against the wall next to him, breath ragged and chest burning, and turns his head with a sinking feeling in his stomach when he picks up on the movement not too far away from him.

Thaddeus has the wind knocked out of him, but he is quickly regaining his wits again as he pushes
himself up, face scrunched up into a pained expression, probably because he was smashed headfirst into a thick underground wall.

The eyes behind the orange tinted bug-goggles seem confused, then they turn to Barry, and for the briefest moment, Barry thinks he can make out fear in them. The expression quickly vanishes, though, after the speedster has gotten a better look at him, and it is replaced by pure rage instead, causing his eyes to glow in a bright, crimson red.

“I’ll take your fucking arm for this,” Thaddeus spits at him, and Barry prepares himself for the impact, for the punch.

The pain…

It doesn’t come.

Instead a gush of wind fills the room, pushing Barry back as he watches with confusion how behind the evil speedster a portal opens up, bathing the whole room in bright light and forcing him to close his eyes.

“Let go of me!” Thaddeus’ scream causes Barry to peek at the source of the sudden tumult, and much to his utter astonishment, he spots Abra Kadabra in the now much fainter light of the portal, who has what looks like glowing chains firmly looped around the struggling speedster. “You fucking moron! Let me go! What are you doing!?”

Energy is rolling off the portal that appeared in the middle of the air, dropping down to the ground like thick syrup and skitter over the dirty surface before vanishing into thin air again.

Barry can feel it, the raw power, the magic, like he did when Zatanna casted one of her more elaborate spells, and like then, he is awed by the display of it.

“I’ll rip your face off, Abra, if you don’t l-” Thaddeus is cut off when his mouth is suddenly taped shut, causing him to grow even more furious, though all his struggling is getting him nowhere as he is pulled into the apparent split in reality.

Barry’s gaze moves from the speedster to the much more familiar face of one of his former Rogues. The man looks older, much older, and very worn out. He meets Barry’s eyes with a grim expression, and frowns.

“You owe me for this, Flash,” Abra calls to him in a grave voice, over the sizzling of the magical energy surrounding him. “Don’t forget today, you’re in my debt now!”

There is no time for Barry to utter a word as the portal starts to close, and the room around them is left in semi-darkness till his eyes can adjust to the sudden lack of light.

What has just happened?

Barry keeps staring at the spot where the magician from the future disappeared just a minute ago. The room around him is quiet, and the air is no longer static but cold again.

- You owe me for this, Flash -

A shudder runs through Barry as the urge to laugh starts to bubble up in his chest.

Abra Kadabra knows that he was the Flash too?
How many people, how many of his former enemies are aware of that?!

Thaddeus, *Zoom*, knows so too, but he’s from another universe. Does that mean that this Abra also came from another universe?

Why? What is-

A soft, pained groan snaps Barry out of his thoughts, and he quickly whirls his head around to look over to where Eddy is still a heap on the ground.

Eddy! Right, his friend-

Barry freezes, the breath caught in his throat, and slowly, reluctantly, he turns to where Izzy is.

Where Izzy is still laying, dropped like a puppet, eyes open and unseeing… dead.

Panic starts to rise in his chest, and he stumps down on it harshly, knowing that now isn’t the time to lose his head, not with Eddy being hurt, and them still someplace dangerous.

Barry needs to get them out of here.

He needs to move, find a way out for them.

Stumbling to his feet, Barry doesn’t immediately notice the change of the pain in his limbs and joints, it takes him a second, but when he does, he freezes.

It is gone.

Shivering, Barry glances down at his hands, and closes them.

No, not entirely gone, there is a very faint twinging sensation in his joints but nothing compared to the one before.

“Wh-what’s g-g-going o-on?” Barry whispers and doesn’t give himself any time to think about what he is going to do next. He moves his hand as quickly as he can and… nothing.

No blur, no connection to the speed force.

No nothing.

Unsure how to feel about that, he turns back to Eddy, forcing himself to ignore the area where Izzy’s corpse is resting on the cold ground. He makes his way over to his friend and is relieved to see that most of his injuries seem to have started to heal, though he is still unconscious.

“Ed-d-dy?” Barry touches the other man’s shoulder lightly, worried about getting attacked should his friend perceive him as a threat.

The man doesn’t move, and Barry starts to shake him very lightly, despite his worry about startling Eddy that way.

They have to get out of here, they are not out of danger yet, if one of Cameron’s men passes by while his friend is still unconscious, it will end badly for both of them.

A soft groan escapes Eddy once more, and Barry allows himself to relax a little as he watches him scrunches up his face in annoyance in response to his rest being disturbed.
“Ed-d-”

The sound of a door being opened somewhere outside the room, with enough force that it smashes against one of the concrete walls of the corridor, followed by footsteps and shouting from what are undoubtedly more of Cameron’s thugs, reaches Barry.

He freezes.

***

Len watches Cameron with pure, unadulterated hate while the man returns his gaze with an amused, satisfied little smile.

The air in the abandoned hall, where the other criminal told them to meet up with him, is icy, mostly due to the broken windows that allow the cold wind to enter with hardly any hindrance.

Len doesn’t notice, wouldn’t give a fuck even if he did.

Right now, he doesn’t really care about much, not the damn weather, not the nearly maddening pain in his right arm, nor the fact that they are outnumbered three to one, with most of his Rogues not doing much better than him.

Coming here like this, in their current stance, wasn’t the smartest idea, he knows that, the others know so too, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had to come.

Barry…

Len fights the urge to clench the hand of his good arm into a fist while no emotion is betraying his calm, blank face.

He doesn’t feel calm, not at all, but he is not going to give this fucker the satisfaction of getting any kind of reaction out of him.

Right now, they may be on Cameron’s turf and that bastard may have the upper hand, but Len has no intention of leaving it that way.

Their chances aren’t good, but what is new?

Cameron possibly knows about Eddy too, possibly expects the speedster to be here somewhere, but Len still counts him as their ace up their sleeve.

They don’t really need Eddy’s help here anyway, he is certainly good to have around as backup, but Len really counts on him to find Barry, seeing that the blonde has to be here somewhere or close-by.

At least, he hopes so.

Cameron is not going to exchange Barry for the data he wants, he is saying he will, of course, but it’s an empty promise. Len knows that Barry caught that man’s interest and with his reputation, it isn’t hard to guess that he doesn’t even consider keeping their deal. He may be inclined to give them Izzy, but not Barry, not after he seemed to have chosen the blonde for his collection.

Sick bastard.

They have no choice but to come here, either way, if they want to get Barry and Izzy back unharmed.
Or as unharmed as they can be after staying with that sick fuck for nearly two days.

A tremor runs through Len’s right arm, but he ignores it stubbornly, using the pain instead to help him focus.

Cameron may think that he already has them in his pocket, but Len trusts his Rogues and that they are just as pissed and fed up with this situation as he is.

Cameron could have gotten a fucking armada in here, and Len would still not have backed down. He has had enough of this twisted man who thinks that he can push them around and play his damn games with them.

Len is out for blood tonight, and he will get his fair share.

He will make sure of it.

“So,” Cameron starts, a pleasant smile on his lips. “I see you’re not really up for chitchat this time around.” He chuckles in bemusement and grins. “Not that you’ve ever been the chatty sort of guy, have you, Lenny?”

“Where are Izzy and Barry?” Len asks in return, the second time now, and his patience is running thin.

“I’m really glad you and your little band of misfits could make it here on such a short notice,” Cameron proceeds, clearly ignoring his question and needling for some reaction. “Especially considering in what a sorry state you and your merry men are in right now. I’m truly touched.”

The Rogues stay quiet.

Cameron’s smirk grows, and he reaches inside his coat pocket to pull out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. “I’m not really surprised, though,” he says as he fishes out one of the sticks and lights it up. He takes a drag, his eyes meeting Len’s, and exhales the smoke. “There’s something really special about our dear Mr. Allen, isn’t there?”

The unease that has been following Len around since this whole ordeal started spikes at these words. He doesn’t show any outward reaction but tries to understand what Cameron could mean by this.

Barry is special, but does that jackass really know how much so?

Whatever Cameron is talking about, the interest Len can see in his eyes make it clear that he can’t get Barry away from that twisted bastard soon enough.

“No?” Cameron arches his eyebrow in faked surprise. “You don’t agree?”

“Where are they?” Len asks once more, and he will freeze this dumb fuck’s face off should he not get the answer this time.

It seems, that Cameron can hear the unspoken threat and realizes how serious Len is about it, as he arches an eyebrow and chuckles in response while taking another drag of his cigarette.

“So hostile, my dear Lenny,” Cameron remarks, blowing the smoke out into the cold air, his eyes fixed on Len’s. “We haven’t seen each other in over a year, and you don’t even want to know how I’ve been.” He chuckles and shrugs. “Barry and your little whore are doing fine where they are, don’t worry about them.”
“Get them here,” Len tells him curtly. “We get both of them, you get the data, that’s the deal.”

“You really think you’re in the position to call the shots here, Lenny?” Cameron asks amused.

“Get them here, Cameron,” Len repeats coldly. “Or the deal is off.”

“And then what?” Cameron grins broadly, his eyes crinkling. “The infamous Rogues gonna teach me a lesson?” He takes another drag from his cigarette and squints at Len. “You know that you’re outnumbered, smart guy, don’t you? Do you really think you can tell me what to do?”

As if on a cue, the men around them take aim with their weapons, and Len feels the itch in his left hand fingers to reach for his Cold gun.

“You’re so arrogant,” Cameron points out, frowning slightly. “You think you deserve to get out of here alive after what you pulled last time? You think someone like you deservers Barry’s sweet little ass?”

The anger in Len’s guts rises at these words, and it must have shown because Cameron looks quite smugly in response.

“Mr. Allen is someone who has proven quite difficult to satisfy,” Cameron points out, tone light as if he was talking about the weather. “Not that it is such a surprise, seeing what happened to him in the past. Rape can really mess with a person’s sex drive.” He makes a sympathetic face, and Len starts to feel sick since he knows where this is going.

“Sexual abuse is such an ugly thing,” Cameron goes on. “It can really leave some horrifying damage, but with the right method you can coax an orgasm out of any person, no matter how unresponsive they seem at first. In Barry’s case, you’ve to put quite some effort into it, but the response you get from him is worth-”

The hissing of Len’s gun powering up fills the cold air, and Cameron stops when he suddenly finds himself at the end of it.

“You are dead,” Len tells him, and he feels calm, detached, the anger no longer tearing at him but now having become a part of him. The Rogues around him move too, prepare themselves for a confrontation they expected from the very second they got Cameron’s message.

Len will kill that motherfucker who kidnapped Izzy and Barry.

Who raped Barry.

Cameron was not going to live through tonight.

Cameron’s man shift, take aim, but pause, even though it is palpable that they are itching to shoot. They are nothing more than lapdogs, though, and without their boss’ command, they won’t act. Considering what kind of man they are working for, their obedience is understandable.

Not that it will make any difference one way or another.

“I beg to differ.” Cameron laughs, loudly and clearly, not looking in the least bit intimidated. “I’m not the one who is going to die here, Lenny. I will get my data and walk away from here alive and healthy, going straight back to your little boy-toy, and show him what it really means when someone is taking care of him.” His eyes grow dark with menace and lust. “I’ll show him what pleasure really means, and he will forget you in no time, Captain.”
Cameron lifts his hand in one swift motion and gives a sign, and Len watches with a deep satisfaction how a swish of wind seems to go past them, leaving behind a mixture of confusion and surprise that quickly turns into alarm and anger when Cameron’s men notice the sudden lack of their guns that have been grabbed right out of their hands.

“What?!” Cameron whirls around, eyes blazing and angry. He then looks around searchingly, looking more and more furious as he bellows. “Thawne! Where the hell are you!”

It is not hard to deduce who Thawne is, and Len has no idea why the speedster he had a run-in with just two days ago seemingly decided to fuck Cameron over, but he is nonetheless immensely grateful for it.

“You lost your little speedster buddy?” Mick asks from Len’s right side, coming to the same conclusion as he did. “Too bad for you that ours is still sticking around.”

“So, I’m your buddy now?” Eddy asks as he appears out of nowhere between Mick and Len, looking amused and pleased. “Sweet, does that make me an honorary Rogue? Do I’ve access to your beer now?”

“If we get through this alive,” Lisa says from Len’s other side. “I’m buying you a damn crate of whiskey.”

“Can a speedster even get drunk?” Marco wonders from behind him. “Doesn’t their metabolism work too quickly for that?”

Len ignores them, his eyes still on Cameron who is now facing him again, his expression taut with anger.

“Where are they?” Len repeats, voice low and threatening.

Cameron’s gaze briefly flickers to the side and even before the smirk returns to his lips, Len realizes that Eddy didn’t seem to have put all that much effort into searching the surrounding area for more men.

His thoughts are cut of when he is grabbed and finds himself on the other side of the hall, behind one of the abandoned printing presses, just a moment later. It leaves him briefly disorientated, and it is due to that that he doesn’t immediately pick up on the sound of gun fire.

To his immense relief, he finds Lisa next to him, who is also trying to shake off the dizziness that came with being transported across the hall at super speed.

“He didn’t check for more men,” Lisa exclaims in disbelief and frustration, but Len shrugs. “Doesn’t matter, he’ll take care of them quickly enough.”

It is annoying, sure, especially as Len has to wait a little longer till he can get his hands on Cameron-Len frowns, and exchanges a confused look with Lisa.

The firing isn’t stopping.

“What is he doing?” Lisa hisses, and Len is asking himself the exact same question.

Where is Eddy?

Len creeps closer to the edge of the press and tries to get a better view of things, spotting some of the
others nearby, in cover behind abandoned machinery, but not Eddy.

“It seems my speedster isn’t the only one who has decided to pass on our fun!” Cameron calls from the other side of the hall, where the gun fire is originating from.

“Worst timing ever,” Lisa grumbles and cocks her gun. “I’m so going to kick that idiot’s ass should we get out of here alive.”

Len grunts and tightens his grip on his Cold gun.

He doesn’t know what caused Eddy to vanish, but he hopes it is not because the man decided to stab them in the back.

Considering the options, it is more likely that he is probably going to look for Barry, but why he would do so at just this moment, when they are under fire and can really use his help, is beyond him.

Fucking speedsters…

Len glances over to his left, where Marco and James are crouched behind a stack of wooden crates. Marco meets his gaze, and Len gives him a sign. The other man nods, turns to James and touches his arm to get his attention. They exchange a few words, then Len watches how James starts to rummage through one of his pockets and pulls out one of his smoke bombs while Marco lifts his Weather Wand.

“You know, Lenny,” Cameron calls over to him. “I’m not sure whether you are aware of that, but your little Barry makes the sweetest sounds when you play with his prostate the right way. He’s not so reactive when you touch his cock, but when he has something up his ass, he is really going wild!”

Anger flashes through Len, and if it weren’t for Lisa, who grabbed his arm hard, he would have thrown caution to the wind and taken a shot at the miserable bastard just then and there.

“I think you are really missing out on a lot of fun there!” The crime boss continues goading him on. “But if you’re faint at heart, you really should have him keep his shirt on while fucking him, the state of his back is truly repulsive!”

“Len,” Lisa warns him, and Len shoots her a furious glare, though they both know that he isn’t angry at her.

Len squeezes his eyes shut, grits his teeth, and takes a deep breath to fight the rage down a notch. He glances back to Marco and James, who both meet his look grimly, and he gives them a nod.

Trickster’s smoke bombs are not exactly lethal weapons, but they are a great way to cause distraction and disorientation, especially when Marco assists with getting the smoke where it is supposed to go and keep it there.

There is a loud crackling sound when the bomb hits the ground about twelve feet away from them, a couple of surprised shouts from Cameron’s men, and then Marco is doing his magic, causing the air inside the hall to stir up, pushing the smoke screen to the other thugs and engulf them.

Firing starts up again, along with angry shouting that quickly is intermingled with screams of pain when the familiar sound of Mick’s Heat Gun fills the air. The others join in a moment later, as does Len, who makes his way towards the source of the enemy fire while being mindful to seek cover to avoid the bullets.

Through the thick smoke he can make out the burning silhouettes of people and blazing gun fire.
Vaguely he can also see Mick’s silhouette, who is standing much too close to the heat for Len’s liking, but he gave up debating with that idiot about his own safety a long time ago.

It is doubtful that he will find Cameron still inside the wall of smoke, and the exit that leads to a connected hallway he spotted earlier is likely where the man has vanished to by now.

Len, of course, intends to follow him just there, and after getting a view of the situation as a whole and making sure that the other Rogues have everything under control as far as they can, he swiftly continues his way past the actual fight.

“Don’t die,” Len bellows towards Lisa, who has taken stance next to Roscoe by now, and he exchanges a quick look with her, nodding to the exit of the hall, making his intent clear.

She frowns, not liking his idea, but Len doesn’t give her any opportunity to protest before he ducks behind a left behind roll of printing paper and continues his way to the corridor.

The shooting and screaming follows him as he leaves the hall behind, echoing off the thick walls, along with his own heavy footsteps.

The air is cold, enough so that his breathe turns into white mist as he runs down the long corridor, his gun firmly in his hand.

Cameron is here somewhere, he knows that, and he likely has other men with him.

Going after him alone is no less of a stupid plan than coming here in their current state, Len is very much aware of it, but he also knows that Cameron will likely get away if he doesn’t catch up with him soon, and he can’t let that happen, not for Barry’s nor for Izzy’s sake.

That maniac knows Len’s weaknesses now, and he does not doubt that he is going to try and use them against him again and again if he lets him.

The corridor ends into a staircase, and Len slows down, slightly out of breath and with his right hand screaming in pain as he comes to a halt a few steps before it.

He can’t hear anything from down there when he inches closer carefully to get a better view, but it doesn’t catch him by surprise when a bullet swishes past his head just a second later.

“You better piss off, Snart,” Cameron calls up to him. “Or I’ll make sure that the only thing you get back are two cold corpses! My men are already getting your two favorite cunts away from here, so either scram or let yourself be killed!”

Another shot is fired, and Len listens for movement, for footfalls, voices, anything that could help him assess how many adversaries he has to deal with right now.

His back is pressed against the wall next to the staircase, his gun cocked as he waits, but there is nothing but silence. He changes the setting of his cold gun to maximal width and intensity, which would turn the whole staircase into a winter wonderland, but while his desire for revenge and letting Cameron suffer is nearly oppressive in its strength, he doesn’t want to take a chance of the man getting away.

“You’re going to die here, Cameron,” Len calls back, his voice as cold as the air surrounding him.

Silence.

Concern creeps into Len, and he nearly gives into the urge to take another look, to move and make
sure that this piece of shit hasn’t gotten away without his notice.

“No, Lenny,” Cameron finally replies, and Len’s eyes widen in surprise when the voice comes right
from the stairs next to him, where the other criminal succeeded in creeping up on him without
making a sound. “I’m not the one who’s going to die.”

How the fuck did the guy get up here this silently?!

Len looks into the dead black eye of the muzzle as he glazes to his side, and moves.

It is likely thanks to his many confrontations with the Flash that his reflexes are honed enough that
the bullet doesn’t bury itself into his head but only graces the back of his skull.

Without thinking, without looking, Len points his gun in the general direction of Cameron, just as the
sound of another bullet cracks deafeningly loud through the air, and pulls the trigger.

The white, blinding light of the cold ray fills the staircase and the hallway, and the painfully intense
cold causes Len’s left hand to go numb within seconds.

Then he hits the ground, his right arm flaring up in agony as he landed on it.

His head is not doing much better, and for a split second he is certain that he is going to fall
unconscious.

“Len!” Lisa’s worried call digs into him, shakes his slowly fading mind awake harshly, and he grunts
dizzily.

“Fuck! You damn moron!” His sister skidders to a halt next to him and crouches down. “You
couldn’t have waited for us?!”

Len grunts again, still unsure where is up and down, but he knows that he doesn’t have time to rest
just yet. He pushes Lisa’s hand away as she tries to get a better view on his injury, and forces himself
up.

Damn, his head feels like it cracked open, it is such a nauseating pain that he briefly fears that he is
going to throw up. Thankfully, the feeling subsides quickly, and just as he forces himself back onto
his feet despite Lisa’s angry protest, he can hear the footfalls of others coming their way.

The grip on his gun, which he hasn’t let go, tightens, but his muscles relax when he hears Roscoe
call out for Lisa, realizing that it is just his Rogues.

“We’re here!” Lisa calls back, just as the others come around the corner. “We’re okay!” She then
looks back at Len and frowns. “Mostly, at least.”

“Fuuuck!” Sam, who stops next to Roscoe and Mick, stares behind Len with wide eyes. “You really
went all out on him, Cold.”

Len glances over his shoulder to where the frozen remains of Cameron are standing, hardly any of
his features distinguishable anymore due to the thick layer of ice covering him all over.

He is dead, died the second the beam hit him, and Len can’t help but feel betrayed by this, because
he wanted – needed – to hurt that man way worse than he eventually had the opportunity to.

Walking over to that frozen piece of shit, Len takes him in one last time, hopes to make out fear or
even terror in the other man’s eyes, frozen in time, but he can’t see anything through the ice.
“Fuck you,” Len says quietly and lifts his hand with his gun to bring it down hard on the dead man’s frozen face.

It shatters like glass under the impact.

Len doesn’t feel any real satisfaction from it.

He pulls his arm back and punches Cameron’s chest, causing it to crack as well before the whole body tumbles back and crashes into the stairs that break just as easily on impact.

“We’ve to get to Barry and Izzy,” Len tells the other grimly. “Cameron sent his men after them.”

They hurry down the three levels as quickly as they can which is not as quickly as Len would like due to how the stairs are partly destroyed thanks to the cold ray and for the most part no longer fit to bear the weight of any person.

Thankfully, James has a rope at hand they can use, though the task to get down there is an ordeal for Len with both of his hands partly numb and frozen. He is pretty sure that he would take some serious nerve damage away from this, but he can’t find it in himself to care.

His mind is on Barry and Izzy, and the unborn child.

If something happened to them, he…

Len doesn’t know what he would do.

They are in this miserable situation because of him in the first place, because he couldn’t keep this fucking trouble away from them.

The cellar is even colder than the ground level, even more barren looking, with grey, colorless walls and cold artificial light.

They haven’t gotten far down the corridor, when they start to hear voices, of men talking and moving around, and Len signs the others to stop as they close in to a part where the way forks off.

A swift glance around the corner shows that one man with an Uzi is standing outside the opened door, not looking their way since his attention is on what is going on inside the room where his colleagues must be.

“We’ve to be careful,” Lisa states as he informed her and the others about the situation, looking worried and angry.

“That’s such a pain.” Sam grumbles. “If that paranoid fuck had left anything reflective here, that whole farce would have been over hours ago.”

“It does show that your powers are seriously lacking,” Roscoe agrees, and Len is grateful when Lisa tells both morons off before an argument can break out.

Len is just about to tell them, that they will wait till the other thugs return from the room with Barry and Izzy, when the agitated voice of one of Cameron’s men cuts him off.

“He can’t just fucking vanish!”

“He isn’t here, is he!?”

“The boss is going to skin us!”
“Yeah, because I don’t know that!”

“Shit, he can’t have gotten far! Let’s get looking!”

“What about the dead whore?”

Len’s blood turns cold.

“Leave her, we’ve to find the guy—” The guy has a bullet in his head the second he steps out of the room.

Lisa doges back into cover, gun still cocked, teeth gritted and a deep scowl on her face.

The following standoff between them and what turns out to be three more of Cameron’s men only lasts for no longer than two minutes, then none of them are breathing anymore.

“Len, wait,” Lisa is at Len’s side when he starts to make his way over to their initial goal, trying to get him to slow down, but he ignores her. “You shouldn’t go in there,” she continues, and the worry in her voice is nearly palpable.

The others stay back, and a part of Len is grateful for it, while a much bigger one doesn’t care.

He starts to feel numb.

Not sparing the corpses of Cameron’s thugs a glance, Len steps over the one that is blocking the entrance, and halts abruptly.

His stomach drops, his hands turn clammy, and he starts to feel dizzy again.

There she is.

Izzy…

On the floor, with her eyes wide and unseeing.

Dead…

Len closes his eyes, and concentrates on breathing for a long moment.

Izzy is dead, as is the child in her, there is no doubt in him about that.

He let them die.

“Len,” Lisa says quietly from next to him, and he doesn’t pull back when she touches his arm, but he doesn’t turn to her either.

Izzy lies dead on the cold stone floor, her expression dull and lifeless, and inside here, their child…

Len feels sick, truly sick, and utterly helpless.

“Lenny,” Lisa’s voice is faint, and a slight tremor sticks to it as she speaks, the grief open and honest. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” Len agrees quietly, his throat hurting as he talks around the lump in it. “So am I.”

They stay there in silence for a minute or so until his sister lightly tugs at his arm. “Let’s get out of here—”
“Guys!” Sam’s call cuts her off, and both Len and she turn back to the door. “Barry’s safe! He’s back at the hideout with Eddy!”

For the first time tonight, Len feels how his legs nearly give out under him, the relief that floods him at these words is massive enough that his head starts to spin momentarily.

“Shit!” Lisa hisses, grabbing his arm firmly with both hands.

Barry is fine.

That’s good.

That’s really good.

Barry is alive.

The throbbing at the back of Len’s head starts to grow, turns nearly smothering, and it drones out everything, the noises, the light, the pain-

Len loses his consciousness, and everything turns black.

Chapter End Notes

Well, after receiving last chapters’ comments, I think most of you probably liked where Cameron’s story headed… though, I’m pretty sure some of you agree with Len that the man’s ending came too quickly.

Barry doesn’t have to worry about another abuser, at least, and Len doesn’t have to worry about Cameron trying to use Barry against him again.

Cameron is an interesting character, not only because he is utterly nuts, but because his story did change quite a lot over time. Initially, he was only going to turn up briefly, then I came up with his collection of dolls and changed that. I explored the dolls concept, got Barry there, and be Cameron’s hostage for a while longer, but while I still think that it in itself is an interesting idea, it dragged this story down too much, and I cut it. Anyways, I hope you like this final version of that psychotic criminal. :)

Regarding Izzy… damn, was she a difficult character to write. Her part in the story did change over time as well, probably more so than of any other character, as I initially wanted her to befriend Barry and thus started out trying to make her friendlier, that didn’t really fit, though. Then, her role got much more reduced and she just stayed around, which I wasn’t really happy with either, especially because of how she influenced Len’s development. Then the idea with her being pregnant came up, and I decided once again to let her and Barry befriend. It didn’t really work out, and eventually my muse took over, pushing my planning aside, and we landed where we are right now.

I know that Izzy is a very polarizing character when it comes to her likability, and I’m very happy about your feedback and how differently you all perceive her and feel for her. People like her are difficult to be around, they can be sympathetic (at least in my opinion), but they are also so scarred by their lives that they can’t help but be generally
of the harsher, meaner, and selfish type. I still think that exploring a friendship between Barry and her would have been very interesting, but it would also have made things very crowded later on, and I was not convinced that I could get them where I initially wanted them to be with how I eventually let them start out.

I honestly missed Izzy after this at times, funnily enough, even though she never had a main part, and I still feel sad about her death and the way it happened. Nobody deserves to have their lives snuffed out like that, and maybe one day I will write a short of an alternative universe where she got a better fate.

Regarding alternative universes, Thaddeus really got talking about them, didn’t he?

Having the Rogues rescue Barry is hopefully not going to be an annual thing, though he did aid a lot this time around, and Eddy seems to have gotten an honorable spot among the Rogues now as well – much to his delight, since this means a lot of free booze.

If you wonder why Eddy just suddenly disappeared after shootout started, it’s because he sensed Barry connecting to the speed force, which startled him into acting, since it tugged at some buried memories of his – and he also assumed that the crazy speedster (aka Thaddeus), who he thought is the reason for the disturbance in the speed force, is probably close to Barry.

And we have Barry connecting to the speed force… hm, I think some of you are probably a little excited about that? Well, we will have to wait and see what this means, but it appears to have helped him with his arthritis, so, yay! :D

Barry is now finally back at the hideout, and we will see how he is holding up now that he is back in a familiar place he regards as safe and with his friends around in next chapter.

A big thank you to all you amazing people who left me feedback on the last chapter and this story in general, it means a lot to me, and I truly hope you enjoyed this chapter!

I’ll be back with more in two weeks! <3
Barry breaths in the hot, humid air of the shower, and swallows around the lump in his throat.

His skin is bright red and burning, not from the nearly scolding temperature of the water, but from his attempts to get the disgusting feeling his last encounter with Cameron left him with off his body.

He knows that it is all just in his mind, and that this isn’t getting him anywhere and will likely only cause him to get a rash later. He can’t help but think, as he scrubs down his legs one more time, that cleaning himself still helps a little. It always does.

Reaching for the soap once more, the one that smells like lavender that belongs either to Lisa or Hartley, he starts to rub it over his arms, absentmindedly taking in the calming, pleasant scent that doesn’t do much for him right now.

The sense of hands on him is persistent, too many for them to belong to one person.

Barry tries not to notice it, not to think about it, and instead reaches for the washcloth that Lisa gave him prior to starting his first of by now three showers about seven hours ago.

A shudder runs through him, and he squeezes his eyes shut as he turns his face towards the jet of water.

He is doing fine. He is okay.

Cameron is gone, and it still sickens Barry how relieved and grateful he felt after hearing of that man’s demise.

Still, of all the abusers he had to endure over the span of his life, Cameron is the only one he will not have to worry about ever coming back. Despite how awful it is to be glad about another man’s death, he can’t but be just that.

That man was sick, twisted, and Barry had caught his interest. It is likely that he had to live in fear of
that bastard coming after him for the rest of his life, otherwise.

_Doll_…

Barry shivers and increases his effort to get rid of the memory of the other man’s touch. Cameron is dead now, and Barry is safe. He has to remind himself of that. That man can’t come after him anymore.

The picture of Michael forces its way unbiddenly in his mind, and Barry grows still for a second. Michael is still out there, as is Puckett, and all the other men who…

“N-no.” Barry hisses at himself, and starts to rub himself down once more, ignoring the ache this causes by now.

He is safe.

He is with Len and the others.

He is safe-

A knock at the door causes him to startle, badly enough, that he loses his footing and lands hard on his behind with the back of his head smashing against the tiled wall of the shower cabin.

“Barry!?” Lisa sounds alarmed as she has undoubtedly heard the small tumult. “Are you alright in there?!”

“Y-y-yeah,” Barry calls out, eyes stinging with tears as he rubs the painful bump that is forming where his scull got knocked against the wall. “I-I-I….” He grits his teeth, swallowing, and forces himself to calm down. “I-I… I-I’m f-f-fine!”

There is a long pause, and while he can’t be sure, he is certain that Lisa is still standing outside, likely pondering on what to say.

Biting down on a groan, Barry forces himself to get up again.

He wonders how long he has been in here this time.

It didn’t feel like that long, but he can hardly trust his own perception of time right now.

“I made something to eat,” Lisa finally proceeds, sounding uncertain and worried. “Maybe you want to joins us?”

No, Barry really doesn’t.

He wants to stay under the hot jet of water, and keep scrubbing his skin till he finally gets rid of the nasty feeling that has enveloped him like an invisible aura.

“S-s-sure,” Barry agrees instead and starts to feel sick again.

“Great!” Lisa seems honestly relieved. “I’ll fix you something to eat when you’re done!”

Barry utters his thanks, and while he can’t hear it over the sound of the running water, he is pretty sure that his friend has finally left.
Tiredly, Barry rests his forehead against the cool tiles and concentrates on taking a couple of long, slow breathes.

He is alright.

He is doing okay.

Maybe this time telling himself so will make it true.

He doubts it, but what else can he do?

Turning the water off, Barry tries to avoid thinking of how he is going to join the other Rogues in a few minutes.

He opens the shower and steps out, shivering slightly in the far colder air of the bathroom as he quickly grabs his towel. The material is soft, but his abused skin still hurts when he dries himself, causing him to grimace as he does so.

It would be best if he asked Lisa for some body lotion later on, he really doesn’t want to deal with a rash on top of everything else.

The thought is somewhat amusing, in an exasperating way, and Barry chuckles despite himself.

His gaze falls upon his own reflection in the mirror, then, and the amusement vanishes.

He looks horrible.

Gaunt, exhausted, his face sickly pale with dark circles under his eyes, and the rest of his body glowing a nearly angry red.

Swallowing thickly, Barry turns away and finishes drying himself.

The clothes feel itchy and uncomfortable on his skin, but he doesn’t pay it too much mind. There is nothing he can do about it right now, and he has other, more urgent things nagging away at him. Like the fact that the mere notion of being among other men, among his friends, scares him.

It is a problem that will only be temporary, Barry is sure of it. He knows from experience that his paranoid mind will calm down again in a few days, maybe a week, and for now he can do nothing else but try and push through it.

The corridor is dark when he enters it, as the lights in it are broken and none of them has deemed it necessary to fix them so far. Barry regrets this now, walking towards his destination, as his mind comes up with all possible horrors waiting for him in the shadows. Faces of people, he hasn’t seen in years, ones he never wants to see again.

He ignores them as well as how hard his heart is pounding against his chest.

He is alright. He is safe.

The living room comes into view, the light streaming out of the open door and illuminating part of the corridor. Barry slows down and stops.

The noise of the television can be heard, and he wonders who of his friends is going to be in there.

It is around noon, but here in the mostly windowless basement it could be the middle of the night as far as he knows. Most of the others have left before he went for another shower, exhausted from the
events of the last couple of days, and he hopes that is still the case.

Swallowing tightly, Barry shifts his weight indecisively from one leg to the other and the urge to go back and take another shower hits him with full force.

He doesn’t want to go in there…

Barry tenses up when a shadow falls upon the illuminated wall opposite to the entrance, and a second later, Mick appears.

The man stops short when he notices him.

An awkward silence follows, as neither of them is sure what to say or do.

“Lisa cooked,” Mick eventually settles on, tone unusually gruff, though it isn’t hard for Barry to realize that this is mostly due to his friend not knowing how to react to him after what happened.

“Y-y-yeah,” Barry croaks in agreement, and he makes another step towards the door but stops again. His cheeks become warm, and a nearly biting frustration settles in his guts when he realizes that he is scared of getting closer to the other man.

“I’m going to get a beer.” Mick informs him, his voice softer than prior, and Barry feels a pang in his chest when the other man makes a step away from the entrance, in the opposite direction from the kitchen, giving him some more space to get into the living room.

Mick seems to understand the reason for his nervousness, and the unexpected display of mindfulness is touching.

“You want one too?” Mick asks.

Barry shakes his head, unable to get a word out as his throat has closed up again.

Briefly, Mick studies him, then he gives him a curt nod and waits for him to move.

The shame hits him hard, like a fist, and Barry lowers his gaze as he swiftly proceeds to enter the living room, unable to meet his friend’s eyes any longer.

Lisa is the first person he notices, sitting at the table, next to Digger and Marco, who are both nursing a beer with empty plates in front of them. There are poker cards on the table, but none of them seem interested in a game right now.

An aura of exhaustion is very palpable in the room, and when the three look up at his entrance, Barry quickly averts his eyes, causing his gaze to drop upon Len, who is sitting on the couch, arms crosses, and snoring softly. The bandage Lisa put around Len’s head after disinfecting and stitching up the wound he got from the bullet graze, reminds Barry once more in what danger his friends were, and how close to being shot the other man came again.

When the others returned to the hideout shortly after Eddy and Barry got there, Len had been unconsciousness, bleeding, and pale. For a horrible moment, Barry had thought that he was dead, and he nearly lost it.

He can still only vaguely remember what exactly happened afterwards, he thinks he was crying, and while the sudden appearance of his friends, of the other men, nearly scared him silly, he didn’t want to leave the room, not when it meant that he had to leave Len’s side as well.
Barry tightens his grip on his upper arms and notices just then that he is kind of holding himself again. His gaze is still on Len, and he is unbelievably grateful for how much better his friend looks compared to before, no matter how clearly in need of rest he still is.

“Barry?” Lisa’s voice startles him, despite her low, tentative tone, and he turns to her with wide eyes. She has gotten up from the table and made her way over to him but stopped about three feet away. “You want me to grab you a bite?” She is smiling, softly and encouragingly, but the concern in her eyes is hard to miss.

Barry immediately feels stupid for his reaction, for how tensed up and scared he must appear, and he wishes he could return to the shower...

He flushes and tries to smile, his gaze nervously flickering around for a moment before settling on the ground. “Y-y-yes.”

His appetite is about as lacking as it has been earlier, when Eddy brought them take out, but he knows that he has to eat, that he hasn’t eaten in more than two days by now, and that it isn’t healthy to starve himself.

“You want to sit down at the table while I grab you something?” Lisa asks, and he can feel her eyes on himself, watching him carefully. “You can also join Len on the couch,” she adds, understanding his hesitation.

Barry glances back at Len, who is still sleeping, and feels conflicted.

When they brought Len to their bedroom earlier after returning and Lisa had been done with patching him up, Barry stayed with him. It was a big improvement to being in a room with all of them, but when he finally was left alone with Len, he couldn’t bring himself to get close to him. He was bone tired, enough so that it was difficult to keep his eyes open, but he just wasn’t able to get into the bed, even though he knew he doesn’t need to be wary or afraid of Len.

Instead, he took a seat on Len’s working desk and drifted off there for about an hour.

He could go back to Len’s bedroom that became their bedroom quite a while ago, but Barry knows that trying to hide is one of the worst coping mechanism there are after what has happened to him.

Aside from that, he doesn’t want to wake Len only to ask him to come with him. His friend has had troubles resting since their return, despite how clearly exhausted he is, and Barry knows that it is mostly because of him.

“I-I-I…” Barry breaks off and shoots Lisa an embarrassed glance. He nods to the table, and his friend gives him an understanding smile.

“Okay, sit down, I’ll be back in a minute,” Lisa tells him and leaves after shooting the men at the table a look that Barry doesn’t catch.

Both Marco and Digger greet him with wordless nods and in case of the Australian a rather uncomfortable and uncertain attempt at a smile. Barry can feel how his skin starts to itch again, and he shoots them a forced smile in return without meeting their eyes as he takes his seat.

It is a relief that they don’t try to talk to him as he waits for Lisa to return, though he can feel their gazes on him every other minute. Mick returns as well, a beer and a quickly put together sandwich in hand, and Barry can’t stop himself from tensing up even more.

Mick is his friend, he is, despite what the public would say, a good man, at least towards the people
he cares for, but he also looks probably the most intimidating from all the Rogues, and while Barry tells himself to stop being an idiot, he feels frightened by him. The other men don’t remark on it, should they’ve noticed, and the uneasy silence stays.

Lisa returns with a bowl of noodle soup, an easy and light meal he likely can stomach, and he wonders whether she made this dish because of that. She is considerate like that thus it wouldn’t surprise him.

With Lisa being back, the Rogues pick up a game of poker, while Barry eats his soup, listening to them although nobody seems to be in the mood for talking today.

The bowl of soup is just about halfway gone when he calls it quits. He can’t stomach anymore of it, even though he is aware that he should eat more than he did. But he feels slightly nauseous, and he doesn’t want to overdo it and make himself sick again by accident.

The unwanted memory of waking up bound to the chair, of being slapped and throwing up on himself comes to his mind, and he grows utterly still.

Barry swallows thickly and closes his eyes.

He is safe. That is over, he is alright, and he is back with his friends.

A shiver runs through him, and his eyes start to burn.

He is okay…

Barry wets his lips and forces himself to take a slow, deep breath.

The others are shooting concerned looks his way, he can feel them, and for a split-second he feels angry, nearly furious at them for gawking at him like he is some sideshow attraction, enough so that he has to stop himself from glaring at them.

The anger quickly wanes, though, and is replaced by tiredness.

He glances at the empty seat next to him and wonders how Mary is doing. Eddy went back to their apartment building to let their friend know that Barry is okay when Barry went for his latest shower.

Another shower would be nice…

Imagining scrubbing himself down once more is very appealing, though Barry is aware that he will need to wait for a while longer. The mere idea of showing again causes his skin to hurt, and he doesn’t want to do more harm than good.

“Barry?” Lisa asks, drawing Barry’s attention back to the present. She meets his wary, tired look with a comforting smile and offers. “Do you want me to make you a cup of tea?”

Tea sounds good right now, and he nods. “P-please.”

Lisa seems honestly relieved by his answer, probably glad that she can do something to make him feel a little more comfortable, and it hits Barry once more that he can count himself really lucky that he has her and the rest of the Rogues.

They care for him.

The warm feeling in his chest fades away when he recalls Zoom and Abra Kadabra. Both knew his identity, and not for the first time since he learned of that, he wonders whether the Rogues…
No. Barry blocks that train of thought and pushes it away.

They don’t. They can’t.

Why would they still allow him to be around if they did?

He swallows, glancing briefly at the three men sitting on the other side of the table, still playing, and with a sinking feeling he realizes how truly frightening the prospect of them learning about his past as their enemy is.

They hate the Flash, and if they learn that he once was him, they would likely kick him out – at best.

A shiver runs through him, and he lowers his gaze again.

He feels tired, and he has a slight headache, both of which makes him not want to think about that scary possibility right now.

Something else creeps its way into his mind, then. Another thought he has tried not to face so far.

Did they know what Cameron did to him?

Probably.

By the way they are behaving around him, the criminal probably boasted about it, likely to get a rise out of Len.

And, damn, isn’t that a humiliating image?

What did that twisted man say? Did he claim that Barry enjoyed it? That he wanted it?

The idea alone makes him feel sick, sick and angry, and helpless.

He didn’t want it.

A shudder runs through his mind, and he clenches his left hand into a fist, pressing it against his chest unconsciously.

His body reacted to it, but he hated it!

Biting down on an angry, frustrated groan, Barry shifts restlessly on his seat, fighting the urge to pull his knees up and curl up into a ball.

He is alright.

He is okay, he doesn’t need to get himself so worked up over what happened. It is over, he is safe now!

Why is it, that he doesn’t feel safe, though?!

Even with the Rogues around, with Len nearby, he feels vulnerable and helpless… and disgusting…

He needs to take another shower-

“Barry?” Len’s warm, low voice catches Barry off-guard, causes him to freeze for a second before he glances back to where the other man is standing now about an arm’s length away.

Barry hadn’t noticed him waking or even getting up.
They watch each other quietly for a couple of seconds, a deep frown on Len’s face that speaks volumes about how he is feeling right now.

Then, Len’s expression relaxes, and he gives Barry a small, tentative smile. “You mind me sitting down next to you?” He nods to the empty chair on Barry’s right.

Briefly, very briefly, Barry wants to say yes, that he doesn’t want Len to take a seat next to him, that he doesn’t want anybody next to him.

Len came for him, though, and even with how repulsive and raw Barry feels just now, he is still very much aware of how grateful he is that he has his friend.

“C-c-can y-y-you…” Barry flushes in embarrassment when his voice betrays him once again and huffs in frustration.

“You want me to sit there?” Len asks much to his surprise, nodding to the chair that would leave one empty between them.

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and nods, surprised by the unexpected understanding for his dilemma Len is showing even without him being told so.

Len takes the seat on said chair and notices the bowl of soup that is still standing in front of Barry. He seems to relax a little at that, and meets Barry’s eyes with a nearly grateful expression, as if he did him an actual favor by eating.

Considering how Barry’s appetite usually ceases to exist when he is stressed out or upset, it is no real surprise that Len would be concerned about him neglecting to eat.

It is touching to be reminded how much the other man cares about him, despite how emotionally exhausted Barry feels, he still can recognize it for what it is.

His tongue feeling more like a foreign object in his mouth than an actual part of his body, Barry touches the back of his own head as he makes eye-contact with Len, giving him a questioning look.

“I’m okay,” Len assures him, and maybe his exhausted expression is belying his words, but there is a calmness to him that does point towards him feeling better than just an hour ago. The short nap probably did help a little, no matter how uncomfortable sleeping upright on the couch must have been.

Lisa returns with the tea soon afterwards. She also gets her brother a bowl of soup, but not before shooting him another misgiving look for not being in bed, which he skillfully ignores.

There is not much talking going on afterwards, Lisa, Mick, Marco and Digger start another game, and Barry and Len watch quietly for the most part.

Despite his nerves, Barry soon starts to relax, sipping on his tea every once in a while, and watching his friends play cards.

It is odd, after some time he starts to feel nearly normal again, very tired, but normal.

His mind grows heavy and thick, and he doesn’t notice it when he pulls his legs up so that he can sling his arms around them and rest his head on his knees.

He feels tired...
There is movement next to him, startling him. He blinks, realizing that he was about to nod off, as he turns to his side warily.

It is only Len, who smiles down at him as he steps closer. “You look tired, Barry,” he tells him. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Barry hums in agreement, and slowly unwinds himself, glancing with heavy lidded eyes at Lisa and the others.

“Th-th-thanks f-f-for th-th…” Barry swallows, slight frustration bubbling up in his chest again, and nods to the half-eaten bowl of soup.

Lisa understand. “Of course, Bear. Go and get some rest.” She then looks at Len and adds in a sterner tone. “Both of you.”

Barry pushes himself to his feet, feeling unsteady for a second.

Len makes a step closer but stops when he notices him tensing up in response.

Barry frowns unhappily and shoots Len an apologetic look. His friend understands and shakes his head, wordlessly letting him know that he gets it.

They leave the other Rogues to their game and make their way to Len’s room.

It is when they close in on the door that Barry’s drowsy mind picks up on the actual problem at hand. His steps slow down, and he stops.

Len notices and turns to him, frowning concerned. “Everything okay?”

Barry presses his lips into a thin, unhappy line and averts his eyes, crossing his arms unconsciously.

A pause follows.

“Mick and Sam brought one of the spare matrasses into our room,” Len says, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “We won’t share a bed.”

Barry turns to him in surprise, taken aback by that piece of information though the emotion is quickly replaced by one of deep gratitude. There is also guilt because he is aware of how Len must be feeling about him suddenly no longer being able to have him any closer than with at least an arm’s length between them.

He swallows thickly and can’t bring his voice to work. He wants to apologize and thank him, but he can’t do either.

His eyes start to itch, and he takes a deep, shaky breath as he lowers his gaze, unable to meet Len’s any longer.

“You’re tired,” Len remarks after a couple seconds passed by in silence. “And so am I. We should try to get some sleep. Things will look different when we’ve rested.”

The exhaustion is plain in Len’s voice, and when Barry glances up at him, he can also see it in how he holds himself, the tense line of his shoulders, in the dark circles under his eyes.

Len needs sleep, they both do, and Barry knows that for the most part he is the reason why the other man has forced himself to stay awake since the whole business with Cameron was over. He worries
Barry finally nods which gets him a small, relieved smile from Len in return, and they proceed into the other man’s room.

The mattress on the ground hasn’t been there before, and was probably put there while Barry had been taking his last shower. It was put next to the bed, and the sight alone suddenly makes his body feel so much heavier and makes it so much harder for him to even just keep standing upright.

The exhaustion hits him full force, and he staggers towards the makeshift bed without thinking.

“No.” Len stops him, making him freeze up and turn to him with a scared expression he immediately regrets.

“Take the bed, Barry,” Len explains, and he tries not to show it, but the concern, hurt, and frustration are still undeniably there in his dark hazel eyes. “You’ve troubles with your back, and we both know that you won’t be able to find any rest on that crappy thing.” He nods to the mattress on the ground, that has clearly seen better days, and Barry nearly snorts, because why Len thinks that he will do much better on that thing, is beyond him.

He shakes his head, about to protest despite how much his body tries to will him to just move and lie down, to not worry about that right now, to just be an egoist for once, but stops.

His back isn’t hurting.

Neither is the rest of his body.

His limbs feel heavy, like lead, but they don’t hurt.

After he had pushed Thaddeus off Eddy, the pain nearly completely vanished.

He connected to the speed force, at least momentarily, he is sure about it, the feeling that flooded him was unmistakable.

It should have been impossible, though. The nanites are still in his body, and if it weren’t for how his joints feel, he would have thought that he just imagined it all.

The feeling of energy that rushed through him like a proverbial flash vanished just as quickly as it came, and he knows without a doubt that he is no longer connected to it-

“Barry?” Len meets his startled expression and nods to the bed. “Lie down, you look ready to keel over.”

Barry shakes his head, stubbornly, and points to the mattress, causing Len to huff in annoyance and reach up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“Take the bed, I’ll take the mattress,” Len repeats. “You know that I can sleep on the floor if I have to.” Then, he pauses and studies him with a slight frown. “Do you feel safer on the mattress?”

It is an unexpected question, that momentarily throws Barry for a loop because he didn’t even think of that.

Warmth settles into his belly, and Barry feels himself relax a little.

Len is a caring person, despite how he tries to portray himself to the rest of the world, and Barry understands that he will need time to get over what was done to him, and that it ripped scars open
that never completely healed to begin with, but he is still grateful that he has his friend at his side, looking out for him.

In a way, Len is everything he should be afraid and wary of, but at the same time, like nobody else, he is a source of comfort and security for him.

Barry swallows, ignoring the burning sensation at the back of his throat or the itching in his eyes, and nods. He will take the bed, it will make Len feel better, and it is the least he can do after what his friend went through for him.

The bed feels heavenly when Barry finally lies down, and a soft groan passes his lips as his head comes to rest on the pillow.

There is the smell of Len clinging to it, surrounding him, and despite how a part of him tries to stir up alarm over it, tries to get him to move and find another place to rest, far away from anybody else, he stays where he is.

Of all the people, Barry has ever met, he knows that he doesn’t have to fear Len. It doesn’t matter that he still does, that to some extent he is terrified of the notion of spending the night near him, he won’t allow himself to doubt that he is safe with Len because of what Cameron and all these other awful people did to him.

Tiredly, Barry watches how Len turns on the lamp at his working table, angling its head away from them, prior to walking over to the door where the switch for the main light is.

The room grows dimmer, but still illuminated enough that Barry can see everything in here. It is a thoughtful, caring thing of Len to do, and Barry wishes he could touch him, just squeeze his hand for a moment to show him how much it means to him that he has him at his side right now.

Instead, he presses his left hand closer to his chest, the cool material of the ring like a source of comfort in its own way.

Len lies down onto the mattress, movements slow and heavy, and grimaces for a second when his head touches the pillow.

Barry catches his eyes and lifts a hand to the back of his own head in question.

“I’m fine,” Len assures him, smiling tiredly. “Lisa did a good job at patching me up, and I took some Ibuprofen earlier.” He rolls onto his side and yawns. “My nagging sister is probably right; I just need some rest.”

Barry nods, agreeing wholeheartedly with that statement.

“How are you holding up?” Len asks in return, and Barry expected that question. He shrugs, unable to express the convoluted mess of emotions in his chest any better with his lack of a voice. Not that he would have known how to put it into words in any case.

Len hums in understanding, and falls silent as they both proceed with watching each other quietly.

The heaviness of his body seems to push Barry deeper into the mattress with each passing minute, and he pulls the blanket closer, allowing himself to relax into the bed.

His thoughts drift off, back to when Len woke him up earlier today after he fell asleep on his working desk. The touch to his shoulder scared him enough that he fell of the chair, and Len quickly understood to keep his distance from then on. There was no reproach or disgust, or any other horrible
emotion on his face Barry had been afraid of finding there, thankfully.

Only an exhausted concern and anger, though the latter one was not directed towards him.

Barry calmed down quickly enough, retaking his seat on the chair while Len sat on the edge of the bed as he informed him of Cameron’s demise. He didn’t go into detail, but Barry still understood that he killed the man, and even now, hours after learning this, he is still not sure how this makes him feel.

Every life is valuable and worth trying to be saved, that is a belief Barry lives by, but for the first time he is confronted with the reality of what a relief it is to have a tormentor taken out, of not having to live in fear of their return and more pain.

It is a confliction he will deal with later as he is too exhausted to make sense of anything he is feeling.

The same is probably also true for Len, who pretty much took the information that Izzy had been lying to him in stride without showing much of any reaction at all. The only real sign that he understood what Barry had scribbled down on the sheet of paper due to his troubles to get a single word out straight was how he tensed up and the shadow that flickered over his face for a second. Afterwards, he seemed to shake it off, steering their conversation back to how Barry is doing.

This is the reason why he hasn’t asked about what happened to Izzy’s body. Eddy didn’t give him any time to even mention her before he had them – for the lack of a better term – teleported back to the hideout with one of Sam’s emergency-mirrors.

Barry guesses that some of the Rogues probably gave an anonymous tip to the police about what went down at the abandoned factory so that they would take care of the whole mess.

Not for the first time since his escape, Barry wonders whether Izzy had family or someone else who could be informed about her death, and who would go to her funeral. The thought that she could be laid to rest without anybody there is upsetting despite their past and him knowing that there isn’t much he can do. He hopes that some of her coworkers and friends will learn of what happened to her and attend. In a few weeks, when everything settles down, he will visit her himself to bring her some flowers.

They weren’t friends by any means, but Barry can’t shake off the guilt about how he was the main factor that eventually led to her death. It never was his intent to hurt her, but in the end, it was still his appearance in Len’s life that set this chain of events into motion.

It was also because of him that she attracted Thaddeus’ ire, and it is still hard for Barry to fathom that Izzy tried to help him. Even so, he is thankful for it and believes that it showed a side of her she may have tried to hide. Her actions proved that she was a decent person at heart. Someone who was formed by a hard life, but despite that would not idly stand by and watch when someone was hurt.

Barry swallows and blinks rapidly as tears start to well up in his eyes once more.

“Try to sleep,” Len tells him and pulls his mind back to the present. His friend is still watching him, his expression somber. “You’re exhausted, things will look better after you’ve rested.”

Barry nods, grateful for having Len at his side just then.

There is going to be a lot of things he has to take care of tomorrow, as he will have been gone for more than two days by then, and while he hasn’t missed his next scheduled call to his parole officer yet, he isn’t sure whether Jay and the others have picked up on his sudden disappearance.
If they have, he will have to come up with a good explanation for it, and he isn’t looking forward to it. He doesn’t want to lie to Jay or anybody else, but he can’t tell them what actually happened. They will learn of his friendship to the Rogues that way, and he can’t let that happen, he will get into so much trouble, and Iron Heights will be a certainty-

Barry cuts the train of traitorous thoughts off.

Worrying about what could be is not going to do him any good.

He needs to sleep.

“G-g-g… G-g-go-od n-n-night L-L-Len,” Barry whispers, his eyes already closed, and buries his face in the pillow that smells of his friend to hide the embarrassed flush.

“Good night, Barry,” Len replies, his voice already slow from getting close to falling asleep. “Don’t worry, I’m here.”

Barry feels warm tears push past his closed eyes and roll down his cheeks before the pillow cover absorbs them.

He wants to thank Len, for coming for him, for staying with him.

Most of all, for being so understanding.

He can’t, though, as his voice is gone again.

Instead, he listens to Len’s breathing growing slower and deeper, evening out, and allows himself to drift off as well.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this update comes to you a little early because I’m going to visit my family over the Easter weekend, and I won’t have my laptop with me and probably will be too busy with visiting various relatives to find the time to post it on Sunday. I haven’t seen them since February, and I’m super excited! :D

Anybody else looking forward to chocolate bunnies? I know that I’m probably past the right age to get really excited about it, but I finished the Easter baskets for my nieces yesterday, and, damn, so much good chocolate, I really had to force myself not to try some. Thankfully, my mom usually gets me and my siblings some sweets too, even though we are a little too old for it. ;)

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, it has Barry back with his friend and gives a glimpse of how he and the others are dealing with what happened to him.

Thank you all for your comments and encouragements, and for following this story in the first place! I’m really lucky to have you guys as my readers! :)

I wish all of you a wonderful Easter weekend and have a wonderful time with your loved ones!

I’ll be back at my usual schedule for the next chapter!
James looks awful.

That is the first thing that crosses Barry’s mind when he finds the other man in front of his apartment door.

“Hey,” James greets him, his voice low, exhausted sounding, and there are dark bags under his eyes. He gives him a faint, forced smile. “I’m sorry for passing by unannounced like this, especially this late, but I’ve been so busy since yesterday…” He breaks off, a mournful and lost expression settles over his face, and Barry’s stomach drops.

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The mug shatters into pieces, the loud crash causing Barry to flinch slightly, and he watches helplessly how the first tears start to run down Axel’s cheeks.

“I’m not upset!” Axel repeats, his voice climbing higher, interwoven with a mixture of anger and sadness that seems to strange him from within. “She’s dead, so what?!” He kicks the table leg closest to him, his clenched fists shaking with hardly suppressed rage.

“I-it’s ok-ka-”

“Shut up!” Axel hisses, glaring dagger at Barry, who is the only person around in the apartment, the only one he can direct his anger at. “Stop saying that! I don’t care! She’s dead! So what?!” He grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut. “People always leave, that’s how it is… why should I give a fuck?!”

Barry doesn’t know what to say that could comfort the boy, seeing that he himself is still raw and open.

Mrs. Ming was also his friend. She was the first person he found after he was discharged from prison, and over the years she had become family to him. He understands what losing her feels like, and he knows that no words can soothe the pain, they are nothing more than meaningless platitudes.

“Shit…” Axel rubs his eyes, hissing another curse under his breath. His face is a distorted mask of
fury and hurt as he reaches for the plate with his half eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and Barry flinches again when it shares the fate of the mug, shattering on the ground, leaving a mess of broken shards.

“I don’t care…” Axel sniffs as he wipes away the tears with the end of his sleeves once more. “She was old, I knew she…” His lower lip starts to tremble, and he takes a shaky breath, looking close to crumbling over the grief he is experiencing.

Barry swiftly makes his way around the table, careful to avoid the mess on the ground, and while he was unable to offer James this kind of comfort when his friend so clearly needed it, he can at least do so for Axel. He pulls the boy, who really is hardly more than a child, into a hug, and is a little surprised when Axel immediately welcomes it, slumping heavily against him, like a marionette which strings have been cut.

Axel doesn’t have any real family, Mrs. Ming probably was the closest he had to an actual grandmother, and with just so few people around he holds dear, her loss has to be all the more excruciating for him.

“I don’t care,” Axel repeats stubbornly, his voice hardly more than a hoarse whisper. Barry makes low, comforting sound and starts to rub his back soothingly.

The pain of losing a person is no stranger to him, and it is always better to let out the wrecked emotions instead of locking them away inside where they can do much more harm.

Mrs. Ming, Bo, is gone, and no matter how much it hurts, how deeply the loss of her cuts, they must move on.

“Sh-she l-l-lov-ved y-you v-very m-m-much,” Barry tells Axel quietly and feels how the kid puts his own arms around him in response, holding onto him with a nearly painfully tight grip.

“I don’t need her,” Axel tells him, hisses the words through clenched teeth as if saying them was a painful task. He pressed his forehead against Barry’s shoulder, hardly suppressing a sob, and utters. “I don’t need any of you.”

Barry closes his eyes, the tiredness of the last two weeks still clinging to his body, making him feel like he is carrying an invisible weight around with him all the time.

It makes no difference, but he wishes that this would not have happened now, not after he was…

His inside feels raw, open, and too thin. It is as if his emotions were exhausted, and it worries and angeres him.

Mrs. Ming has died, and he feels sad, but nowhere near enough, than she deserved.

The only problem is that he doesn’t feel much of anything these days. As if his chest had been stuffed with cotton until there was no room left for any emotions anymore.

Seeing Axel react so vehemently is… unsettling, worrying, and Barry wonders whether something inside him broke that he hasn’t done the same, or whether it is just the aftermath of what he was put through again.

James looked for comfort when he came to him last night, he needed someone he could lean on and… Barry just couldn’t offer it to him. He couldn’t even let the man inside his apartment, come near him, no matter how guilty and outright horrible of a person it made him feel like.
Tiredly, Barry rests his cheek on the crown of Axel’s head.

“I-I l-love y-you,” Barry says quietly, nothing more than a whisper, and it breaks something in Axel, who grows utterly still for a second before he starts to cry in earnest.

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Jay, of course, notices that something must have happened to him when he eventually passes by.

His visit is unexpected and something Barry has dreaded for weeks now.

Despite his initial relief over not having seen or heard anything from the man the first few days after he returned home, he knew that this peace could not last forever.

In all honesty, Barry is surprised that it lasted this long as it is. He expected the older man to pass by on New Year’s Day or the day after at the latest, but he didn’t. Neither did Max and Bart, and while Barry initially had been looking forward to seeing the kid again, he was incredibly grateful for their lack of presence in the end.

There is still no explanation for their absence, but he pushed that thought away, having enough things occupying his mind without worrying about that as well.

Now, with Jay sitting at his kitchen table and studying him as he prepares some coffee for him, the weariness returns with full force.

As does the feeling of being trapped in his own skin, making him feel itchy and restless as he keeps his eyes on the mugs he is filling them with the hot beverage. It is one of the ones James tends to bring back from his trips, and Barry studies the small cartoon cat that is holding up a heart with an I love Vienna print.

Unlike James, he could not simply ask Jay to leave. At least, not without making himself look suspicious, and while his fear of being sent back to the Heights was bad prior to his little reunion with Cameron, it is outright smothering now.

The mere notion that he could be forced to live through that hell again is making him sick, and while the more sensible part of his mind tries to assure him that this won’t happen, that Jay won’t do this to him even if he knew, Barry knows that he will not share this ugly secret with the other man.

He can’t.

Jay, as observant as ever, has of course immediately noticed that something isn’t alright. The man is attentive like that by nature, and he knows Barry.

Not that Barry is successful at trying to hide his apprehension or the fear he feels in Jay’s presence all that well in the first place.

The last few days, after learning of Mrs. Ming’s death, were stressful and riddled with nightmares that kept him from getting much rest on top of everything. He feels exhausted, and he intends to not let the other man’s suspicion grow any further than it already has, so that he would leave as soon as possible.

His hands are shaking slightly as he picks up the mugs, probably simply his nerves and tiredness, and he tries to steady them a little before he turns to make his way over to the table, avoiding Jay’s attempts to seek out his gaze.
“H-here,” Barry murmurs as he puts the mug down close to Jay and quickly retreats to the other side of the table. He takes his seat, his hands around the warm ceramic, and keeps his eyes on the table.

He is behaving silly, likely even suspicious, but he can’t bring himself to look up.

It is odd and confusing to him how ashamed he fells all of a sudden, seeing that he didn’t feel the same around anybody else so far, not Len, not the Rogues, Mary, Eddy, or James. Then again, they all know what happened to him at least to a degree or suspect it, but Jay…

Barry’s grip around the mug tightens for a second.

He doesn’t want Jay or anybody else from his earlier life to know about this. Ever.

“Is everything alright, Barry?” Jay asks after a long moment of uncomfortable silence passed between them.

“Y-y-yeah.” Barry croaks, and forces himself to look up to meet Jay’s eyes briefly. He coughs lightly, flushing over how uneven his voice sounds just now as he proceeds. “E-very-ryth-thing i-is f-f-fine, j-just…” He breaks off and returns his gaze back to the mug in his hands, feeling annoyed at himself for being this unable to not make himself look so ridiculously suspicious in the first place.

Jay hesitates, it is palpable, but he eventually points out. “You don’t look like everything is fine. Did something happen?” The last part is said in a softer voice, he sounds worried, and for a horrible moment Barry imagines what it would be like if Jay actually knew.

He doesn’t know, though. He can’t and won’t ever.

“N-no,” Barry insists and presses his lips into a thin, unhappy line. Nervously, he lifts his mug and takes a sip of the bitter, warm drink.

“You look like you haven’t rested in days,” Jay presses on, clearly not getting the hint that Barry doesn’t want to talk about it, or, which is more likely, just not caring about it. He pauses, then, before he adds. “You can talk to me if something happened, or if someone is troubling you.”

Barry freezes momentarily, panicking as he is not sure how to take what Jay has just said. Was he implying something? Like he thought someone was threatening him? Hurting him? What does he mean by that? Did he mean the Rogues, or-

“M-m-my emp-p-ployer d-d-died,” Barry blurts out, without thinking.

Jay’s worried but grim expression is replaced by one of surprise that quickly morphs into one of sadness and sympathy.

“I’m really sorry to hear that,” Jay tells him. “I know that you were close to her.”

Barry nods curtly, his lips pressed into a thin line once more, and he swallows thickly, slightly sickened by himself and the intense disgust he feels over having used Mrs. Ming’s death as a means to get the other man off his back like that.

It was disrespectful, and he wishes he had just not answered the door to begin with.

“If this is a bad time, I can pass by another day,” Jay points out as he watches Barry with a look that is worried but also understanding.

Barry is about to agree, already relieved to get rid of the other man, when he turns his eyes back on
Jay too, he notices, looks like the last couple of weeks have been rough on him. He appears worn out and like something is weighing down on him, and Barry is suddenly hit by the realization that he hasn’t asked about Joan at all.

“H-h-how i-is J-J-Joa-an?” Barry asks, worriedly.

“She’s doing good,” Jay informs him, a small, soft smile on his lips as he is reminded of his wife. “She is sending her regards, by the way.” He frowns slightly as he proceeds. “She is feeling a little under the weather right now, the chemo is taxing her body quite a bit, but her doctor said that she is doing exceedingly well, and that she will be done with the last part of her therapy in about two weeks if everything stays as it is.”

“Th-that’s g-great.” Barry feels happy hearing that, despite everything, and he wishes the circumstances under which his friend is visiting him were better, because he does want to know more about how Jay and Joan are doing, and what is going to happen after Joan finished her treatment in Denver. Currently, his need to get Jay out of his apartment is even bigger, though.

“It is,” Jay agrees readily, chuckling. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am that things turned out this way.” His face darkens somewhat as he lowers his gaze back to his mug. “If we hadn’t noticed early enough…” He doesn’t finish, but Barry still understands.

“B-b-but y-you d-did,” Barry points out.

“Yes…” Jay leans back into his chair, reaching up to rub his chin as his eyes meet Barry’s once more. “I know you think that you can’t take my offer for help seriously, but if you need anything, you can always come to me, Barry.”

Barry stays quiet and averts his eyes again as the unease from earlier creeps its way back into him.

A soft sigh cuts through the otherwise quiet kitchen, but Jay doesn’t sound angry or disappointed as he goes on. “I understand, trust is hard to earn back after you’ve lost it once, but please try to remember that you can call me if you need help with anything, okay?”

The offer is honest, Barry recognizes that, and while a part of him knows that he will likely never take Jay up on it, he still nods.

Jay is a good man, and something is clearly causing him grief right now. Who is Barry to deny him this little peace of mind?

“Thank you,” Jay says, relieved and grateful, and Barry wonders why this matter to him, and whether he thinks that this will change anything-

Barry cuts off that bitter line of thought, not wanting to wallow in self-pity, not when it is so easy to get lost in it with everything that happened recently.

“Have you tried out your phone by now?” Jay’s question confuses him for a couple of seconds before he remembers that he indeed got a cell phone from the older man for Christmas. His face flushes hot, and he immediately feels bad for having forgotten all about the gift, especially considering that it must have cost the other man quite a bit.

“N-n-no…” Barry stammers, shifting uneasily. “S-s-sor-ry, I-I… I-I w-w-was j-j-just b-b-bus-sy…” He glances up unhappily. “Y-you c-c-can h-hav-ve i-it b-b-back i-if y-you w-w-want.”
“No.” Jay shakes his head, the frown from earlier back. “It is a present, and you can do with it whatever you want.” He smiles slightly. “I was hoping that you’d use it, though, or at least keep it on you in case you need it.”

At the wary look Barry gives him in response, Jay swiftly adds. “You don’t have to, Barry, it is really up to you, it is a present, after all. But you don’t exactly live in the safest area, and I’m sure it will be more convenient for you to use your cell phone if you have to make a call instead of going to the phone booth around the corner.”

These are good reasons, and it would be much more comfortable for him to call his parole officer via a cell phone instead of having to go outside to do so. Considering how bad the weather still is, this alone makes the gift appear much more appealing.

“Bart would also like to be able to call you,” Jay goes on. “He tried a couple of times so far but his calls always went straight to your mailbox.”

The thought that Bart could try and call him never even crossed his mind so far.

Or that anybody would, for that matter.

Eddy and Mary have his number, of course, but they have never ever brought it up that his phone is turned off, so he kind of forgot about it.

Feeling guilty at the notion that Bart could have tried to get in contact with him while he hardly ever thought of the kid over the last few weeks, Barry promises that he will turn it on later today.

“You don’t have to keep it on all the time, Barry,” Jay reminds him, clearly noticing how uncomfortable he is. “You can use it just in case of an emergency, I didn’t mean to force something you don’t want upon you.”

“N-no.” Barry gives him a thin smile. “I-i-it’s a-a v-v-very thoughtf-f-ful p-pres-sent, I-I sh-should u-use i-i-it.”

“Oh kay,” Jay agrees, but the frown stays on his face, and Barry hopes that he didn’t upset him by accident. His worry is cut short, though, when Jay asks. “When is the funeral?”

Shivering, Barry turns his gaze back to his mug he is still holding in his hands. “Th-th-this S-Sunday.” He swallows thickly since the lump in his throat has returned and tries not to think about that day, or how he will have to say his goodbyes to the dear old woman whose absence is already painfully palpable in his life.

“Do you have a suit for it?”

The question comes unexpected, and hits one of the things that are currently troubling Barry on top of everything else. He doesn’t have a suit, and while he knows it is not necessary to wear one, he wants to pay his respects the right way. His actual plan is to go and shop for one tomorrow, there are a couple second hand shops he knows of that have rather nice pieces at times, and maybe he will be lucky.

He still has three thousand dollars he got from Mrs. Ming, and in theory he could get a new one, but he can’t be sure when he gets another job and thus his next paycheck.

Jay seems to get his answer from his reaction, as he offers. “I can take care of that for you, Barry. A friend of mine rents out suits, and I’d just need your measurements for getting you a fitting one.”
Barry didn’t anticipate an offer like that, it pretty much left him speechless for a minute before he could shake the brief stupor off. His initial instinct is to reject the offer, since he doesn’t want to be in Jay’s debt, and he doesn’t like the idea of accepting the other man’s help.

The last weeks have been taxing on him, though, and even with how a part of him balks at the thought of agreeing to this, an even bigger one is just thankful that he will have one thing less to worry about.

“Th-th-that w-w-would b-be v-v-ver-ry h-h-help-pf-ful,” Barry concedes and tries not to notice how horrible his stammer has gotten again or how ridiculous it makes him sound. Instead, he goes on, not letting himself think too much about what he is about to bring up. “I-I’m g-gon-na n-n-need a-an-nother o-one a-as w-well.”

Jay seems surprised, and Barry elaborates, looking back down to his mug, nervous enough that his mouth goes dry. “F-f-for E-Ed-dy’s n-n-nephew, A-Axel.”

The teen doesn’t own a suit of his own, he doesn’t own anything but the baggy pants and shirts or the jacket he usually runs around in, and as Barry has started to let Axel do his laundry here a while ago, he knows that his wardrobe is very sparse. So far, he hasn’t brought up the subject of fitting attire to the boy, as he has been distraught enough over the news of Mrs. Ming’s death that he just didn’t want to touch upon it then.

“Eddy’s nephew,” Jay repeats, and Barry tenses up at the tone he uses, not outright skeptical or weary, but like he isn’t buying what he tries to sell either.

A pause follows, and Barry knows that he is being watched again, probably scrutinized. He starts to feel sick, and he could kick himself for being stupid enough to come with this to Jay of all people.

Axel is a minor, if Jay thinks that he is having an inappropriate amount of contact with the kid-

“Relax, Barry, there’s no reason for you to worry.” Jay seems calm, not angry or reproachful, and he stays calm when he goes on after another brief pause. “Why isn’t Eddy getting him a suit?”

“H-h-he p-p-p… p-prob-bably w-w-will,” Barry agrees quickly and stops himself from fidgeting nervously, while he is still not looking at the other man. “I-I’m s-s-sor-ry, i-it w-w-was s-st-stupid o-of m-me t-t-to a-a-ask.”

“It wasn’t,” Jay disagrees, and even though Barry has his eyes fixed on his mug, he can feel the other man’s frown. “I told you that you can come to me if you need help with something, and you did just that.” He stops and seems to hesitate for a moment before he goes on. “I do understand why you feel like you have to hide things from me, and I’m not upset about it.”

Barry bites his lower lip but otherwise stays utterly still.

He shouldn’t have said anything about Axel. He is so unbelievably stupid for bringing this up, he can’t be tired enough to forget what kind of trouble this can get him into!

“Axel isn’t Eddy’s nephew, is he?” Jay asks, and Barry feels sick.

A soft, hardly audible whimper passes his lips, and he meets Jay’s surprised and worried face with a pleading look. His fingers dig hard enough into his mug that it comes close to breaking, but he doesn’t notice.

“I-I d-d… d-d-didn’t d-d-do an-nyth-th… a-anyth-th-” Barry starts to tremble, and it is as if someone was pushing down on his chest, squeezing it between two big hands, making it suddenly hard to get
“Barry, calm down,” Jay tells him, audibly worried, and gets up.

Barry is out of his chair and on his feet before he can think, backing away from the table and the other man with large, scared eyes.

Jay doesn’t follow, doesn’t move at all. He keeps standing still, and only returns Barry’s frightened gaze with a somber one.

Slowly, Jay lifts his hands, as if to show him that he means no harm. “I didn’t mean to insinuate anything.” He exhales a slow, wary sounding sigh and rubs his eyes. “I’m sorry, I should have thought…” He breaks off and neither of them says anything for a couple of seconds.

“Eddy isn’t the boy’s relative,” Jay finally says again, not a question but a statement this time.

Barry swallows and shakes his head wordlessly, unable to speak.

“You will have to tell me about it eventually, Barry,” Jay goes on seriously. “But not tonight.” His expression softens and becomes more sympathetic. “Do you think you can get the boy’s size by Friday? I will pass by then and you will have the suits by Saturday.”

Not sure what else to do, Barry only nods dumbfounded, utterly caught off-guard by how this turned out. For a moment, he was certain he would be back in Iron Heights before the end of tonight.

“I think I will take my leave now, it is already late. Thank you for the coffee.” Jay smile is small and a little sad as he speaks. “And please remember that you can come to me if you need anything or if something is bothering you. I’ll be there, even if it is just to listen.”

Jay is gone not two minutes later, and Barry is left confused and still unsettled.

After locking the door behind the older man, he proceeds to his bedroom to see whether Sam can pick him up.

Maybe it is careless of him to seek out the Rogues so briefly after one of the Flashes has passed by, but he wants to see Len, and he feels safer with his friends around.

Barry takes a deep, calming breath and calls for Sam.

***

“Hello?” James’ voice is rough and thick, he sounds tired, like the call he is now answering must have woken him from a late afternoon nap.

Barry’s mouth goes dry, and it is as if the comforting words he nicely put together in his mind suddenly dissipated into nothing.

He has no idea what to say.

“Hello?” James repeats, sounding slightly annoyed, a clear sign that he isn’t doing too well, seeing that he usually seems to have a seemingly never-ending patience.

A pause follows in which Barry can’t bring himself to talk, and the idea to just hang up suddenly becomes more and more alluring.

“Barry?” James asks then, startling Barry out of his stupor, and for a second he has no idea how the
other man knew that he is the one calling, till he remembers that smartphones do show the caller’s id.

“Y-y-yeah…” Barry croaks, shifting uncomfortably at his spot in front of the kitchen window in which he can see his own nervous looking reflection as it’s already dark outside.

“Is everything okay?” James sounds concerned, and Barry forces himself to go on, to not cause his friend any more trouble with all he has to deal with already.

“Y-yes, s-s-sor-ry,” Barry murmurs and reaches up to rub his eyes. “I-I j-j-just… I-w-w-want-ted t-t-to… I…” He shivers and slings his free arm around himself. “I-w-w-want-ted t-t-to kn- know h-how y-y-you a-are d-d-doing…”

Barry can imagine that this won’t make James feel any better, being constantly reminded of his loss by people around him, since he probably has to talk with others about how he is feeling all the time right now considering how big his family is.

He hesitated for quite a while before he eventually picked up the phone, as he himself is a rather reserved person when it comes to his feelings, especially loss, and he never liked to share his emotional state with others when someone close to him died. The idea that he could cause his friend to feel even worse worries him because of that.

Even so, he wants to let James know that he cares, that he didn’t mean to come off as cold when he passed by to inform him about his grandmother’s death a couple of days ago.

“I’m at her place,” James explains, voice low and full of sadness. “I… I should meet up with my mother, I was supposed to meet with her about an hour ago but…” He swallows thickly, audibly. “I don’t want to see anymore of her today, so I came here…” There is a shaky inhale on the other end of the line, and Barry doesn’t need to see his friend to know that he is fighting for composure right now.

“I just need some time to think,” James proceeds after a moment. “I know that I can’t hide forever, but…” He chuckles wetly, distraught. “I can’t help but think about her, no matter where I am or what I do, everything reminds me of her, and I know that it’s normal and that it will get better…” He breaks off, and the pain he experiences is palpable despite the distance between them. It is obvious how much he is hurting right now, and Barry wishes he could offer him any kind of comfort, something that actually makes this better for his friend.

As James stated himself, grief is a normal part of a loved one’s loss, and a necessary one.

“When I’m here, it is as if she’s still around, like she’s just in the other room and will come back in just a moment.” James huffs, and Barry can hear him move, probably getting up. “I woke up this morning and for a second I forgot that she’s… I felt okay, but then I thought about how she and I were supposed to meet up with my cousin for lunch and…” He inhales shakily and breaks off.

Silence settles between them, and Barry pulls his gaze from the window he stared at without paying it any real mind so far to make his way over to the kitchen table. He doesn’t sit down, though, and instead shuffles uneasily next to it.

“I miss her.” James’ words are hardly more than a whisper, and the pain in them is so intense that Barry feels himself tear up in response.

“I-I’m s-s-sor-ry f-f-for y-your l-l-loss,” Barry says just as quietly, and it’s difficult for him to speak with the lump in his throat. Then, he adds, hesitantly. “I-I m-m-miss h-her t-too.”

“Thank you,” James replies. “And I know.”
They fall quiet again, and it presses down on Barry like an unseen weight, causing him to shift with restless energy.

“I-I’m s-s-sor-ry i-if I-I… I-I d-d-didn’t m-mean t-t-to b-be r-r-rud-de wh-when y-y-you p-pas-sed b-

by.” Barry shivers, half regretting bringing this up, half hoping that his friend will understand. “I-I h-

h-h-had… I-I’m s-s-sorry.”

There is no way that he can tell James about what happened, about Cameron and-

Shaking his head, trying to force that unpleasant memory away, Barry goes on. “I-I kn-know th-th-

that th-this i-is h-h-hard o-on y-y-you, a-and th-that e-ever-ryth-thing ap-pears a-aw-wful a-and b-b-

bleak r-r-right n-now, b-b-but… I-I’m h-here i-if y-y-you n-need s-s-someo-one t-to l-listen. B-Bo a-

and I-I w-w-weren’t r-rel-lated b-b-but… sh-sh-she m-meant a-a l-l-lot t-to m-me a-and…” He stops

briefly, fighting for his own composure for a moment as it hits him once more that Mrs. Ming is

gone, that one of the nicest people he had in his life and who treated him like family and showed him

nothing but kindness despite who he is, was now gone.

“I-I… y-y-you a-aren’t a-al-lone, n-n-no m-m-mat-ter wh-what i-it f-f-feels l-like r-right n-now, J-

Jam-mes,” Barry finishes quietly, the back of his throat hurting from the suppressed urge to cry.

James doesn’t reply for a long minute, causing Barry to worry that he might have said something

wrong and upset him by accident.

“Thank you,” James eventually says, quietly, moved. “I’m glad you’re there, Barry, and it means a

lot to me.” Then, more hesitantly he adds. “You know that you can talk to me as well if something is

bothering you, right?”

“S-s-sure,” Barry agrees, probably a little too hastily, and licks his lips nervously.

Another pause follows.

“Are you… are you doing alright?” James probes on. “Did something happen?”

“N-n-no,” Barry denies, again too quickly, but he can’t help himself.

“Okay.” James is clearly doubting the validity of his response, but he accepts it nonetheless, likely

not having the energy to inquire about it right now with everything else going on. He still adds. “I

mean it, though, I’m here if you need someone to talk. I’ll always listen.”

Barry doesn’t doubt the statement, and despite everything else, it is both touching and reassuring to

know that he still does have James as a friend, even with Mrs. Ming gone. There is so much of his

grandmother in the younger man, that alone is comforting.

“I-I kn-know.” Barry closes his eyes, and the feeling of warm tears wetting his cheeks doesn’t

surprise him as he smiles faintly. “Th-th-thank y-you.”

***

The weather is cold, rainy, with dark, greyish-blue clouds covering the sky.

The sea of black umbrellas covers the area around the freshly dug grave, the air around them is quiet

other than for the sound of mourning from Mrs. Ming’s family and friends who have come to give

their farewell to her.

There are hardly any other people around at the Central City cemetery on this early Sunday
afternoon in January.

As Barry watches the coffin being lowered into the dark earth, filled with sadness and the sensation of loss only a dearly loved person can cause, he wishes that the weather was better. Mrs. Ming always preferred milder, sunny weather.

The clouds only make everything look even bleaker than it already is.

Barry closes his eyes briefly and takes a slow, deep breath, pushing the sorrow back down for now. He doesn’t want to cry out here, among people he hardly knows and only met once at the Christmas party or who are utter strangers to him.

James is standing next to him, looking sickly pale with dark bags under his red, swollen eyes, and he too seems to do his hardest to keep it together for now. Barry wishes he could offer his friend more support, make all of this a little easier on him, but since James picked him and Axel up this morning, they haven’t really talked much as neither of them seemed up to it during the drive over to the church where they met up with the rest of the family and friends who had also come to attend the funeral. Afterwards, there hasn’t been time with James having to accept the condolences and the service starting not much later.

Not that Barry really minded it, much to his own embarrassment and frustration. At least, despite what a horrible friend he proves to be at the moment, James don’t doesn’t seem to hold it against him.

They talked over the phone the last couple of nights, after Barry did finally decide to use Jay’s present for the first time, and it was nice to be able to be there for James at least in that way if he couldn’t be in person.

Axel sniffles next to him, causing Barry’s attention to move on to the boy who has been unusually quiet the whole morning so far as well. He is rubbing his eyes, lips pressed into a thin line, and while he isn’t crying, it is a close call.

For the last few days, Axel pretty much stuck to Barry, either staying with him at his apartment or accompanying him to the Rogues’ hideout, and while he was unusually moody and snappy, and mostly just occupied himself with reading old comics he had brought along, it was obvious that he needed his company. It was only when Jay passed by that he retreated to stay at Eddy’s apartment, and even then he seemed very reluctant to do so, and complained about not needing a suit and how he disliked the older man.

Barry took it all without complaint, he understands how Axel must be feeling, and despite the boy’s difficult attitude at times, it is good to have him around. To his surprise and gratefulness, Len and the others dealt surprisingly well with Axel’s temper and didn’t react to it when he tried to bait for some confrontation. It made it easier to have them around, to be among the people he loves, and he is looking forward to returning to the hideout after the post-funeral reception.

A girl who is standing next to Axel causes Barry’s attention to let go of his current train of thoughts when she touches the teens elbow lightly, meeting his gaze with a sad and understanding look, and a faint comforting smile.

She is one of Mrs. Ming’s great nieces, Barry thinks, he met her briefly at the Christmas party a couple of weeks back. About a year older than Axel, very pretty and friendly, she took an immediate liking to him after their arrival and took it upon herself to introduce him to the other teenagers around.
Axel, who turned to the girl, flushes in response, ducking his head. He seems uncomfortable about being seen so close to tears, but he eventually settles on returning her smile, or at least trying to, before his face starts to crumble and he quickly looks ahead of him again, towards where Mrs. Ming casket is being lowered into the ground. He doesn’t try to shake her touch off, though, and she doesn’t pull her hand back either.

Next to Barry, James shifts restlessly, and when he looks over to him, he feels a pang in his chest as he watches his friend press a hand over his mouth, clearly fighting for composure. His eyes are bright with tears that threaten to fall any second now, and Barry is overcome by the sudden urge to reach for him, to offer some comfort in this clearly painful moment.

If this had occurred a month ago, he would have been able to do so without hesitation, despite the sea of strangers around them and despite how uncomfortable he would have felt even back then.

Now, though…

Barry bites his lower lips, conflicted, and it is then that he becomes once more aware how crowded it really is, how close the other mourning people who are attending the funeral are.

A shiver runs through him, and he the faint panic touches the back of his mind, the notion of being surrounded by so many strangers suddenly nearly oppressing, smothering.

He is safe here.

Cameron-

No!

Barry grits his teeth and looks back to the grave, his body growing taut.

He concentrates on his breathes, on how cold and clear the air is, how it fills his lungs, how the soft pitter patter of the rain falling on the umbrellas surrounds them, mixes up with the sound of sobs and grieving.

This is not the place nor the time to let himself be dragged down by what happened. Barry pushes the fear down and tries to concentrate on what is happening in front of him instead. He owns Mrs. Ming enough to not disturb her funeral because he can’t keep it together. It is only a few more hours, then he’ll be able to return home.

The realization how eager he is to get away from here, makes the guilt dig its claws deeper into his guts, but he ignores it. He will return later, maybe tomorrow, and say his own private goodbye in peace.

Earlier, at the church, a number of people held eulogies for her, and Barry never really realized how many loved ones Mrs. Ming is really leaving behind, even though he met part of her family at the Christmas party last year.

James didn’t ask him whether he wanted to share a few words with them as well, for which Barry is grateful, as he knows what kind of an ordeal that would be for him. Instead, he asked for Barry’s assistance on his own eulogy, and read it to him over the phone. They worked most of Friday’s night on it, and ended up sharing fond memories of her along the way.

Thinking back to it helps Barry’s inner turmoil to settle down, and it becomes easier to breathe again.

Mrs. Ming was a gift to him, a ray of hope in his darkest hour, even if he had hardly been able to
recognize it back then due to how depressed he was. Now, she is gone, and while she leaves behind a hole that will stay with him forever, she left so many good things behind for him as well.

Barry thinks that he wouldn’t still be here today, if it hadn’t been for her. In the early days after his discharge from prison, he was lost, scared, desperate, and Mrs. Ming gave him hope, helped him to find his footing again in a world he had no place in anymore.

The priest speaks again, Barry only half listens as he looks down the grave, where his dear friend is finding her last rest, and he knows that despite how awful the last couple of weeks were, that he will prevail or survive. He always had, and while everything hurts, while his inside feels like cracked, fragile glass, he knows that this is just another hurdle to overcome.

The rain picks up when James’ mother Suzan steps forth to throw a handful of earth into the grave, then James follows. It is when his friend passes him that Barry reaches out to him, grasping his hand lightly, causing him to stop short.

Their eyes meet, and Barry watches the brief surprise that flickers across James’ face which then is replaced by gratitude and unashamed sorrow. He tightens his grip on Barry’s hand nearly painfully, and for a long minute neither of them moves.

“James.” Suzan’s voice breaks the moment, and the annoyance in it is hard to miss, though Barry isn’t surprised by it. Despite her rather cool relationship with her mother, it is obvious that Mrs. Ming’s daughter is taking her death hard, and Barry loosens his grip and so does James, though he is very reluctant to do so.

As James throws in another handful of earth, Axel steps closer to Barry, reaching for his hand as well. Barry returns the hold and doesn’t mind nor tenses up when the teen leans into him, crying quietly.

It is not even noon yet, but Barry is already exhausted and wishes the day was over. He knows that he isn’t the only one, though, and keeps his head up as the funeral closes in to its end.

After the following reception, Axel and he will be able to return home, but before that, he wants to be there for James at least a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

We finally reached this chapter, one I was dreading, to be honest, because we learn that Mrs. Ming passed away, which is really a hard loss for a couple of characters in Singularity and probably also for most of my readers, since you guys seem to have grown very fond of her over time too.

With her, Barry has lost a very important supporting character in his life, which is especially awful considering what just happened to him. Time will show how he will be able to deal with it, but he has Axel to look after as well, something that will help him to keep his head up, and there is James, of course, someone who understands his loss better than anybody else can.

Mrs. Ming is a character that I deeply miss, it was odd suddenly not being able to have her there anymore, and with her death, a lot of change is going to head towards Barry.
Jay also made an appearance, and surprisingly, he did not react to Barry’s friendship with Axel as one would have thought considering his past behavior. Then again, he did change quite a big over the last couple of months, but I have the feeling something else happened too we are not aware of yet. ;)

The next two chapters will be about dealing with loss and depression respectively, thus they will be a bit on the heavier side. The one after that, chapter 88, is one I’m looking forward to quite a bit, since we will finally have part of the Justice League turn up and see them interact with Barry, something I hope you guys are curious about. :) 

A big thank you to all you of my readers who left me feedback, whether it be in form of kudos or comments, they all mean a lot to me! <3 

Before I forget, I was wondering whether anybody of you would like to pass by on my tumblr. My name there is Snatch7777, and you really don’t need to feel shy about contacting me.

I’ll be back with chapter 86 in two weeks! Hope you guys have a great time till then!
Life Goes On

Chapter Summary

Life goes on, even after the loss of a dear person.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my dear friend Quintessenzza, who did an amazing job as usual! He is going to have some important exams next week, so maybe you wanna think of him and cross your fingers, though I'm sure he will ace them no matter what! :)

Len absentmindedly rubs the back of his head, where the scar from his encounter with Cameron is itching, likely due to the change of weather.

He really seems to get old, in the past he never was sensitive to such things, but now that he is going toward his fifties he can feel it in the numerous scar tissues that cover his body whenever the temperatures drop or rise too starkly.

Frowning down at his hand, he hopes that it will still be some more years before his joints start to bother him as well, seeing that his old man had troubles with his hip in that regard.

Thinking of his father is as usual the most reliant way to cause his mood to drop, and Len quickly pushes that bastard out of his mind, instead adding his wager to the slowly increasing heap of cash in the middle of the table.

“Is your head still bothering you?” Lisa asks, studying Len from the other side of the table with a slight concern.

“No,” Len replies, gruffer than he intended to. Lisa aches an eyebrow, but he ignores her and instead gets up. “I’m getting a beer, fingers off my cards.” The last part is directed towards James, who has already started to eye said cards with an obvious interest.

“Fetch me one too,” Lisa calls after him.

“I’m not a waiter, get your own beer.” Len grunts in return as he leaves the room.

“Maybe you should take a nap instead,” Lisa adds, annoyed. “You sure are a cranky ass today.”

James finds this hilarious, of course, while Roscoe has some snide comment to add as usual, but Len doesn’t bother to actually listen.

It is shortly after five p.m., and Barry’s latest job interview is probably over by now.

Making his way towards their makeshift kitchen, Len hardly notices the darkness around him. He
didn’t bother to turn on the light in the corridor, as he knows all their hideouts by heart after all these years. In a way, the darkness is a little soothing, and he wonders whether this is because he is tired, or because he is about to get a headache.

The light in the kitchen is on, and by the sound of it, both Hartley and Sam are currently talking about something while the faint buzzing of the microwave can be heard in the background.

“Hey,” Sam greets Len, beer in one hand and what looks like a quickly thrown together cheese and ham sandwich in the other. “Are you guys still playing?”

“What else would they be doing?” Hartley asks, who is sitting at the table, eyes focused on some article in a science magazine he probably borrowed from Roscoe. “The TV is still broken, after all.” He sounds slightly irked and shoots Len a brief reproachful look.

“You’re always laying into Trickster about watching too much TV,” Len points out with a shrug as he opens the fridge and grabs one of the cold beers. He turns around and leans back against the closed door, opening the bottle. “Now he can’t.”

“And neither can the rest of us,” Hartley reminds him tersely.

“I like it,” Sam interjects as he walks over to the microwave to check on what looks like a frozen lasagna. “I mean, having the damn telly running in the background all the time is irritating to all of us who haven’t converted to the increasing mass of brain-dead zombies our entertainment industry is creating.”

“Because you’ve so much brain to worry about to begin with.” Hartley snorts, and Len notices that he isn’t the only one with a bad mood around here.

“You’re just pissy because you can’t watch your show with that gay werewolf you’ve the hots for,” Sam snarks back and takes a pull of his bottle.

“You’ve heard from Barry yet?” Len interferes, cutting Hartley off from spitting a likely angry remark back at Sam. He doesn’t feel like being around the others right now, he partly left the poker round because of how restless he is, and having two bickering man-children is not something he will put up with either.

“Yeah,” Sam informs him. “I actually just came back from picking him up.”

“He’s here?” Len asks, frowning, and the annoyance must be visible on his face since Sam quickly explains. “I was about to join you anyway, would have told you about it then.”

“Where is he?”

“Your bedroom,” Sam explains. “He seems pretty down. I guess the interview didn’t go too well.”

“That sucks,” Hartley remarks, sitting back into his chair as he turns his attention to them. “Wasn’t this his third interview this week?”

“You can’t say he isn’t trying,” Sam agrees and a grim smirk appears on his lips as he adds. “Not that that bitch of a parole officer gives a shit.”

“He can’t get in trouble for not finding a job immediately after losing his last,” Hartley says, sounding slightly exasperated. Len guesses that it is probably because he and the rest of them told Barry so several times so far, but it seems it has not gone through the blonde’s thick skull yet.
Barry is that kind of person who can worry himself sick over things like that, and he is terrified of the notion that he can be sent back to the Heights. It is not that Len doesn’t understand him or where he is coming from, but even an old bat like Jenkins can’t cause him any serious trouble over his current lack of occupation. At least, not yet.

“I know that.” Sam shrugs. “But Barry clearly finds it hard to do so.”

“Can you fault him for that?” Hartley asks with a frown, but Sam snorts and shoots him an incredulous look. “Of course not, I’m just saying how it is.”

There is a palpable tension between both criminals as they wordlessly glare at each other, a baseless aggression that has been clinging to all of them for a couple of days now, and Len decides to diffuse it before they have another fight at hands. The clashing of Mick and Marco the other night already cost them their television, he doesn’t need to lose their fridge or microwave as well.

“Go back to the others,” Len tells Sam, who turns to him with a confused frown. “You can have my cards, it’s a good hand. I’m going to see how Barry is doing.”

“Sure,” Sam agrees, clearly liking the idea of winning another game, especially when most of the work has already been done for him. Shooting another dirty look at Hartley, he makes his way past Len.

As soon as the man is out of earshot, Len turns to Hartley. “You’re more level-headed than Sam, so I really don’t get why I’ve to tell you that it’s a stupid idea to goad him on.”

“I’m more level-headed than probably any of you.” Hartley snorts and turns back to the magazine still in his hands.

“We all are in a tight spot right now, and getting at each other’s throat won’t help it,” Len reminds him, irked.

“I didn’t start anything,” Hartley points out and shoots him a glare. “Why the heck are you laying into me? You want to press on someone’s conscience, go to Mick or Marco, I haven’t ruined the TV as far as I can remember!”

Len stops himself from snapping at Hartley, despite how much the other Rogue’s tone rubs him the wrong way.

Hartley has a point, and Len knows so.

If he is honest with himself, he is just in a miserable mood, has been so for days now, and the slowly increasing level of aggression in the hideout is not helping.

“Yeah,” Len finally settles on. “I know.”

Hartley frowns, knowing not to expect an apology from him, and instead turns back to his magazine, obviously dismissing him.

After putting the hardly touched beer back into the fridge, and without another word, Len leaves the kitchen, the buzzing of the still running microwave the only sound that follows him into the dark corridor.

It doesn’t take long to reach his room, and he picks up on the lack of light shining through the slit between bottom of the door and the ground.
Quietly, as to not disturb Barry should he be sleeping, Len opens the door.

The air is cool and smells of rain. Barry must have tilted the small basement window to air the room, and when Len steps in, the darkness is banished by the bright white of lighting outside. Momentarily, he can make out the silhouette of Barry on his bed, the blanket pulled up to his chest, seemingly resting. Then, everything turns dark again.

After closing the door softly, Len walks over to the window to shut it. It is getting cold in here, and Barry has troubles staying warm as it is.

“H-Hey,” Barry murmurs quietly, and Len turns to his side, where his friend lies on the bed, pleasantly surprised to find him still awake.

“Hey,” Len replies and steps closer to the bed. He crouches down next to where Barry is resting, careful to leave enough space between them. “You want me to leave so you can rest a little?”

There is a pause, and even in the faint light Len knows that Barry is studying him.

“C-can y-you s-s-stay?” Barry’s voice is quiet, tired sounding, and Len watches with relief how he slowly moves his hand that is close to the edge of the bed from under the blanket towards him. It rests there, waiting, and he understands the invitation easily.

Len takes a hold of it, closing his own fingers around it lightly enough to make it clear that Barry can pull away anytime he wants to. “Of course,” he says, and starts to draw small, soothing circles on the back of Barry’s hand.

Being able to touch Barry again, without him flinching away whenever he comes too close, is a reward on its own. It took him nearly a month before he allowed Len to do so again, and while there were no more than a handful of instances like this over the last week, it is still incredibly encouraging and reassuring.

After what Cameron did to him, Len wasn’t sure what to expect. Barry did need a long time to trust him enough to let him touch him after his release from prison, and he feared that it would take years for his friend to overcome his latest trauma.

Thankfully, Barry has proven to be more resilient than most, once again.

“You want me to get you some water?” Len asks, mostly because he doesn’t know what else to say right now.

It is clear that Barry’s latest interview couldn’t have gone too well, like all the ones he had prior to it, so far.

“N-no,” Barry murmurs and adjust his position, pulling his knees up to his chest, slinging his free arm around them.

He looks small and fragile, and exhausted.

Len feels sympathy for him, knowing how hard it is for him to take the ongoing rejection, especially now with everything else he has to deal with.

Silence settles between them as they watch each other, and the only sound that fills the cool, dark air around them is the faint noise of the storm going on outside.

It has been a long two weeks since Barry’s late employer’s funeral, and it is still so very apparent
how much he is hurting over it. Len, who hasn’t yet lost too many of the few people he let close enough to feel such an intense loss over their deaths, doesn’t really know how to offer his support. When his grandfather passed, he was devastated but didn’t have anybody to seek comfort from, so he mostly tried to shut the emotions off and ignored the pain till it eventually got easier. It was the same with his mother, though then he was already older, and it was far easier to deal with her absence since she had never been much of a presence in his life to begin with.

That helplessness is probably why he found himself pulling away from Barry the first couple of days after he learned of Mrs. Ming’s passing away, and his sister had to give him a verbal kick in his ass so that he stopped behaving like a total bastard once again.

Luckily, Barry didn’t seem to notice his absence, as he was too caught up in his own grief and having to look after Axel, but Len still feels guilty about it. He is just plain crappy when it comes to dealing with emotionally hurting people, even when they are as close to him as Barry. Or maybe even more so.

“I’m here,” Len says, out of the blue, surprising himself with the words he didn’t intend to speak.

A slow, small smile creeps over Barry’s lip, hardly to make out in the dim light. “I-I kn-kn-know,” he agrees softly. “Th-thank y-you.”

Not knowing how to respond, considering that he didn’t mean to say anything in the first place, Len stays quiet, the pitter-patter of the rain against the small window becomes the only noise around them.

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“Barry,” Lisa says his name in that slightly displeased, exasperated manner she always uses when she is annoyed by something the blonde does but doesn’t want to outright speak against it.

Axel has picked up on how the woman usually tries not to critique what Barry does, but sometimes she just can’t help herself. It is nearly funny to watch, at times, considering how short of a temper she tends to have with everybody else.

From his spot at the couch, where he is currently snacking away at some of the breadsticks Barry has made this morning, he glances over to Lisa before looking to the man in question, curious what he could be doing that is rubbing her the wrong way.

“You don’t need to do that,” Lisa goes on, frowning from her place at the table where she and a couple of the other Rogues are once again involved in a game of poker. Axel briefly wonders whether they will let him join in later, since he hasn’t annoyed any of them today so far.

Then, his gaze moves back to Barry, who is currently moving around, dusting of all things.

Axel bites down on a snicker – Barry is just such a housewife at times.

“I-I d-don’t m-mind,” Barry returns, not even stopping to look at Lisa, since this is the argument they already had a couple of times over the last few weeks, and Axel has been hanging around the hideout for the major part of that time.

“Still.” Lisa huffs, and the furrow of her brows deepens. She then turns back to the other men at the table, scowling slightly. “Those lazy asses could do something around here as well, for once.”

“Hey, if he wants to clean, let him clean,” Sam remarks with a shrug and takes a sip of his beer. “Who am I to take it away from him if it makes him happy?”
“Yeah,” Digger agrees, smirking amused. “Barry likes it, nothing wrong about that.”

“Oh, shut up.” Lisa grunts. “It wouldn’t hurt either of you to help a little every once in a while when it comes to keeping the hideout from turning into a total sinkhole.”

Axel stuffs another breadstick into his mouth, enjoying the slightly salty taste of the snack as he chews it, and turns back to the comic book in his lap.

This is an old argument, if you even can call it that, as neither of the involved parties ends up screaming or throwing stuff at each other, and he already knows how it will end.

While it is an utter mystery to Axel why Barry keeps insisting on cleaning, he doesn’t see what’s wrong about it either, and he pins it on Lisa being a woman. Women and girls are odd on good days, and with his fourteen years, Axel has given up to try and understand them anymore. It just isn’t worth the hassle.

Mimi suddenly comes to his mind, Mrs. Ming’s great niece, and he has to correct himself. She certainly isn’t as annoying as other girls.

A slight tingling sensation spreads over his cheeks as he thinks back to how she gave him a tight hug at Mrs. Ming’s funeral reception, after Barry and he were about to leave with James, who had offered to drive them home.

His eyes are on the pages of *Racoon-Man #218*, but the story is momentarily forgotten as he remembers the girl, who undeniably is quite pretty, and whose hair were soft and smelled really nice when it brushed against the side of his face.

Swallowing, his mouth suddenly dry, Axel lowers the breadstick he grabbed and glances towards the others, where Lisa is still talking with Barry, and feels his cheeks heat up even more. None of them is looking his way, thankfully, and he turns back to the comic, stuffing the snack into his mouth and munching away at it.

Reaching for the coke that rests on the small couch table in front of him, he takes a gulp and pauses, as the sweet taste turns sour when his thoughts shift their attention from Mimi to Bo.

Bo, who is no longer around…

Axel fights the shudder that threatens to take him over, and swallows the drink with some difficulty.

He doesn’t want to think about the nice old lady, who was more of a family to him than his own has ever been.

Forcing his thoughts back to Mimi, he grits his teeth and tightens his grip around the bottle.

Mimi is safer to think about, mostly, at least. She is related to Mrs. Ming, which makes it hard not to think of her too, but Axel realized a while ago that the notion of Mimi does cheer him up more effectively than any other thought.

Picturing her in his head, he lingers on her face for a while, and he remembers the sheer peach colored lipstick, how pretty it looked on her lips. He wonders…

Something tightens in Axel’s guts, and for a second he thinks he is going to grow sick when an unwanted thought slips in between the rest, one that is frightening and embarrassing all the same. He slams down on it, hard, and it is the loud clang that cuts through the room that causes him to realize, that he did so too with the bottle in his hand, nearly smashing it on the couch table.
For a second, everything seems to pause, and Axel can feel his face grow even hotter as he shifts his eyes to where the others are, watching him in surprise. He utters an embarrassed, “Uh… sorry.”

Barry has a concerned frown on his face, causing Axel to feel slightly guilty again, as he knows that his friend has enough things to worry about, without him adding another.

He is grateful when Lisa returns her attention to Barry, and proceeds to try and get him to stop cleaning without sounding too much like she is criticizing him.

Axel evades Barry’s gaze, turns back to the still open comic, and pushes any other thoughts out of his head as he starts to read again.

Len joins them in the kitchen not too long afterwards, and Axel isn’t in the least surprised when Barry finally relents and joins his friend for a game after the criminal asked him to. Like his sister, Len isn’t all that keen on having Barry clean their hideout, but he usually doesn’t try to keep him from doing so as persistently as she does.

Axel, who watches Barry join the round out of the corner of his eyes, is kind of glad that his friend is doing better again. For a while he couldn’t stand being near any of the Rogues other than Lisa, and even then, he was tensed up petrified when she got too close or touched him.

Nobody told Axel about what happened to Barry, but he is not stupid, and he can imagine what that miserable fuck Cameron did to him. Even now, knowing that that bastard is dead, an intense fury coils up in his guts whenever he imagines what Barry had to live through once more.

Not that he really knows what Barry experienced in the past, as, again, nobody deems it worthy to keep him in the loop. He has been living on the streets for years now, though, and he has seen and heard about twisted shit some people do to others.

Some people are just sick, and Axel sometimes wonders what good it is to have superheroes living among them if they can’t prevent stuff like that from happening-

“Oi!” James’ voice, that suddenly comes from right next to him, startles him out of his thoughts, and Axel nearly jumps up from the couch and away from the unexpected appearance of the Rogue.

“Don’t do that, asshole!” Axel glares daggers at the Trickster, who is now perched over the back of the couch, watching with amusement twinkling in his eyes.

“What a language!” James snickers and flops over the back of the couch, taking a seat next to Axel with a bounce. “You’re busy, foul-mouth, or you wanna join me blowing stuff up?”

Axel’s interest is immediately piqued hearing that and his anger quickly forgotten.

“Sure-”

“N-n-no b-blow-wing u-up th-things,” Barry tells them sternly from his spot at the table, giving both of them a warning look. Axel can’t really hold it against him, seeing how his last collaboration with James ended, and it really was sheer dumb luck that he didn’t burn his face off that time.

“We’ll be more careful, Barry-bear!” James promises and adds when Barry doesn’t seem at all reassured by his words. “Hartley will be there too, and you know him, he never lets me do anything fun!”

“If you blow up the hideout, I’m going to kick your asses to Kansas and back,” Len tells them warningly, his glare alternating between James and Axel.
“We won’t!” James assures quickly, and jumps up on his knees, his cape billowing behind him for a second. Unlike the other Rogues, he is wearing his costume, something, Axel notices, he seems to do so more and more these days.

“Come, my minion, let us *not* blow stuff up!” James tells him enthusiastically and grabs Axel’s wrist. “I’m *not* your minion, asshat,” Axel protests grumpily, but lets himself be dragged along and out of the room.

“B-be c-caref-ful!” Barry calls after them, still sounding quite concerned, causing both Axel and James to call back in unison. “We will!”

Any thoughts of Mrs. Ming or Mimi, or anything else troubling are gone from Axel’s mind for the rest of the afternoon.

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James watches Barry shift a little on the couch, glancing around with the same nervousness that always clings to his friend whenever he is someplace new.

If James didn’t know him better, he would have thought it was just an odd quirk, something like how Barry tended to always bring the same food for lunch with just a minimum of variation every once in a while, or how he needed to keep everything tidy at the story, so much so, that James sometimes thought it bordered a little on being obsessive.

It is not a simple quirk, though.

The cup of coffee in his hand is warm, and the deep, rich smell of the beverage fills his nose as he takes a sip. Barry is holding his own cup too, both hands securely closed around it, but so far, he hasn’t tasted his vanilla-rooibos tea, probably still too winded up to even think of it.

The coffee shop James took Barry to is one of his favorites, very small and very cozy, with comfortable couches to sit on instead of the chairs you find in most places. It is a little old but well-kept, and there is something calming to the atmosphere, to the old-fashioned furniture and the bookshelves that take up nearly all the crème colored walls.

It is a nice spot to spend one’s later afternoon with a friend at, and right now, shortly after four p.m., not many people are around as it usually only starts to fill up shortly after six.

James has wanted to introduce Barry to this place for a while, and as he studies the other man over the rim of his cup, taking another sip, he hopes that he will end up enjoying it eventually just as he thought he would.

Barry deserves a small break, after everything that has been going on in his life over the last couple of months.

The blonde is deep in his own thoughts, glancing down at the light blue cup in his hands, a slight frown on his forehead, and James doesn’t notice it at first how his gaze drops down to the full bottom lip that is caught between Barry’s white teeth.

It is an unintentional movement of his eyes, and James quickly forces himself to look away when he catches himself doing what he knows would at best be seen as inappropriate by Barry, or at worst scare him off.

Barry has been incredibly skittish the last six weeks as it is, and with that memory comes also the one
of the blonde’s kidnapping.

James takes another sip, hardly noticing the taste of his drink this time, an anger simmering behind his brown eyes as he is now studying the little decorative flowers on the coffee table between them.

He didn’t expect that the man that had abducted them over a year ago would try to go after Barry again. Not that anybody did, clearly, but that hardly made any of this better.

James knows that it makes no sense for him to feel guilty about the whole disaster, he couldn’t have known, he isn’t and never was involved in the circles the Blue Velvet and other criminal organizations tend to gather.

Neither is Barry, but he has friends who are, and that clearly came back to haunt him.

Grinding his molars momentarily, James fights down the sudden surge of anger that tries to well up in his chest at the notion of what happened to Barry. The unfairness in all of this is enough for him to want to punch something. He is not a violent person, he never was, but-

A slight pang in his right temple causes James to squeeze his eyes shut for a second, and he reaches up to rub it.

“A-are y-y-you ok-kay?” Barry asks, quietly, nervously, causing James to look up once more, meeting the other man’s concerned eyes.

James can’t help but smile softly in return. Barry is always worried about the wellbeing of others, no matter how he himself is feeling. He has always been like that.

“I’m fine,” James assures him and lets his hands sink so that they end up resting on his lap.

It is not really a lie, he is okay, just feeling a little out of it, has so for a while now, though he is certain that it is mostly due to his grandmother’s death. He hasn’t got a lot of rest lately, and it started to show.

James leans back into the cushioned back of the sofa, and studies Barry. “I’m glad you’d time to come here with me.”

Barry gives him a small smile in return, one of these where the corner of his lips moves up only slightly, and that looks tired but warm all the same. “I-I’m g-g-glad y-y-you inv-v-vitat-ed m-me t-to.”

His stammer has gotten worse again. James noticed it the moment the other man opened the door to his flat the morning he visited him to inform him about lao lao’s passing.

His aversion to being close to others got worse too, as did the fear that is lingering in the deep sky-blue eyes of his no matter where he goes.

It is not hard to guess what caused it, and the thought itself fills him with a nearly sickening rage. He takes a deep breath, and forces the anger to lessen as he exhales, since he is aware that it would only intimidate Barry and cause him to feel on edge around him should he notice the aggression he is feeling.

“I wanted to take you here for a while now,” James explains and lowers his gaze back to the small table between them. “Something always cropped up, though.” He chuckles bitterly. “Like usual.”

The term workaholic was invented for people like him.
James presses his lips into a thin line, scowling down at the little, cheap plastic flowers, angry at himself once more for choosing his job over his grandmother so many times over the years.

And now she is gone.

The thought of having lost her still fills him with pain, it is a sharp, biting feeling, awful and miserable at the same time, and he wishes he could just make it go away.

“Y-you h-have n-now,” Barry points out softly, and his gaze holds both sympathy and understanding when James looks back at him.

“Yes,” James agrees quietly, the word hardly more than a whisper.

He eventually came around, didn’t he?

He should have done so earlier, though.

They fall quiet again, and James listens to the soft jazz music playing in the background and to the murmur of the other customers around them. The sadness that fills him then is nearly stifling, and he swallows thickly.

“I’m sorry about my mother,” James says and grimaces as soon as the words have passed his lips.

Barry lifts his eyes from his lap and meets his in surprise.

“I-it’s ok-k-kay,” Barry assures him, a faint, unhappy smile tugging at his lips. “Sh-sh-she d-doesn’t h-have t-t-to k-keep th-the s-store o-op-pen.”

No, James agrees quietly, she doesn’t. It wouldn’t have caused her any trouble if she had, though. He would have looked after it, and Barry pretty much had been handling the business on his own for months now. Suzan would have lost nothing by keeping it open, and she knows it, James is certain of it.

His mother knew how much the little store meant to her mother, though, how much it meant to her son, and being the spiteful person she is, she closed it down as soon as she had the legal means to do so.

James blinks, fighting down the emotions of hurt and anger, and averts his gaze to the window that is next to their table, behind which he can see people moving around, cars passing by, and the light of the day dimming away.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Barry tells him. “A-and I-I d-don’t n-need t-to w-w-work th-there f-f-for u-us t-to m-meet u-up.”

Surprised, James turns back to Barry, who studies him with a slight frown. “Y-y-you kn-know th-th-that I-I d-don’t h-hold i-it a-ag-gainst y-y-you, J-James, d-don’t y-y-you?”

Yes, James knows that. Barry wouldn’t do that, he never gets angry at people who don’t deserve it… or even at those who do. At least, it looks like that to James, and this makes it difficult for him to decide whether Barry should be angry with him, should hate him a little bit for how he just let his mother take that away from them.

If his grandmother were still alive alive, she wouldn’t have let this happen.

In a way, she did, though, didn’t she? James can’t help but hate himself for thinking so, but he
knows that it is true. Lao lao could have insisted in her will that Suzan had to keep the store open if she wanted it, or she could have given it to James in the first place, but she didn’t.

Guilt runs deep in his family, thick like blood, maybe thicker, and James knows that his grandmother hoped despite everything that her daughter would maybe finally forgive her and do the right thing.

At moments like this, James can’t help but resent his mother for how she never wanted them to be her family, for how she never wanted them to be around at all.

He swallows thickly again, and takes a small sip from his coffee, the misery clinging heavily to his shoulders.

“J-James…” Barry sounds worried and uncertain, not sure how to help him, and somehow having him there, knowing that he will still be there tomorrow, next week, or in a year, is like a balm.

“I’m sorry,” James says, meeting his friend’s eyes apologetically. “I’m okay, Barry, I really am, I’m just… it is still hard not to have her with us anymore.” He reaches up and brushed over his eyes, wiping away the first traces of tears he isn’t willing to let fall. “I miss her, all the damn time, no matter where I am or what I do, or… or who I’m with.” He chuckles wetly, miserably. “It’s still so unreal… I sometimes get up in the morning and feel fine, because I forget that… and then I remember…”

Gritting his teeth, he breaks off.

It hurts.

It hurts so much.

He is a grown man, why can’t he deal with this like he is supposed to?

His mother would watch him with reproach could she see him now, he doesn’t doubt it-

“J-Jam-mes?” Barry’s voice is low, soft, *pained*, and James glances up towards him before he can even think what he is doing. Warm tears run down his cheeks, but he hardly notices them, as he stares at the hand Barry is holding towards him across the table. It is an offer of comfort, of solidarity, one that must cost Barry a lot to give, seeing how badly he takes being touched these days.

James shouldn’t take it; he can see that it is trembling slightly and knows how difficult this is for his friend. He should man up and be able to deal with this on his own.

He can’t, though, he just can’t, and instead he grasps the offered comfort and welcomes it desperately.

Barry doesn’t flinch, doesn’t grimace, he tenses up some more, but his eyes stay warm as he meets his. “I-I’m h-here f-for y-you, o-ok-kay?”

The lump in James’ throat feels like it must be of the size of a baseball, and the urge to cry is nearly smothering.

Something cracks in him, it is like porcelain that gets shattered under too much pressure, and he starts to weep as quietly as he can.

There are other people around, a young pair at the table next to them, but James doesn’t care, not right now. He holds on to Barry’s warm, firm hand, and allows himself to grieve, his mother’s disapproving gaze momentarily forgotten.
Len hates graveyards, always has.

As a kid, he found them creepy, and he still does, though he would rather bite his tongue off than let anybody in on that little secret.

Cemeteries are just miserable places by default, and while Len knows that some people find the quietness and calm that comes with visiting a gone loved one soothing, he has always thought that to be a little absurd.

It’s a place of death, of misery and grief, and just being at one without visiting someone close to him is usually enough to set his teeth on edge with unease.

Shifting slightly, Len studies the gravestone he is standing in front of, and he can’t help but think he would rather be anywhere else than here.

His mouth is a thin line as he studies the cold, smooth stone he can hardly make out in the darkness surrounding him.

The air is cold and still holds the last traces of winter that will soon be gone, though it is probably the late hour that is giving it its current biting edge.

The air is cold and still holds the last traces of winter that will soon be gone, though it is probably the late hour that is giving it its current biting edge.

It is close to one in the morning, and, so far, Len really seems to be the only living person around here. He prefers it that way, since he could get himself and the others into serious trouble if someone noticed that he had broken in after the graveyards closing hours.

The Rogues are pretty much non-existing in the public right now, and he wants to keep it that way. Getting himself taken down by some guy from the cemetery night watch would certainly be cause for ruckus he would rather avoid. The thought is amusing in a way, though, since he doubts that any of the guards can really stop him from escaping. As soon as they realize who he is, they will likely not put up much of a fight, thanks to his reputation.

A crooked smirk tugs at his lips, and he can picture Barry’s disapproving look clearly, as well as Lisa’s exasperating glare, since wouldn’t it be just dandy for him to get the heat back on them after he put his foot down and ordered to stay low at least for a couple weeks longer?

Len snorts, very aware that he currently won’t win any popularity vote among the other Rogues.

The amusement quickly slips from his mind. The depressing, uneasy mood is just too potent for any trace of humor to hold up against it any length of time, and he pushes his hands deeper into the pockets of his jacket, his focus back on the gravestone in front of him.

The surrounding silence appears nearly oppressive to him, even though a main road lies not too far from here, and if he looks to his right, he can make out the lights of close-by buildings behind the row of trees that surrounds the Keystone City cemetery. Even so, he feels oddly isolated, and for second he regrets having declined Lisa’s offer to come with him.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep, slow breath, noticing the scent of snow in the air. The weather has been shit for weeks now, with three actual blizzards seeking the Twins home within just as many weeks.

Marco has been in a miserable mood, taking having to lay low worse than the rest, and while nobody said anything so far, Len is certain he is not the only one who has by now got the suspicion that the Weather Wizard really isn’t all that dependent on his Weather Wand anymore to wreak havoc…
That is a can of worms he is not going to open now. He prefers to put off doing so for as long as he can, and a small part of him hopes that this problem will vanish before it really can grow into an outright catastrophe, like he expects it to.

He reaches up to rub his eyes and pushes that particular source of trouble away from his mind for now.

Reluctantly, Len turns back to the grave he came here to visit, a visibly new one, which along with two of the three bouquets of flowers resting on it, is covered by a thick blanket of snow. The still visible one is from him, though it was really Barry who got it for him, and Len knows that Izzy would have punched him for this little fact if she were still alive.

One of the two bouquets covered by snow is from Barry, and Len thinks that it must be the second one the blonde left here so far since Izzy’s funeral. The last one has to be from one of Izzy’s friends, Len guesses Camellia, one of the women she hung out with during most of her free time. The thought that someone else cared enough about Izzy to pass by and leave her flowers for her is somewhat reassuring and eases the guilt a little that sits coiled up in the pit of his stomach.

He has been feeling guilty for a while now, shortly after his self-righteous anger over what Izzy did started to calm down and wither away, and instead was replaced by the realization that she was truly gone.

“You could have come to me,” Len says quietly, shifting in restless, nervous energy, though his gaze doesn’t leave the gravestone that was put here not even a week ago, after he had pulled in a favor of an old acquaintance who made sure that she would get it, making her grave one of the few among the numerous ones that are marked with nothing more than cheap metal crosses. It did cost quite a sum, and Lisa clearly didn’t approve judging by the look she shot him when Abe let him know how much it would be, but Len really didn’t and still doesn’t care.

Izzy was a complicated, rash, sometimes outright mean-spirited woman, but he grew to like her a lot over the years. She was a friend, someone he trusted and whose company didn’t grate on his nerves most of the time, but to which he even looked forward to. Their relationship was uncomplicated, easy, refreshingly so, and Izzy knew how to help him to relax and help him out in one of his bitter, dark moments when he was so wrought up with anger that he could hardly contain it.

This is something he won’t share with Barry nor Lisa, or anybody else.

Len presses his lips into a thin line, and not for the first time since Izzy’s passing it feels like regret and guilt are eating away at his insides.

“I’d have helped you,” Len goes on after a long moment, bitterness clinging to his words. “You could have trusted me.”

Though, he isn’t sure whether that is utterly true, and it is obvious that the sentiment didn’t go both ways.

Izzy lied to him, went behind his back, betrayed him, and got herself into that horrible situation because of that. He honestly doesn’t know how he would have reacted should she have told him about what she did. He would probably have kicked her out, too furious to think, at least for a while, but he would have come around eventually. Izzy hadn’t been just a whore to him, not like he tried to make Barry believe.

It is true that he never loved her or wanted to get into a relationship with her, but after sharing your bed with someone for so long, you grow to know them very well, seeing that there is hardly anything
more intimate than sex.

Despite how livid Len initially felt after learning from Barry about her betrayal, now, weeks later, there is not much of the anger left.

Thinking of her causes mostly just sadness and regret to settle over him.

“I should have never let you get this close,” Len says quietly.

She should have known better than to let herself get attached, an angry part of him thinks, and it is true, seeing that letting feelings get involved in one’s profession is probably nowhere else as dangerous as in the prostitution business. It only can lead to misery.

What should, could, or would have been doesn’t matter, though.

Izzy is dead. So is the child in Izzy, and Len doesn’t feel half as relieved as he thought he would when it turned out that it wasn’t his.

Lisa is right, he couldn’t offer anything to a babe, kids just don’t fit in the world he chose to live in.

That doesn’t mean that, for a very short time, he didn’t allow himself to imagine what it would be like to have a son or a daughter, to be a father.

Len reaches up and rubs his eyes, sighing wearily.

He would never have a child of his own, and everybody is probably better off due to that.

“I’m pissed at you,” Len tells Izzy’s gravestone, and while he is only speaking to the cold night air, it helps a little to ease the tension in his chest. “I thought I could trust you, I though…” He breaks off and scoffs at himself. “I’m an idiot, aren’t I?” He chuckles humorlessly and lets his hand sink.

A minute ticks by, and he makes a step back, away from the grave, but doesn’t turn to leave just yet.

“I am really sorry for how all of this turned out, Izzy. You got yourself into this fucking mess, and that’s on you, but… I should have realized earlier that I was hurting you.” He frowns. “I never wanted to lead you on.”

He really never meant to do so, though that hardly makes any of this better.

“I hope you’re doing okay wherever you are… I’ll be around.” Len turns and makes his way over to the small chapel at the south side of the cemetery where Sam will pick him up via the restroom mirror.

Len hardly notices that the snowfall has started again as he walks over the snow covered ground, not looking back once.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! ;)

I'll keep myself short, I'm staying at my parent's place because today is mother's day, and it is always annoyingly bothersome to upload a chapter via my phone.
I hope you guys liked the chapter, please feel free to leave me a comment, you know I love them! ;)

Next chapter will be up in two weeks as usual! Till then! <3
Barry lies on his back with his blanket up to his chin as he stares at the ceiling above him.

He can’t bring himself to get up.

It isn’t that something is actually physically wrong with him to prevent him from getting out of bed, but he still can’t. It is as if an unseen weight is pushing down on him, making even the slightest movement a chore.

The world outside his little apartment is still dark, and a glance to the small alarm clock on his bedside table tells him that it is shortly after four.

He had another nightmare, his chest still heaving from waking up in wordless terror, and, like usually after one of those, it takes him a while to shake the last traces of it off and calm down.

His shirt is sticking to him uncomfortably below the thick blanket that is covering him, and he thinks about getting up and changing, but the mere notion alone is dauntingly exhausting.

He has sweat through the thin grey shirt while trying to fight off the attackers his mind created for him, and he tries not to remember any of it as he stares into the darkness above him, listening to his too quick and sallow breathing.

A slight tremor is clinging to his limbs that feel heavy while at the same time a nervous energy skitters just below the surface of his skin.

It’s not enough to get him to move, though. The thought of getting up to get some water crosses his mind, but he considers it only fleetingly. His throat is dry, his tongue feel too big and heavy, and he is thirsty, but he can’t get himself to move.

“N-no…” Barry whispers into the silence of the empty room and closes his eyes.

This lethargic feeling is no stranger to him, and he realizes all too quickly what it means, what it announces.
He hasn’t had to deal with this form of depression in a long while, not since his late teens, just a few years prior to meeting Iris.

Simon called it Barry’s blue blues, a silly little nickname that still somehow made it easier to handle.

Simon…

Barry opens his eyes again, not surprised by the tears that run down his cheeks, and swallows thickly.

This won’t do, letting himself get dragged down by his own mind won’t help him, it will make things only harder.

The last month has been hard enough as it is, he doesn’t need to deal with this on top of everything.

“M-mayb-be i-it’s n-noth-thing,” Barry whispers to himself, shivering.

Maybe he is lucky, and it is only a fluke, a reaction to yesterday’s job interview, the last one of a long string that went nowhere. Being rejected again and again is tiring. It feels like he is trying to push against a wall that just won’t budge.

He can’t let himself think like that, this won’t help, and he knows that, knows where it will leave him if he doesn’t force himself to move, to get up and face another day, get through it.

Because, what else can he do?

Nothing, a cold voice whispers to him, and Barry is aware of how untrue that is, but he feels so tired and trying to give himself a prep talk appears like an unmanageable task to him.

It is still early, he should go back to sleep, he would probably feel better after he caught another one or two hours of sleep. Rest helps, after all.

Sometimes, at least.

The nightmares, though, he doesn’t want to face them again just yet. He doesn’t want to face them at all, if he can help it, but like with so many other parts of his life, he doesn’t seem to have any control over that.

Cameron is just lurking around the corner, in the darkness of his mind Barry doesn’t dare to peer into when he is awake. He can feel him, and it isn’t surprising in the slightest that this horrible man became part of the collection of awful people who haunt him in his sleep at times.

Eventually, like with Michael and so many others, the dreams will cease, become less and farther in-between, but right now hardly a night goes by where he isn’t ripped out of his rest by one of those painful scenes his mind comes up with to terrify him.

Compared to what others did to him in the past, Cameron’s act was hardly that bad, but after the last couple of years passing by without anybody sexually assaulting Barry, it felt somehow nearly worse. Like early on during his time in prison, after over a decade of living free from all that awfulness he had hoped was behind him.

Feeling like his limbs are made of lead, his insides raw and hurting, Barry closes his eyes and swallows around the lump in his throat. He doesn’t notice how he drifts off again mere seconds later.

A hand on his shoulder wakes him, shaking him lightly, and the punch he blindly throws in response
is a kneejerk reaction.

It doesn’t connect, not that it surprises him with how stiff and sluggish his body feels, and terror
overcomes him and makes everything in his chest constrict. It turns his scream of protest into a small,
croaking whimper.

“...right, Barry. It’s fine, it’s just me, you’re okay,” someone says, voice low, calm, and clearly
worried, and it takes Barry a ridiculous long moment to recognize that it is Len. His body relaxes
immediately, and he slumps back against the mattress, exhaling a soft, miserable groan.

His head hurts, and his tongue feels like it is covered in fur and swollen.

“L-Len-ny?” Barry croaks and blinks to clear his vision as he tries to focus on the other man.

Len hums in agreement, his hand back on Barry’s shoulder once again, rubbing soothing circles into
his still taut muscles. The touch makes him feel odd, apprehensive, and he nearly shakes it off, but
ends up not doing so. He may not like the feeling of another person touching him right now, but it is
still somehow grounding and calming, since it is Len who does so.

“Wh-what…” Barry coughs slightly and swallows, or tries to, as his mouth is utterly dry. The
hand on his shoulder vanishes, causing him to make a small, protesting sound as he feels Len get up
next to him.

“I’ll be back in a second,” Len assures him. “I’m just getting you a glass of water.”

The thought of something to drink causes Barry to stay quiet and bury half his face into his pillow
with a soft, tired sigh.

The throbbing behind his temples is painful, and he keeps still, not wanting to anger his already
hurting body anymore by accident. Squinting in the room, he notices the faint light that is falling
through his window, and realizes that he will have to get up soon as he has another job interview
around noon.

The mere notion of it causes dread to settle over him like a heavy cold blanket, and he squeezes his
eyes shut as he tries to push the thought away for now.

Len enters the room a minute later, and Barry shoots him a grateful look when he sits down next to
him once more. He rolls onto his back and grimaces as he tries to swallow. His mouth feels like a
barren wasteland, enough so that his throat actually hurts.

“Can I help you sit up?” Len asks, and in the shallow morning light Barry can clearly make out the
concern in his eyes which causes him to worry in return about why his friend is here.

Usually, Len lets him know beforehand if he intends to pass by or asks him whether he can do so.
He hardly ever just comes over unannounced these days, which has been a nice change, as Barry
never really minds having him over, but it still calms him to know when to expect him.

“Barry?” Len repeats, patiently, and Barry realizes that he hasn’t answered his earlier question.
Having somebody touch him isn’t something Barry wants to experience right now, but he is thirsty,
his head hurts, and he feels oddly weak, so much so, that just lifting his head feels like a chore.

The fact, that it is Len makes it also a little easier to nod in agreement, and he hardly flinches when
he feels the other man push his hand under his upper back and help him sit up.

The water feels amazing, and it is when Barry swallows the first sip that he realizes how thirsty he
really is. He grips Len’s wrist as if to make sure that he won’t pull the offered drink away, a silly reaction but he can’t help himself, and empties the glass within seconds. Releasing a soft sigh, he closes his eyes and leans back heavily, feeling much better already.

Len helps him lie down and puts the empty glass on the small bedside table. Barry watches him his eyes half-closed. A deep exhaustion is still clinging to him despite the fact that he slept relatively well for the most part of last night.

Briefly, the dream with Cameron crosses his mind, the feeling of being suffocated while his skin felt too tight-

A shudder runs through him, and he forces his attention back on Len, who is watching him quietly with sombre, thoughtful eyes.

“I-is e-ev-eryth-thing a-alr-r-right?” Barry asks, concerned once more by his friend’s behavior. “D-did s-someth-thing h-hap-pen?”

Briefly, a frown settles over Len’s features, and Barry wonders what happened, and whether everybody is alright. His friends didn’t do another job last night as far as he knows, and when Barry was over yesterday, there was the by now familiar tension in the air but everything seemed like usual.

“You’ve been sleeping the whole day,” Len finally explains, causing Barry’s eyes to widen in surprise and confusion. “Sam checked up on you a couple of times, and he told me that he doesn’t think you left your bed at all.”

“Wh-what?” Barry glances over to his clock, and his stomach drops when he realizes that it is already past six in the evening.

He has slept through the whole day!

How is that possible, he is sure he was awake before Len arrived. At least, he feels like there could have hardly passed more than half an hour-

His body freezes in horror when he realizes that this means he missed his job interview.

A tremble overcomes him, and he inhales sharply, feeling nauseous all of a sudden.

He missed the job interview!

When Ms. Jenkins finds out about this, she will get so mad, this was the one she personally arranged for him!

“Hey,” Len speaks in a low, calming voice, causing Barry’s wide, frightened eyes to meet his. “Hey, it’s fine, you obviously needed it.” His hand is back on Barry’s shoulder, though he keeps the touch very light, making it clear that he will pull back any second if necessary. “You’ve had troubles sleeping for weeks now, Barry, it’s good that you were finally able to catch up on some.” The worry that lingers on his face makes it clear that he doesn’t really think so, though, and Barry, whose mind still feels sluggish from sleeping for so long, wonders for a split-second whether Len is angry at him for missing the interview too.

Tears well up in his eyes and start to wet his cheeks once more as he takes a shuddering breath, biting down on a whimper.

If Ms. Jenkins thinks that he doesn’t take this serious, he can get in so much trouble, she can decide
that he is breaking his parole requirements, and he can’t let this happen. He can’t go back to prison.

He can’t!

Len hushes him again, rubbing comforting circles with his thumb on Barry’s trembling shoulder. “You aren’t in any trouble because of this.”

Barry whimpers in protest and buries his face behind his hands, a familiar hopelessness slivering its way around him, like ice-cold fingers, which makes it even harder to fight for composure.

The pain behind his temples intensifies, spreads to his forehead and the base of his skull, and he wishes Len didn’t come over to wake him, no matter that it clearly was a sensible thing to do.

“You’re safe,” Len tells him, tone soft but certain. “You needed a break, Barry, and your body probably just took it when you kept ignoring it.”

“I-I h-h-had a-a j-j-job-”

“Forget the job interview or anything else for once, you haven’t given yourself any time to rest since…” Len breaks off, and Barry doesn’t need him to say it out loud to know what he is talking about.

Since Cameron kidnapped him.

Barry presses the balls of his hands against his eyes, his mouth a thin, unhappy line.

They haven’t talked about it yet, not really, at least. Neither Len nor he wants to touch upon the subject, and it has turned into the metaphorical elephant in the room between them these days.

Nobody has tried to make Barry talk about what happened while Cameron had him, not that it was necessary, he quickly realized that his friends may not know any details, but they know the essentials.

The mere notion that Cameron could have tried to goad Len on by boasting to him how he… how he…

Barry grits his teeth hard enough that the muscles in his jaw and neck start to hurt, and he would give a lot to not feel this horribly helpless.

Or ashamed.

Len stays quiet, for which Barry is grateful, because he doesn’t want him to say that everything is alright.

Nothing is alright, absolutely nothing.

He was raped again, Mrs. Ming is dead, he lost his job, and he is unable to find a new one.

A sob forces itself past his lips, and he feels his throat work as he tries to fight the next one down.

Why can’t he catch a break? Why can’t his life go fine for a while without something miserable happening in the end? He hates this! He doesn’t want to do this anymore, always moving on and on, and on, and getting nowhere. He is tired.

He is so tired…
Barry is startled out of the string of depressing thoughts by a hand grasping his, and it is then that he realizes that he has stopped fighting for composure and is crying once more. His face heats up, and he turns it away from Len, embarrassed by how he can’t keep it together, though he doesn’t try to pull his hand out of his grasp.

Every part of him feels heavy and disgusting, dirty, and it has been feeling so for over a month now. It doesn’t matter how often he showers, whether he scrubs himself down till he bleeds, this horrible sensation of being defiled doesn’t go away.

Eventually, it will get better, Barry knows so from experience, but that is hardly a comfort right now, and he wishes there is something he can do that makes it all just go away.

It makes him so angry to think that he nearly lived for half a decade without anybody abusing him, long enough to start believing that he could be a normal person like others, only to have it ripped away from him as a horrifying reminder that he is nothing like other people, that abuse follows him around like a shadow.

It can’t be normal what is happening to him. There are other victims of abuse, with constant violence in their lives, but they usually accept it, let it become a twisted form of stability to them, but Barry tried so hard to not become like that, he doesn’t want to think of himself as someone who attracts that kind of sickness.

What if he does, though? Why else would this happen to him again and again?

*It’s not my fault! I didn’t want it,* Barry thinks angrily, desperately, but even in his own head he has started to doubt it once more.

Thinking like that is dangerous, even harmful, but he can’t ignore the fact that he seems unable to get away from this twisted part of his life.

Cameron called him broken, that sick man saw something in him that was clearly alluring enough that he wanted Barry to become one of his *dolls* and own him-

The memory of the act itself, of the helplessness and fear, and the horrible humiliation that followed soon afterwards, slams into Barry without warning, and he pushes himself up before he can even think what he is doing and throws up onto the blanket covering his lap.

There is nothing in his stomach other than water, but the nausea doesn’t let off after it is empty, and for the next couple of minutes his body is wrecked by dry heaves with tears streaking down his face while his body is trembling like a leaf. He hardly notices it, though, since there seems to be nothing but that horrible nausea that goes deep enough that it has latched onto his very bones.

Both of Barry’s hands are clenched into fists and pushed into the mattress next to his thighs, so that he wouldn’t tumble over into his own vomit with how lightheaded he has started to feel, and he is truly grateful that Len let go of him the moment he pulled back. Despite not being able to handle his touch, Barry is glad to have him at his side, even when he is nearly drowning in the misery that has latched onto him once again.

Len doesn’t touch him during the ordeal, he understands that he won’t give Barry any comfort that way, but after the waves of nausea finally subsided enough that the dry heaving stops, he carefully rolls the blanket up and leaves the room with it, probably taking it to the bathroom where the laundry basket is.

Barry doesn’t move an inch, his eyes are closed, and he tries to listen to Len moving around in his
flat through the throbbing in his ears. His heart is beating harshly against his ribs, and his body feels feebly. It is an odd sensation, like his limbs are made of paper and should he move, they will crumble.

The tears keep coming, but he is too exhausted to care anymore, and when Len comes back, he forces himself to open his eyes and glance up to him, feeling miserable, embarrassed, and just plain tired. Len meets his gaze, and Barry expects the tension and worry, but is surprised and a little unsettled by the anger.

“I’m not angry at you,” Len says as he stops next to the bed, not missing what goes through Barry’s head, and his voice is that forced kind of calm that makes it obvious that he is keeping a strict grip on his emotions. What he sees in Barry’s expression doesn’t seem to satisfy him, as he keeps standing, and watches him with a slight frown. “I am not, Barry.”

Averting his eyes, Barry wordlessly looks down at his lap. He doesn’t know what to say, or how even to feel, and right now it is impossible to ignore the voice in the back of his mind that tries to convince him that Len must have picked up on the fact that there is something wrong with him by now as well. That Barry is attracting these horrible things and sick people like light is attracting moths.

A tense moment of silence passes between them, and the weight on Barry’s shoulders seems to grow heavier and heavier with each second. He glances up in surprise and worry when he hears Len move and walk away from the bed. Briefly, he is certain that his friend will leave, and that he somehow succeeded in messing up things between them completely. The notion alone causes his throat to close up and his eyes to burn again.

To his relief, Len doesn’t leave, though, not even the bedroom. Instead, he walks over to Barry’s cupboard and picks up the spare blanket he has stashed in there.

Barry studies him quietly as he comes back to him and doesn’t notices the tears that have started to run down his cheeks once more.

“Can I cover you with it?” Len asks, lifting the blanket a little as if to clarify, and adds. “It’s pretty chilly in here.”

Barry doesn’t trust his voice, and instead nods in agreement as the tight cold ball of tension and misery starts to slowly unwind in his chest. He lowers himself back down with some difficulty and watches Len spread the cover over him, nearly choking for moment on how thankful he is that he didn’t leave.

“You want me to get you something to drink?” Len meets his eyes, and Barry shakes his head. His stomach has started to calm down somewhat, but he still won’t be able to keep anything down.

“Okay.” Len seems like he expected that reply, and after hesitating briefly, he sits down next to Barry again, careful to leave some more room between them, though. “You think you can go back to sleep?”

“N-n-no,” Barry croaks and swallows thickly. He pulls his right hand out from under the cover and rubs his eyes with a soft sigh. While his body feels heavy and worn out, like he had just run a marathon, and his mind is sluggish, he slept too long for going immediately back to sleep, especially after that short episode.

Len nods, and his glaze drops to Barry’s hand that is now resting on his chest. He doesn’t ask whether he can touch him, though, and Barry doesn’t offer it either. Just having Len there is enough,
right now, and anything more will likely cause the panic he can feel lurking at the back of his mind to come forth.

Barry closes his eyes and tries not to acknowledge how messed up he is. How much Cameron messed him up, once more.

Silence settles between them, and it isn’t as tense or uncomfortable as he feared it would be, but there is a heaviness to it, that still is a stark difference to the ease that has become the normalcy between them these days.

After about ten minutes, Len gets up, and Barry listens to him refill the glass of water in the bathroom. He tilts the window above the bed when he returns, and Barry, feeling a little more settled than earlier, opens his eyes and gives him a grateful smile as the air in his bedroom has become stuffy by now.

“You want to try a sip?” Len asks, lifting the glass in his hand slightly, but Barry declines, since his stomach is still feeling too queasy.

Len nods and doesn’t seem surprised, instead he puts the water back on the bedside table while shifting a little to make himself more comfortable. Barry watches this with relief, as he was worried that his friend could want to leave now that he is doing better again.

“Marco nearly electrified Trickster today,” Len tells him out of the blue, and Barry, who has started to grow drowsy, needs a second to grasp what he was just told. He arches his eyebrow in surprise before he settles on a wince, feeling bad for both of his friends, as he knows what a pest James can be to the other Rogues if he got bored, and how Marco doesn’t pull his punches when he gets really pissed off.

“Wh-why?”

“Because Trickster is a twelve-year-old brat trapped in a man’s body,” Len replies with a snort that seems to hold as much exasperation as amusement. “The idiot thought it would be hilarious to replace Marcos shampoo with superglue.”

“N-n-no…” Barry groans on behalf of his friends, and the thought of Marco’s long hair nearly makes him wince.

“Yeah,” Len agrees with a pinched expression. “Marco didn’t find it particularly funny, and I wouldn’t even be surprised if he succeeded in strangling James by the time I get back.”

Seeing that James started to pull increasingly annoying pranks on the other Rogues over the last month, Barry is not really surprised to hear about his friend’s latest shenanigan. They’d rather have James pulling stunts like that, though, instead of concentrating on increasingly crazy and dangerous experiments that could blow up their hideout.

The only problem is that the other Rogues’ tolerance for their colleague’s questionable kind of humor has been decreasing steadily over the last two months, and Barry worries that James is going to get himself in over his head because he doesn’t doubt that Mick or Marco would use a pulled prank as an excuse to get some of their pent-up aggression off by getting back on their friend.

“Th-th-they’re g-get-ting r-r-restl-less,” Barry remarks with a slight frown.

“We aren’t made up of guys who are good at laying low for too long,” Len reminds him with a shrug.
“M-maybe y-you s-split u-up f-f-for a-a b-bit ag-gain?” Barry knows that they tend to do so usually if they have to keep a low profile for a while. They’ve done so a few times since he has known them, and by now the atmosphere has gotten bad enough that he thinks it would be probably the most sensible for them to take one of those temporary breaks from each other.

“I d-don’t t-think t-that’s a g-good i-idea r-right n-now,” Len t-tells h-him a-and s-shrugs a-at h-his i-inq-uiring l-look. “W-We u-upset q-quite a f-few p-people i-in t-the r-recent p-past, i-it’s s-s-afer f-for u-us t-to t-tick t-together f-for n-n-nor-n.”

I-t’s c-clear t-that h-he i-is t-talking a-b-out C-Cameron’s d-death a-and h-how t-the B-Blue V-Velvet i-is l-likely n-not h-happy a-b-out t-the f-fact t-that t-the R-Rogues p-played a-crucial r-role i-in i-it. H-He s-should p-probably i-include B-Blacksmith, t-too, a-and n-neither o-of t-these p-parties i-is w-what B-Barry w-wants t-to t-talk o-or e-even j-just t-think a-bout r-right n-now. S-still, a-as t-the R-Rogues a-are s-sit-tting d-ducks, t-the T-Twins a-re p-probably n-not t-the s-safest p-place f-for t-them t-to b-be, c-considering t-that e-everybody w-will l-look f-for t-them h-here f-ffirst.

“W-Wh-what a-b-bout y-you a-ask-k-ing G-Gael f-f-for h-help?” B-Barry a-asks, s-still c-clearly r-remembering h-how a-amiable t-the r-relationship b-between t-the o-old t-thief a-and L-Len i-is. “C-Couldn’t y-y-you g-g-go a-a-and s-s-stay w-w-with h-him o-or h-his f-f-family f-f-for a-a w-wh-while?”

L-Len s-shoots h-him a-an a-an m-mused l-look a-and a-arches a-an e-eye-brrow. “A-Are y-you t-trying t-to g-get u-us t-to p-pull a h-heist i-in A-Austria o-or P-Peru?”

B-Barry s-smiles s-slightly. “L-Like y-you w-w-would e-ev-ver g-g-go b-behind t-the G-Gems’ b-back.”

“A s-saucy a-affair w-with a-an o-other c-country c-could s-spice t-things u-up,” L-Len p-points o-out, s-smirking.

“O-or y-y-you c-could j-just g-go th-there t-t-t o-t-take a-a b-break f-f-from e-everyth-thing th-that i-is g-going o-on,” B-Barry s-suggests.

“I g-guess t-that l-little i-idea d-doesn’t i-incl-u-ude y-you j-joining u-us?” L-Len a-asks, t-the llops-sided s-smirk s-still o-n h-his l-lips, t-though t-the h-humor i-in h-his e-eyes c-clearly d-dimmmed.

A-averting h-his g-gaze, B-Barry p-purses h-his l-lips u-unhappily a-and f-frowns. H-he c-can’t l-leave t-the G-Gems, n-not f-for n-nearly a-another t-two y-years, n-not i-if h-he d-doesn’t w-want t-to l-land b-back i-in p-prison. N-not t-that t-the t-thought o-of v-visiting a-another p-place h-hasn’t c-crossed h-his m-mind b-before. A-a p-part o-of h-him f-finds t-the i-idea o-of s-someplace e-else, s-someplace t-that i-is n-not f-filled w-with m-memories, q-quite a-alluring.

T-The G-Gems a-are h-his h-home, b-but a-ll a-has h-happened, a-and i-it h-hardly m-matters w-where h-he i-is s-since i-it s-seems t-to h-him l-like a-an y-corner r-reminds h-him o-of s-something h-he w-would r-rather n-not t-think a-bout, w-whether i-t be f-from h-his c-childhood o-o-r f-from n-not s-so l-long a-ago.

“I’ll t-think a-b-out i-it.” L-Len’s w-words p-pull B-Barry f-from t-the r-rather g-gloomy p-path h-his t-thoughts s-started t-to t-take, a-and h-he l-looks b-back t-to h-him i-in s-su-prise. T-The o-o-ther m-man g-gives h-him a a-tight s-smile. “M-maybe i-it r-really w-would b-be g-good f-for u-us i-if s-some o-of t-them t-took a l-little v-vacation.” H-He s-snorts. “G-Gael c-certainly h-has e-enough a-art p-pieces f-for t-them t-to s-steal t-to k-keep t-them b-busy f-for a-w-hile.”

“H-his g-gal-lery w-w-was a-alr-ready q-qu-quiet f-full wh-when w-w-w-e v-visited h-him,” B-Barry r-remarks a-and t-tries n-not t-to s-show h-how l-little h-he a-approves o-f G-Gael’s w-way t-to g-get t-to h-his a-art p-pieces.

L-Len w-watches h-him a-a-mused s-since h-he d-doesn’t m-miss h-his m-mild i-rritation, a-and s-shrugs. “G-Gael h-has m-more t-tha-n o-one g-gallery, B-Barry, t-the o-one h-he s-showed y-you i-is o-only h-his f-favorite o-one.”

“O-of c-course,” B-Barry a-agrees d-drily a-and r-rubs h-his f-forehead, b-because h-he r-really d-didn’t e-expect a-anything e-else.

“Y-you’re h-having a h-headache?” L-Len s-studies h-him w-with s-a-slight f-frown, c-causing B-Barry t-to s-smile t-tiredly a-as
he covers his eyes with his hand.

“A little,” Barry says and sighs. A likely reason for the throbbing behind his temples is a mild dehydration as he hasn’t drunk anything since yesterday, or nothing that he kept down. He glances to the glass on his bedside table, and considers trying to take a few small sips since his stomach has calmed down by now.

Len picks up on it, and helps him to drink some of the water without being asked, all the while careful not to touch him too much. The mindfulness causes the tension in Barry’s body to ease away some more, and he shoots him a grateful look when he helps him back down.

“You look better,” Len remarks after he sat back. “You aren’t as pale as a ghost anymore.”


They watch each other silently for the next couple of minutes, the mood between them relaxed once more, and the only sound that can be heard is the one of the world outside reaching them through the tilted window.

“I know that we haven’t…” Len breaks off, grimacing, and his words startle Barry slightly, who has started to drift off.

Briefly, Len looks very much ill at ease, like he really doesn’t want to breach whatever subject he is about to touch upon, and Barry’s stomach drops.

“You can talk to me,” Len forces himself to go on, and seems to shake his discomfort off when he notices Barry’s scared, slightly mortified expression. “I’m not really good with… I don’t know what to say to make you feel better, but I can listen, if you want to talk about what happened to you while Cameron held you captive.”

Barry looks away, his face suddenly feels much too hot, and his skin seems too tight and starts to itch again, though he forces his hands to keep resting next to his body.

Even though he is certain by now that his friends know what Cameron did to him, it is still no less unsettling to suddenly be confronted with the reality of it.

“Wh-wh… wh-what d-do y-y-you…” Barry swallows and coughs lightly, his eyes not meeting Len’s as he forces himself to get the words out even though speaking is ridiculously difficult. “Wh-what d-did h-he t-t-tell y-y-you?”

Len doesn’t reply immediately but studies him silently, probably thinking about what to say. He sounds reluctant when he finally speaks, quietly, “The bastard said that he raped you.”

Barry feels bile rise to the back of his throat and he squeezes his eyes shut as he turns his head, so that he is facing away from his friend.

The anger and humiliation are nearly smothering for a minute, and he forces himself to concentrate on his breathing, on how his body presses into his mattress, the blanket covering him, on the present, on where he is right now.

What Cameron did was horrible, but the man is gone, and it is over. Barry knows that what he feels is not real, there is nobody touching him, it is all in his head.

“Barry-“

Len looks honestly taken aback for a second, but the surprise is quickly replaced by a grim understanding, and he nods. “You don’t have to talk about it, but I’m here in case you maybe want to one day.”

The idea alone that he would want to talk to anybody about what was done to him is absurd, but Barry knows that this can change, and it is touching that Len would offer to listen, despite how sickening it is what Cameron did to him.

“You can also talk to Lisa, if that’s easier for you,” Len adds and meets his surprised look with a faint smile. “I don’t doubt that she would be willing to listen, and maybe it is easier for you to talk to her.”

“Th-thank y-y-you,” Barry says quietly and feels briefly overwhelmed by the love he feels for the other man, and how glad he is to have him here and that he understands.

It takes him a couple of minutes till he has his emotions under control again, and when he feels mostly calm again, the exhaustion is back with full force.

“You should go back to sleep,” Len advises, and cups Barry’s right hand lightly with his own. “I’ll stay.”

“N-no.” Barry shakes his head and pushes himself up into a sitting position. He shoots Len an uncertain look as he asks, “C-can I c-c-come o-o-over a-and s-stay a-at th-th-e h-h-i-d-e-o-u-t f-f-o-r a-a l-l-l-i-t-t-l-e w-w-h-i-l-e?”

“Sure,” Len agrees, though he studies Barry with a slight frown before he gets up and offers him a hand.

Ten minutes later, Barry finds himself on the couch in the living area of the Rogues current bolthole, with most of his friends once again playing a game of poker, while James joined him, sitting on the ground next to where Barry’s head is resting. The younger man is letting him know about a number of ideas he has for new gadgets, even though Len told him not to bother Barry before he joined Lisa in the kitchen who insisted on preparing Barry some noodle soup.

It is nice and calming being among his friends, and as he listens to James crazy and rather worry-some idea of a gun that looks like a nose and shoots acid-snot, he feels like he is drifting off.

The numbing heaviness from earlier has been replaced by a much lighter sensation and him feeling more at ease, and while the cold touch of misery and sadness is still lingering in his mind, he has something else to concentrate on, and for now that is enough.

Chapter End Notes

It seems that Barry is not dealing as well with what has happened as he wants to, which is not surprising, considering what he has on his plate right now. Thankfully, Len is there to pick him up and support him as good as he can.

Depression is something I probably haven’t really touched upon outright in this story so
far, Barry clearly showed signs of it a couple of times, but I never really spelled it out like I did here. Barry is dealing with PTSD, has so since he left prison, and in the past before that too, though it’s not always badly enough that it cripples him into being unable to do anything. Due to his past he learned to cope with it in a way that allows him to lead a somewhat normal life, but as you can see in this chapter, he is currently in a place his usual coping mechanism aren’t working too well.

Barry worrying about whether he is at fault for the abuse in his past is something probably most victims of sexual assault or violence had to deal with in some way, and him worrying that he doesn’t want to become like someone who needs abuse as a stable in their lives because they don’t know any better is not a view I myself share. I don’t think people who aren’t able to live without violence in their lives are very common, but every person deals with trauma differently, especially if they had to come up with a strategy to survive in a horrible environment they weren’t able to escape from, and suddenly being free of one’s tormentor probably can be scary in its own way. I think one has to be very careful when talking about a person ‘needing’ such an environment, though, because it is a form of victim blaming, and such a thing is always wrong. Barry in Singularity is someone who never sought out help to deal with what happened to him, and while he is a very smart and goodhearted person, a part of him was never able to shake the doubt off about whether he isn’t really the one to blame for what happened to him, and with no professional help, he probably won’t be able to get over it.

I hope you were able to enjoy the chapter despite is mostly depressing tone. Things will start to look up again soon, since Barry is not someone who will let himself kept down for long, even if he suffers of bouts of depression, especially now that he has Len and his other friends who are looking out for him. :)

Next chapter will be a rather long one, and I’m looking forward to posting it, since it will have Barry interact with part of the JLA again, and one of my favorite GLs will make an appearance.

Thank you all for you kind feedback, I’m always more than happy about it. :)

To all of you who are in the middle of exam season, I wish you good luck with those!

Till Sunday in two weeks!
The Loss That Lingers

Chapter Summary

Barry is having a bad day, and things only get worse when two people from his past seek him out.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my amazing editor Quintessenzia! He did an amazing job as usual, and it is thanks to his efforts that this chapter got so much more enjoyable to read. :)

He also did amazing with his exams, and only has one hurdle to overcome before he is done with it (damn, I’m still dreaming of that day x)! Please wish him good luck! He will do a marvelous job as it is, I’m sure, but positive energy always helps!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weather is cold, rainy, and reflects Barry’s low mood perfectly.

As he steps out into the cold, late winter air, his gaze drifts up to the cloudy sky, and he wonders whether he will make it back to the bus stop in time to avoid the clearly approaching storm.

A faint thunder can be heard, and he presses his lips into a thin, annoyed line.

Of course, he will get drenched on his way home; it just fits to how miserable the rest of today has gone by so far.

He should have stayed home, why he even bothers to make it to these appointed interviews Ms. Jenkins organizes for him is beyond him by now.

Letting the door that leads to a small container office shut behind him, he makes his way down the grit stairs, where several dockworkers are currently busy with their tasks. They are busy enough that not one of them pays him any mind, and Barry is grateful, he feels like he failed once again. It causes him to feel small and embarrassed, enough so that he keeps his head low as he walks past the men.

His steps are slow, though, since there is no hurry for him to get back home. Mary is currently staying at his place as one of the pipes from her above neighbor burst and flooded part of her kitchen. Now, her living room is cramped with fans and heaters to get the walls dry before mold sets in, and Barry offered her to stay with him till the issue is resolved.

Having Mary there when he gets home generally is something he looks forward to, as his friend is just one of the sweetest persons he has ever been lucky enough to meet, but she will certainly ask about how the interview went, and he will have to tell her that he once again was turned down. She will undoubtedly try to comfort and encourage him, and while he is grateful for it, he really is also getting tired of running the gauntlet when it comes to his attempts to get a new job.
By now, the mere idea of him finding employment seem nearly ridiculous, since nobody seems interested to even allow him the possibility to prove himself.

This last interview was for the position as a warehouseman in Windsor Height near the port.

It ran as Barry expected it would, and not ten minutes after the start of the interview, the foreman added another stamp to the paper Barry has to carry to the job interviews to prove that he actually tries to apply somewhere. It also is a reminder that he, once again, was unable to succeed in convincing someone to hire him.

Failure is the word that hovers at the front of his mind, and Barry’s steps speed up as he tries to get as much space as possible between himself and the docks.

A part of him regrets that the Rogues have a meeting down in Peru today, and Hartley and James couldn’t tag along as they initially planned to. His two friends picked up on how much his current situation is eating away at him, and they started accompanying him when they could and offered Barry moral support.

It is a dangerous and stupid thing of them to do, and Barry is very much aware of it, but it usually helps him stay calmer and not be as depressed after the inevitable rejection.

James would likely try to cheer him up by pointing out that this position would have been a bad choice anyway due to its distance to his home since it would have taken him nearly one and a half hours to get here using the public traffic system.

“I-it a-als-so s-smells,” Barry murmurs to himself and can’t help but smile over that silly observation that would have quite certainly gotten an approving nod from James. Glancing over to the river, Barry slightly wrinkles his nose at how strong the rotten smell really is now that the wind is blowing it towards him.

Even so, he would have given about anything by now to be able to work here.

This whole affair is getting more and more ludicrous, he just wants a damn job to finally be done with those interviews during which people who know nothing about him scrutinize him like he is the dirt under their fingernails the moment they touch upon why he was in prison. He knew from the start that he would probably need patience because of his status as an ex-convict, but he had not counted on how difficult it really would turn out to be.

How do they organize jobs for other ex-convicts if clearly nobody even considers to give someone like him a chance?

The suspicion that Ms. Jenkins is getting him interviews which she knows he will most certainly fail crosses his mind not for the first time, but he angrily pushes that thought away. He doesn’t want to believe that she would do that to him.

She has no reason to, after all, and the thought that she could still want to make the situation even worse for him is unsettling and frightening.

Barry’s stomach ends that uneasy thought as it starts to rumble, reminding him that he has missed both breakfast and lunch today because he felt too nervous to eat anything. He saw a small dinner on his way here, and the idea of getting himself something causes his mouth to water.

It has been over two months since Barry lost his job, though, and while Mrs. Ming left him quite a lot of money, three thousand dollars can only last so long. He decides to head home and make himself something to eat there, instead.
Maybe Mary is up for some omelet with corn salad, an easy dish she really seems to enjoy just as much as he does.

Something heavy impacts with the top of the container Barry is just passing, loud enough that it causes him to come to an abrupt halt and freeze. He knows what causes a sound like that, he has heard it many times in the past, and his stomach drops as he lifts his eyes to look up to the two figures that have just joined him.

It has been years since Barry saw Oliver and Dinah in costumes, he caught glimpses of them on the news, of course, but seeing them again in person is something completely different. He stares at them, eyes wide, and doesn’t dare to move.

Judging by their expressions this is not a social call, not that it surprises Barry since he didn’t expect to meet them as their alter crime fighting egos again other than in case of him being in serious trouble.

For a few strained moments, nobody says anything, and Barry can feel his former friends’ eyes on him, studying him carefully.

The wind picks up, and a seagull screeches above them.

Green Arrow is the first one who breaks the uncomfortable silence, giving him a flouting smirk. “I knew the docks are the right place to find a rat.”

Barry stays quiet, still not daring to move, but then the archer jumps off the container and lands just a few feet away, which causes him to make an alarmed step back. Black Canary follows just a second later, her expression hard to read, and a part of Barry is grateful for it, because he doesn’t want to know what she is thinking when she is looking at him.

For a long minute, they watch each other silently, with wordless reproach and anger radiating off the archer who seems annoyed by him not reacting to his words at all, while Black Canary keeps her expression neutral.

Barry has no idea why they are here, or how they even knew where to find him, though a bitter small voice whispers to him that it must have been Bruce who pinpointed his whereabouts, and if he had to take a guess, he did so with the help of Ms. Jenkins. He has been wondering from the beginning whether Bruce is keeping taps on him that way or not, and he feels frustration bubble up in him for being stupid enough to hope that this won’t be the case.

The wind picks up, pushes against Barry and tugs at his coat, causing him to shiver, though it is only partly due to the cold.

For the Justice League to go to the trouble of finding him makes it clear that something has happened and they think he is somehow connected to it.

Briefly, he wonders whether this could be about the Rogues, but he squashes that thought immediately, not allowing it to settle and cause the panic he is already feeling to grow any worse.

“Any luck?” Oliver suddenly asks, a crooked smile on his lips that holds no warmth. “With your job interview?”

Another shiver runs through Barry since the idea that the other man could know why he is here is frightening and upsetting at the same time, and his face heats up in shame, even though it shouldn’t matter to him anymore what any of them think about him.
“Don’t take it so hard, Allen,” Oliver goes on as he seems to have guessed the answer to his question by Barry’s reaction. “In today’s economy, it is hard to find a job even without your unfortunate preference of fooling around with children.”

Barry flinches like he has been slapped, and the helplessness that overcomes him is nearly downing, because there is nothing he can do about any of this.

“Enough,” Dinah cuts in, her face grim, and she shoots Oliver a chiding look. “We aren’t here because of his private life, Green Arrow.”

“Right,” Oliver agrees with a scoff and walks up to him, giving Barry no time to flinch back before he has a firm, painful grip on his upper arm. “There are more pressing matters we’ve to focus on than discussing what you like to do in your free time.”

“Black Canary to the Watchtower,” Dinah says out loud, using the small communicator in her earpiece, and Barry’s legs would have given out if it weren’t for the hand holding him firmly upright.

No…

Barry’s stomach convulses painfully when they are teleported to the Watchtower a moment later, and he is very grateful for not having eaten anything today.

The teleportation area of the Watchtower looks different when they appear there, nearly nothing like Barry remembered it, and despite the sheer desperation and fear that has lodged itself firmly onto him, despite the intense feeling of disorientation that has overcome him, he briefly wonders how many times Bruce has re-envisioned it from scratch over the last decade.

J’onn is there, close to the controls of the teleporter, with Hawkgirl next to him, and Barry is assaulted by a sad sort of nostalgia as his gaze falls upon them. Contrary to their surroundings, neither of them seems to have changed at all. It is as if one of his memories came to life and was now standing in front of him-

Barry is roughly pushed forwards by Oliver, cutting the depressing thought off. “Move it,” he tells Barry impatiently, while Dinah makes her way over to J’onn and Shiera to exchange a few words with them.

For a split-second, Barry thinks about asking why he is here, about what is going on, but he decides against it since it will probably do him no good, and he still has the small hope that he can get out of here without being put back into prison if he just plays along.

As Oliver more shoves than leads him out of the teleportation station, J’onn’s eyes meet his, his expression grim but at the same time incredibly sad. This somehow leaves Barry feeling much more miserable than any of Oliver’s past snide remarks, and he quickly lowers his gaze to the ground.

Whether Shiera looks at him or not, he can’t say, nor does he really wants to know. She seems to listen to Dinah, but he does sense her piercing eyes on him, and he somehow knows that contrary to the Martian, she holds a far greater dislike and anger towards him.

Green Arrow leads him through the halls of the Tower, which have changed so much and become so alien to him that Barry is certain he will never be able to find his way around on his own.

The hallway they cross after a brief ride in one of the elevators seems a little familiar, at least. They are at the outer part of the satellite, and the wall facing space is nearly entirely covered by big windows, which allow a breathtaking view of what lies beyond.
The earth looks peaceful from so far above, and something constricts painfully in Barry’s chest as he remembers the last time he was up here, back then he didn’t have the slightest inkling of how his life would be thrown off the tracks just a few days later.

He gets another forceful push in the back as he has unintendedly slowed down when the memories overcame him, and he quickly picks up his speed, unwilling to make Oliver any angrier than he already is.

They end up in what has to be one of the new infirmary stations. It too is different to the ones Barry once knew, bigger and even more futuristic looking, like something out of the sci-fi shows Axel likes to watch when they are over at Eddy’s.

Its light is cold and bright, unsettling to Barry whose heartbeat picked up the moment he stepped inside as another bunch of painful memories assaults him. Memories of when his powers were taken from him, of the pain and disbelief, and desperation.

A hand grabs his upper arm once more, causing him to grow taut and whimper in fear, before he is dragged over to one of the examination tables. It worries him how Oliver’s patience is growing increasingly thinner with him as time passes.

“Take a seat and keep it shut,” Oliver tells him sharply and steps away from him, walking the brief distance to one of the control consoles not too far away from the medical table he left Barry at.

Not knowing what else to do but comply, Barry pushes himself onto the smooth surface, the metal cool and hard below his palms.

Then, they fall back into a tense silence, probably waiting for someone else to join them since they are the only ones present right now, and Barry has the uneasy premonition that someone will take a closer look at him.

Averting his gaze, Barry fights the urge to move. It is a little chilly in the room, and it would probably help him to rub his arms, but he doesn’t like the idea that he would look like he is trying to comfort himself in this awful situation, and while he knows that it is unnecessary as his fear is probably oozing off him, he still wants to try and keep at least some face in front of the archer.

His eyes wander nervously through the room, taking in the medical equipment without paying much mind to it. His thoughts feel like a startled flock of birds, restless, and hard to direct or focus.

The last time he was in a medical facility on the Watchtower, they injected him with nanites that took his powers and made any movement a living hell for months to come. A scared, bitter voice in the back of his mind whispers to him that this could happen again, that they knew of what happened at the paper factory.

They must have somehow learned of it, and they will force him to go through that horrible ordeal again.

Or worse.

“How’s life outside a prison cell treating you?” Oliver’s voice catches Barry off-guard, and he glances to the other man without turning his head. It is embarrassing, but Barry is afraid of the archer, knowing that the man would likely jump on any excuse to give him more than the bruise on his upper arm.

They’ve been in here for about five minutes now, so it doesn’t exactly surprise him that Oliver addressed him. Oliver has always been bad when it comes to keeping his dislike of a person or
situation to himself, his ego doesn’t allow it, and that knowledge worries Barry.

He stays quiet, ignores the bait, and judging by how Oliver’s expression darkens as he keeps watching him like he is some disgusting vermin he would like nothing more than to stomp on, he is not happy about his refusal to be goaded on. Not that this will keep him from telling Barry exactly what he thinks of him.

“You’ve been in the Heights for over half a decade, Allen, it must have been hard to get used to the outside world again,” Oliver proceeds just as Barry expected he would. “Especially with no walls or guards keeping you from going after little boys.” The smile he gives Barry is cold and sharp, threatening, really. “I’m sure you miss it, a place where you finally fit in just right, with other people that share your twisted little urges.”

Barry averts his gaze back to the white floor in front of him, his lips pressed into a thin line once more, and he refuses to think of what happened to him in prison. Instead, he tries not to listen to the scornful words, while he reminds himself of how little Oliver knows and how little his opinion should mean to him.

The words cut deeply, nonetheless.

“What? Cat got your-”

A sharp hissing noise fills the room and cuts the archer off, causing them both to look to the door when Batman and Cyborg enter the infirmary.

Barry freezes, his stomach lurches, and the pain of seeing Bruce again catches him utterly unprepared.

It’s been years since Bruce came to talk to him in prison, and he was too messed up back then to hope that this could mean anything, certainly not that the other man could have started to believe in his innocence.

Over the years, Barry has wondered a couple of times why Bruce decided to turn up and ask him about Iris or how he was doing. Nothing ever came from it, though, and he quickly realized that he really prefers not to think about it altogether.

Like Hal, Bruce had been someone very close to him once, but contrary to Hal, who kept insisting on Barry’s innocence, Bruce was the one who injected him with the nanites in the first place.

A shiver runs though Barry’s body, and he lowers his eyes back to the ground.

Victor makes his way over to Oliver and exchanges a few words with him, but Barry doesn’t listen, doesn’t want to, since he is certain that he already knows that the latter has only more scorn for him to offer.

He just wants this to be over.

Bruce steps up to him-

No. Batman steps up to him, and Barry unintentionally makes himself smaller, hunches his shoulders and lowers his head a little deeper, so that his chin ends up resting on his collarbone. He still can feel the other man’s eyes on him, and it is like a heavy, uncomfortable pressure against the top of his head.

“I need to check up on the nanites, Barry,” Batman tells him straightforwardly, and Barry nods
wearily, since he has already expected that to be the reason for his visit.

“Take off your jacket,” Batman goes on while he steps over to the medical trolley next to them.

Barry presses his lips together firmly and does as asked, hoping with everything he has that he won’t be asked to take his shirt off too. The mere notion is humiliating, and he doesn’t want them to see what happened to him in prison.

What he let happen.

His hands are shaking, he feels cold, unsettled, and his fingers feel numb and useless as he takes off his coat, keeping his head low the whole time.

When Batman’s black boots come back into his field of view, Barry nearly shrinks back since he hates being touched when he feels this upset, and the fact that there is nothing he can do about it only makes it worse.

“Give me your hand,” Batman orders him, and Barry does, flinching slightly when he feels the other man’s gloved hand take hold of his.

It is then, that he picks up on how silent it has gotten in the room, and he swallows thickly as he realizes that Oliver and Victor have to be watching him now too.

“Relax, Barry,” Batman tells him, his grip firm but loose enough that Barry could pull his hand back if he wanted too. Barry nods, not meeting the other man’s eyes, and forces himself to take a slow, calming breath. He tries to relax his body as much as he can and hopes that, the quicker this examination is over, the quicker he can get back home.

The cold head of the testing probe that is used to get a reading from the nanites in his bloodstream is pushed against his soft skin on the side of his wrist, below his thumb joint. It doesn’t hurt, but it isn’t a comfortable sensation either while Batman adjusts the probe, looking to establish a good connection.

“What have you been having trouble with the nanites recently?” Batman asks, and it causes Barry’s stomach to flip since he can’t help but think back to when he pushed Thaddeus off Eddy, how his joints have hardly bothered him since then.

“N-no,” Barry stammers and nearly cringes at how clearly nervous he sounds. His eyes flicker up to Bruce, and while he can’t make the other man’s eyes out behind the white lenses of his mask, he still gets the feeling that he is looking back at him.

“Right.” Oliver scoffs and glares at Barry when he glances over to him. “How about telling the truth, Allen? You really think we don’t know what’s going on here?”

Panic starts to rise in Barry, but he fights it down since it would not help him should he start to freak out without knowing what exactly this is about. He stays quiet instead and turns his look back to the ground.

This reaction doesn’t seem to satisfy Oliver at all, and Barry tenses up noticeably when he hears the other man make a threatening step towards him.

“Listen, you damn sicko, you think we don’t know what you-”

“Green Arrow,” Batman cuts him off, the warning clear in his voice, and Barry can’t help himself, he tries to pull his hand back, and much to his surprise the other man lets him. “If you aren’t able to
Both superheroes keep glaring at each other for a long moment, and Barry, who feels like he is in between fronts, fights the urge to curl up. He doesn’t want to be here, he doesn’t want to get in trouble with the League, and he has no idea what caused their returned interest in him in the first place.

“You have to be kidding me, Batman,” Green Arrow nearly hisses, his anger redirected from Barry to Bruce. “We all know that it was Allen, why the hell are we even bothering with this farce?!”

“We know nothing yet,” Batman returns coldly, and while he keeps his voice levelled, it is obvious that he is starting to get fed up with his colleague’s attitude. “We are here to find out whether Barry was involved, and until we do that, we won’t jump to conclusions.”

Oliver snorts, the anger rolling off him in waves, and Barry is reminded of all the times the Green Arrow and Batman clashed in the past, of how their contrasting tempers make it nearly impossible for them not to most of the time.

“Look at him,” Oliver challenges, and Barry tenses up when he feels the man’s glare at himself a second later. “He is screaming guilty from a mile away. We shouldn’t be wasting our time here, we should get J’onn and have him take a look into his mind—”

“No,” Batman interrupts him, firmly, and Barry, who suddenly feels sick at the implication that his mind could be read against his will, digs his fingers painfully hard into the edge of the table. “We won’t infringe on his right of privacy till we have a sound reason to, this is the Justice League’s policy, Green Arrow. If it turns out that the nanites malfunctioned, we will proceed accordingly, but not before we are certain that this is the case.”

“You’ve to be kidding me, Bruce!” Oliver protests, and he sounds so angry, so upset, that Barry starts to worry what this is about.

“That’s enough,” Batman states coldly. “You will leave, you are interfering with my work.”

“Like hell—”

“You are too close to this, you shouldn’t be here in the first place,” Batman cuts Oliver off once more, and Barry doesn’t need to look up to know that both heroes are glaring silently at each other when a silence settles between them for the next minute.

“Fine,” Oliver finally agrees bitterly, and the hairs on Barry’s neck stand up when he addresses him next, voice low and full of disdain. “You’ll get what you deserve, Allen. I’ll make sure of that.” The threat is plain as day, causing Barry to squeeze his eyes shut, hunching in on himself even more, and it is hardly a relief when he hears the other man leave.

“You have to relax, Barry,” Batman tells him after the door to the infirmary closes. He doesn’t sound angry or impatient, but Barry still hurries to comply, or tries to. It takes him a couple of minutes, and, thankfully, the time is granted to him.

The atmosphere eases somewhat after Green Arrow is no longer among them, since neither Batman nor Cyborg act actively aggressive towards him while the measurements proceed. The way Victor meets Barry’s brief look isn’t friendly, but Barry didn’t expect anything else, and the younger man stays silent at least.

Seeing Wally’s former teammate from the Teen Titan’s as a member of the JLA is somewhat of a surprise, though he probably should have expected that the man would eventually end up here,
seeing that he has always been a hero with a lot of potential. It makes Barry wonder who else could be on the Justice League’s member list, since ten years are a long time, and while there will always be constants like Bruce, Diana, and Clark, he knows that there still have to be a number of fresh faces around.

Very briefly, his mind goes to Hal, and he thinks of the younger man that replaced him, someone close to Wally’s age. Swallowing thickly, Barry pushes that thought away, and tries to empty his mind.

Bruce’s hand on his isn’t as intrusive as it could be, but it still leaves him unsettled.

The rest of the check-up goes by in silence, and Barry is immensely relieved when it turns out that it is enough for Bruce to take readings from his hands, lower arms, and his neck, thus allowing him to stay fully dressed.

A few questions follow afterwards while Bruce starts to evaluate the data, they are mostly about whether he has felt anything strange over the last couple of days and where he was yesterday. Barry answers as truthfully as he can, considering that he can’t tell Bruce that he spent the most of yesterday with his former enemies, and he is a little unsettled but not in the least bit surprised when he gets a long, hard look in response to his whereabouts. Bruce is one of the best detectives out there not only because he is brilliant at finding and putting clues together, but also because he is excellent at reading people.

To his utter relief, Bruce doesn’t press any further, and instead turns to Victor and tells him that he can take Barry to Black Canary.

Barry freezes hearing that, and the first thing that crosses his mind is interrogation.

Of course, they would want to talk to him, make sure he didn’t do whatever they think he did in the traditional way as well.

A shudder runs through his body, and again, he can feel Bruce’s eyes on him, but when he glances to the other man, he is studying the tablet that is showing the results of the examination.

“Let’s go,” Cyborg tell him, and it is a small comfort that there is no apparent aggression or scorn in his voice. Barry does as asked, following the man timidly, his eyes staying on the ground all the way, as he is certain he won’t be able to remember the way they go in any case with how scattered his thoughts are.

It doesn’t take them long to reach their destination, and Barry balls his fists, trying to fight off the trembling that has taken hold of his hands, and steels himself.

The room is on the smaller side, bare, nearly cold looking, and Barry quickly realizes that he has been spot-on with his assumption that this will be an interrogation, not that he expected to be wrong.

He stops short when his eyes fall upon Diana, Dinah, and Oliver, and the dread that overcomes him is nearly strangling.

“Come on, Allen, move it. I’ve better stuff to do than to play polygraph.” Another voice cuts through the loaded silence that settled over the room at his arrival, and Barry looks at the fourth person present he hasn’t noticed so far.

Guy Gardner, who leans against the wall to the left of the entrance, eyes him with an annoyed frown, and it is hard to miss that he isn’t all that happy about being here either.
The presence of the Green Lantern is unexpected, till Barry catches up on his words and feels panic dig its claws into his guts.

“Barry.” Dinah meets Barry’s wide, frightened gaze with a calm and collected one. “Take a seat.” She nods to the chair on the other side of the table she sits behind, and while every single fiber in Barry’s body baulks at the notion of what is going to come, he complies automatically, knowing all too well that he would make things only worse for himself if he didn’t.

“I’ll head back to Batman to help him with the data,” Cyborg tells them, and Dinah nods. “Sure, Vic. Thank you for bringing him here.”

The soft hiss of the door sounds behind Barry as he takes a seat, and he has to fight the urge to throw a longing look to where Victor just vanished.

He doesn’t want to be here, he really doesn’t want to be here, this can only end in trouble for him.

“Hello, Barry,” Dinah greets him, a thin smile on her lips. “You’re here to answer a couple of questions, if that’s alright with you.”

Oliver, who like Diana stands a couple of feet behind Dinah, snorts contemptuously, but leaves it at that.

Barry feels sick, and he would give his right arm to not be forced to do this, but nods in agreement nonetheless.

A yelp is startled out of him when bright green light flashes around him for a second, and he tenses up painfully when he feels something attach itself to his temples and a couple of other points of his upper body. He shoots a frightened look to Gardner, who arches an eyebrow in return, and quickly glances back to the table in front of him.

“Green Lantern,” Dinah rebukes the other hero, who huffs in annoyance. “What? We want to get this over with, don’t we? I’m not kidding when I’m saying I’ve better stuff to do. Salekk is being a real pain in my ass—”

“You’ll be able to return to Oa as soon as this is over,” Diana interrupts Guy, a pinched expression on her face, causing the other man to throw up his hands in exasperation. “Right, I get it, and it’s not like I don’t wanna help, but you really couldn’t have picked a shittier time for this.”

“We know,” Dinah agrees, “and we are grateful that you’re able to assist us on such short notice.”

“Sure, whatever.” Guy exhales a suffering sigh and crosses his arms. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Dinah nods and turns back to Barry. She studies him, and he has to force himself to meet her eyes.

“We are going to ask you a couple of questions, Barry,” Dinah explains to him, “and we expect you to answer them truthfully.”

Swallowing nervously, Barry nods.

“Good.” Dinah holds his gaze firmly as she starts. “State your name.”

“B-B-Bar-ry A-A-A-” Barry breaks off, and swallows again. His face heats up in embarrassment, and his gaze drops back to the table. “B-B-Bar-ry A-A-A-” His throat feels dry, and too tight, like it wants to keep the words from leaving his mouth, and his body grows hot in shame, because he can
imagine how ridiculous he has to look right now.

“Seriously?” Guy asks, causing Barry to wince in surprise and shoot him a scared look. The amused incredulity on the other man’s face vanishes when their eyes meet and is replaces by a frown.

“Come on, Allen,” Oliver cuts in, irritated. “Cut the crap, you’re wasting our time here.”

“Barry,” Dinah says his name in a calm manner, ignoring Oliver’s interruption. “I need you to take a couple of deep breathes and try to calm down.” She meets his look with an appraising one and adds. “You won’t be in trouble as long as you tell us the truth.”

Barry does as he is told. He tries to calm himself, though he knows that it won’t help much, just being here is incredibly intimidating and frightening, especially since he has still no idea why he is here in the first place.

“State your name,” Dinah repeats after she gave him a minute to collect himself a little.

“B-B-Bar-ry A-Al-len,” Barry grits out, and the mere idea of having to answer a string of questions appears ludicrous to him with how bad his stammer is and how much worse it probably will get. The fact that he has to make an idiot out of himself in front of his former colleagues makes it only worse, and the urge to curl up into a tight ball hits him full force again, enough so that he has to lean over the table and put his hands flat on its surface.

“How old are you?” Dinah goes on.

“F-F-Forty f-four.” Barry succeeds at the first attempt this time.

“Where do you live?”

That is a hard one, and he briefly wonders whether she wants his whole address or only the city. He tries his luck. “K-K-Keys-st… K-Keys-st… K-K-Keys-st-son-ne C-C-Cit-ty…” Shooting Dinah a worried look, he is incredibly grateful when she lets him get away with it and instead goes on to the next question.

“What is your occupation?”

“S-S-Sal-” This time Barry doesn’t break off because his voice gives out on him, but because he realizes that this isn’t true anymore. He is no longer a salesclerk, and they must know it, seeing that they picked him up after a job interview and were aware of where he had been.

“U-U-Unenp-p-ploy-yed,” Barry replies softly, and somehow this only adds to the coiled-up ball of humiliation in his guts, even though he reminds himself once again that it shouldn’t matter what they think of him.

Oliver snorts at that, and while Barry’s gaze stays fixed at the top of the table, he can hear Dinah shift in her chair, likely to throw the other hero a displeased look, as he refrains from any further comments.

“Were you convicted in the past?”

“Y-y-yes…”

“How long did your conviction last?”

“F-F-For s-s-sev-v-… s-s-sev-y-y-y-years-s.”
“What have you been convicted for?”

Barry freezes, before his whole body grows hot in a mixture of shame, anger, and sadness, that are quickly replaced by heavy resignation. He licks his lips nervously, bile at the back of his throat, and contrary to his talk with Jay about this subject, he knows that he won’t be able to put up a fight. They will never believe him, and he just doesn’t have the energy left to really care.

He just wants to go home.

Barry closes his eyes and lowers his head while a heavy knot settles in the pit of his stomach.

“S-S-Sec-c-… s-sec-c-con-nd d-d-deg-gr-ree m-m-murd-der, a-a-aand r-r-r-r-…” Barry swallows thickly and hunches in on himself even more. “R-R-Rape.”

“Rape of an underage boy,” Oliver provides derisively, and Barry grits his teeth but stays quiet.

“That’s enough Green Arrow,” Dinah warns Oliver, irritated.

“Are you seriously believing his act?!?” Oliver’s glare is so intense that Barry can feel it, and he digs his fingers into the surface of the table to stop his arms from hugging himself and embarrassing himself even further.

His skin is itching horribly again, he feels restless, helpless, knowing that there is nothing he can do, other than going along with everything, seeing that he has no rights, no way to stop it.

“Enough, Green Arrow.” Diana’s voice ends Oliver’s protest, and this time the man actually backs down, not that Barry would have expected anything else. Diana sounds very much like she has no patience left for her colleague’s antics, either, which means whatever this is about has to be something really severe, and nobody wants to get on Wonder Woman’s bad side in such a situation.

A silence settles over the room, and Barry glances to Dinah, noticing that she is studying the readouts from the green polygraph construct that has been placed to her left on the table. Her expression is unreadable, and Barry suddenly is ridiculously afraid that he could have already gotten himself in trouble, despite answering truthfully.

Dinah’s gaze shifts then, meeting Barry’s briefly before he averts it back to the table, and after another second of pregnant silence, she goes on.

“Where were you Sunday around seven p.m.?”

Barry feels his heartrate spike up, even though he wasn’t with Len or the others on Sunday since Mary and Eddy took him to a yard sale they spent most of the day there.

“W-W-With f-friend-s-s…” Barry recalls nervously, shifting uneasily as he tries to remember what they did around seven, and whether they were home by then. “A-A-At h-h-hom-me.”

Dinah studies the readout again for a long moment, and Barry starts to grow sick with worry because that clearly means she doesn’t believe him. She turns her attention back to him. “Are you sure?” A shiver runs through him, and Barry nods helplessly as he croaks, “Y-y-yes…”

A long tense moment of silence follows, and even though he is no longer looking at her, he can still feel her watching him.

Against his worries, Dinah doesn’t ask again, and instead proceeds on questioning him about his
friends, what he did the rest of the day, before finally moving on to his whereabouts at certain times on other days of the past week.

This brings him into a predicament due to him having spent most of his time at the Rogue’s hideout, and his stammer grows accordingly worse with each lie he comes up with, though he doubts that he would have reacted any differently if he could just tell the truth. Just being here makes it hard to breath, causing a nervous energy to throb below his skin.

Dinah is kind enough not to comment on his stammer, or how difficult he is making this whole thing for them, and it helps a little to try and concentrate on her and ignore the rest of the people in the room.

She obviously does not believe him when he tells her that he was at home on most of the dates, but she hears him out, and that in itself sets his teeth on edge. Barry knows Dinah, has so for years prior to being put into the Heights, and he knows that despite her calm, nearly kind attitude, she will not let him get away with lying to them.

His worry turns out justified, when Dinah asks him, after another long, heavy pause. “You had a couple of unfortunate run-ins with Wally last year.” Wally’s name also causes Barry to freeze, and it is as if someone was emptying a bucket of ice-cold water on his head as she proceeds. “Did that make you angry? That he reacted to you like that?”

“N-n-no…” Barry denies, and he has never hated his traitorous voice more than in this moment, in how weak it sounds.

“It would be understandable for you to be hurt over it. You were a father-figure to him once, and seeing that he moved on has to be hard to accept.”

Barry swallows, his throat is working, but he can’t get a word out. Dinah asks him to take a couple of breathes, to try and calm down, and it nearly causes him to break, since he understands that he won’t be able to leave this room before they don’t get what they want. Not a forced confession, but the truth, and Dinah knows how to get that from a person without needing to fall back on violence.

The next fifteen minutes are a loop of horrible, painful questions and insinuations, and Barry can’t answer most of them to Dinah’s satisfaction, because, while he is scared of his former colleague’s ire, of the consequences lying can have for him, he knows that the Justice League will make sure that he has no further contact to the Rogues whatsoever should they find out about them. Barry is already a liability as it is, and him buddying up with his former enemies will probably result in him being locked away in a hole with the key being thrown away.

The whole ordeal is increasingly frustrating to everybody present in the room, and Barry shrinks back, eyes wide and scared, when his unwillingness to cooperate finally brings Wonder Woman to step closer so that she ends up standing next to Dinah. She looks Barry straight in the eyes, and there is no trace left of the warmth they once held for him, the fondness Diana holds for all her friends. There is only cold reproach and impatience.

“We don’t have time for this,” Diana states. “And I’m no longer willing to go along with your defiance, Barry. You clearly don’t take the situation you are in seriously enough.”

Barry feels his stomach lurch as he watches her reach for her lasso, and suddenly it is as if there is not enough air to breathe left in the room.

“Calm down, Barry,” Dinah tells him with a concerned frown, not missing how his growing anxiety causes him to get close to hyperventilating, and turns to Wonder Woman. “Wait, Diana, Bruce
“Are you serious?” Oliver interjects, huffing an incredulous laugh and pointing at Barry. “Are you really believing him? He’s clearly hiding something, and he is wasting our time here! That jackass is not going to spill on his own, and Iry and Jay could be—”

“We can’t assume anything just yet,” Dinah disagrees firmly, but Diana sides with Oliver on this one. “We are wasting time here, Dinah, and I’m not willing to let him get through with hurting another one of us. The person who attacked the Flash’s family was a speedster, and Barry Allen has more than enough reason to seek revenge on him.”

Barry’s eyes widen as he realizes what this is about, and he has to catch himself from trying to ask whether Wally is alright, because he knows that his concern for his nephew will be met with nothing but distrust and scorn.

His worry for Wally is quickly replaced by dread when Wonder Woman picks up her lasso, and he feels that he starts to tremble in response, the throbbing of his pulse grows loud in his ears, and he eyes the golden rope with silent horror-

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Guy complains, his voice cutting through the tension like a knife. “Are you guys serious? That’s ridiculous, this guy clearly has no super-speed.” The Green Lantern’s frown deepens when he meets Barry’s eyes. “Just look at him, my grandma could probably outrun him.” He scoffs and turns to the other heroes. “This right here is a waste of time, why not try to interrogate someone who can actually be considered a threat?”

Guy Gardner’s support comes pretty much out of nowhere, and Barry can only stare at the man speechlessly. He didn’t expect to get any aid, especially not from Gardner, who doesn’t really know him at all, since he had been part of the Corps for only a very brief time when Barry lost the title of the Flash, not long enough for them both to meet.

“You don’t consider a pedophile a threat?” Oliver demands, causing Guy to roll his eyes. “Sorry, Arrow, but I think you’re really missing the point here.”

“Allen is clearly hiding something,” Oliver insists firmly, shooting Barry a glare, which causes him to shrink back even more.

“Maybe,” Guy agrees flippantly with a shrug, but his expression is surprisingly grim when he nods to the polygraph. “According to the readings anything that left his mouth so far has been a fucking lie, even his damn name.” He snorts humorlessly. “The guy is scared out of his mind, you can’t get reliable measurement from someone like that even with the most sensitive equipment.”

“I knew we should have called John or Kyle,” Oliver returns annoyed.

“Screw you.” Guy grunts. “They wouldn’t have been able to help you any better, dipshit, you can measure all of his bodily functions during a questioning, if the interviewee is this damn stressed out, you’ll never get a reliable feedback.”

“Then let’s finally use the lasso,” Oliver exclaims exasperatedly and turns to Diana. “We’ve tried questioning him, and he is clearly not willing to play along.”

“You’re such a virtuous prick.” Guy laughs at the archer’s words before he turns to Wonder Woman. “And how will you defend using your lasso on Allen? I know you guys have history and pretty much hate his guts, but it is obvious that it is ridiculous to insinuate that he can be responsible for what is going on. Look at him.” Guy nods to Barry, once again eyeing him with a frown. “I doubt he
could even lift one of Wally’s kids up, no less carry them away.”

Barry flushes, but he doesn’t feel as embarrassed as he would have just a few minutes ago. His mind is still reeling around the fact of what he has just learned, about Wally’s family being in danger and about another, apparently evil, speedster being around. His mind immediately goes to Thaddeus, and the mere notion that he could be back is terrifying.

“Look Gardner,” Oliver starts, annoyed. “You don’t know Allen, he is good at fooling people if he wants to, and despite what he makes it look like, he is still the guy who killed his own wife and raped his underage nephew countless times. I’m sorry, but he is the last person whose guilt will be doubted when something happens to Wally.”

“That’s rich,” Gardner returns, crossing his arms. “Aren’t we all about rehabilitation and giving people second chances around here?”

“Not people like him,” Oliver disagrees icy.

Both, Green Lantern and Green Arrow glower at each other for a long, tense minute, then the former snorts. “You wanna know what I call it what you’re doing here?” He scowls. “It’s plain old bullying, nothing more, nothing less. You try to intimidate Allen into confessing something not because he fits the profile of the guy who did it, but because you hold a grudge against him, and, hey, I get that, some people are just scum, but when the hell did the League turn into a bunch of vindictive assholes?”

A taken-aback silence follows, and Barry doesn’t miss how Diana stills in response to Guy’s words, her grip tightening noticeably around her lasso.

It is Oliver, who speaks up first, glowering at the other hero. “You really have no part in this, Gardner-“

“No,” Diana interrupts the archer, though she is looking at Barry now, her expression unreadable to him. “Green Lantern is right, we cannot handle it like this.”

Oliver is clearly about to protest, when the door to the room is opened, and any further discussion is stopped by both Batman and Cyborg joining them.

It turns out, that the nanites in Barry’s bloodstream are working as they should, and that he still is unable to access his powers, which makes it clear that he isn’t the speedster they are looking for.

Barry listens to that quietly while he keeps his head low and gaze down. They don’t apologize for bringing him up to the Watchtower without his consent or interrogating him, not that he expected them to, and he wordlessly follows Batman back to the teleportation station after they finally decided that he is no longer needed.

This time, there is nobody else around, not that Barry really cares. He just wants to go home, back to his apartment, and back to the Rogues. Away from all of this…

Bruce leads him to one of the teleporter stations, and Barry bites down on a sob of relief as he sees it, so glad that now everything seems to be finally over. The worry and fear from earlier flickers up again, though, when the other man pauses at the monitoring desk and turns back to him.

Barry lowers his eyes, and he is too tired to care what he must look like, how ridiculous he must appear as he is hugging himself, but it is the only comfort he can get right now.

“Barry,” Batman starts, and Barry glances back to him in surprise, because it is Bruce’s voice that
addresses him now. He seems uncertain how to go on for a moment, which is unusual for the other man, especially while he is wearing the mask.

“Do you need help?”

The question is not what Barry expected, and he can only stare in return, utterly caught off-guard by the slight concern he can make out in the words.

Is that a trick question?

“Your readings show me that you are undernourished.” Bruce explains. “Chronically so, and your cortisol levels are concerningly high.” Barry is certain that he would see a concerned frown on the other man’s face if he took the mask off, and the realization hurts, horribly so.

“If you need financial aid, or if somebody is-” Barry cuts the other man off, shivering, and his gaze is once again back on the ground. “N-n-no… I-I’m f-f-fine.”

It so obviously is a lie that he probably shouldn’t even have bothered, but Barry has had enough of today, of being here, of these people who were once his friends.

“C-C-Can I-I-I g-g-go h-h-home,” Barry asks quietly, wearily. “P-please?”

Bruce studies him, his mouth a thin, clearly displeased line, but, to Barry’s relief, he eventually nods.

They part ways without another word, and Barry finds himself down at the harbor again mere moments later.

Barry isn’t sure how long he has been up there in the Watchtower, probably hardly more than two hours, but he feels as if he worked a fourteen-hour shift, causing him to stagger momentarily as his legs suddenly baulk at the idea to carry his weight. He slumps against the container next to him, the coldness of the metal seething even through his jacket, and he is grabbed by the desire to just sit down and rest.

The weather has changed for the worse during the duration of his stay at the satellite, and the faint drizzle from earlier has turned into actual rain, which likely will only get worse judging by the dark, thick clouds that are covering the sky.

Barry proceeds standing there for a long moment, feeling strange, like he had just awoken from a dream.

A loud crack causes him to wince and look up to the sky again, just as thunder follows the lightening, and even in his current state, he knows that he should find shelter from the storm.

Stumbling along the wall of stacked containers, it takes him some minutes, but eventually he finds an empty container, that has been left open.

A part of Barry knows that it isn’t the safest spot to seek cover, and that he should instead head back to the bus station, getting wet and cold be damned, but he ignores it, too tired to care about anything rational right now.

Shivering, Barry pulls the open side of the container door close, not enough to cause it to latch as he doesn’t want to end up locked in here, but so that the increasing storm won’t get inside.

That done, Barry makes a couple of steps back, till his back hits against the container wall, and stares in the darkness opposite to him.
It has been a strange experience seeing them again, strange and very sobering. Somehow, he has forgotten how little they care for him and in some cases even despise him.

No, not forgotten.

Barry closes his eyes, and tries not to notice the tears running down his cheeks.

He lied to himself, hoped deep down that some of them would believe-

Barry flinches when a bolt of thunder sounds from the sky outside, snapping his mind back to his current whereabouts. He notices that his teeth are chattering and that his fingers and toes have turned numb.

“Barry?”

Barry nearly jumps out of his skin when Sam calls his name out of nowhere.

It takes him a moment to understand where his friend’s muffled voice is coming from, and when he does, his stomach drops, causing his legs nearly to give out on him.

“Barry? Seriously, man, are you alright? I can’t see you in that container,” Sam complains, annoyed. “Who the fuck seeks shelter in a metal container during a lightning storm, anyway?”

With a soft, tired groan, Barry lets his head drop back against the metal wall and closes his eyes. He concentrates on breathing, slow and deep, in and out.

More tears wet his cheeks, and before he knows it, he slides down the wall, pulls his knees up to his chest, and curls himself into a small ball, sobbing.

Sam falls quiet, and Barry tries not to think of the fact that he took the little communication mirror with himself to the interview, since he carries it anywhere with him these days, just in case, and he also tries not to think of the fact that the man likely checked up on him, while he was at the Watchtower, or what this means.

A frantic little voice in his head tries to tell him that he is overreacting, that Sam probably didn’t hear or see anything, the little mirror was in his trousers pocket during all of it, after all, but Barry knows that that is only wishful thinking.

The not even palm-sized mirror is not only useful as a device for communication or emergency transport, but also as a homing device, and Sam could locate him anywhere via the mirror-verse as long as he had the thing with him.

“O-oh g-g-god…” Barry grips his head, digs his fingers painfully hard into his scalp, and tries not to be smothered by the horror that comes with the knowledge that his secret has been found out.

The Rogues…

He lost them…

No! He can’t, he can’t lose them too! They’re his-

Barry whimpers, and presses his forehead against his boney knees.

“Barry?”

Barry freezes and bites down on a sob as he hears Len’s voice reach him from the mirror in his
“Barry, are you alright?” Len sounds gruff, concerned, and Barry tries to curl up even more.

“S-s-sor-r-r-ry…”

There is a brief pause.

“Barry, can you pick up the mirror and step outside so that Sam can get you over?” Len asks, and Barry wants to laugh at the absurdity of that request.

“I-I… c-c-can’t…”

“Are you hurt?”

Barry huffs a laugh that comes out more like another whimper, and shakes his head. “N-n-no…”

Again, silence follows, long enough this time, that Barry worries that Len got fed up with him.

“Barry,” Len eventually speaks again, his voice much calmer than earlier. “There’s no reason for you to worry, nothing has changed.”

So, they know…

Sam probably told Len about his whereabouts the moment he realized that he was on the Watchtower, and Barry doesn’t doubt that he listened in during his questioning.

Do the others know too?

They have been in Peru, they still should be in Peru. Did they return because of him?

He feels sick.

“Barry, grab the mirror, and open one of the container’s wings. Can you do that for me?”

His mind starts to feel sluggish, heavy and thick, and Barry clumsily gets onto his feet. He pushes his hand into his right trouser pocket and shivers when his fingers touch something small that is cold and smooth. Without looking, he pulls the little mirror out and walks the couple of steps to the entrance. He hesitates only for a second, before pushing the door open.

Travelling via this small emergency mirror is a nasty experience, his body feels like it is squeezed through a tube, pushing all the air out of his lungs, and when he lands on the other side just a moment later, he feels disorientated enough, that he would have slammed into the ground if it weren’t for Len, who takes a firm hold of his upper arm.

“I’ve got you,” Len assures him, and helps him to take a seat on what Barry realizes must be his friend’s bed.

They are in Len’s room.

It is still difficult for him to make anything out with how disorientated he feels, but he knows this room, knows the comfort that comes with it.

Barry doesn’t protest when Len helps him out of his jacket, he feels too exhausted to really care. At least, till he notices Sam, who stands not too far away from them, and tenses up in response, throwing him a startled, scared look. Len doesn’t miss it, and glances at Sam over his shoulder, who
appears rather ill at ease himself.

“Go and ask Lisa whether she can make some tea,” Len tells Sam and gets a dirty look in return, but unlike usual, he doesn’t protest.

Not wanting to think why that is the case, Barry turns his focus back on Len, who studies him with a serious frown.

“Did they hurt you?” Len asks, and Barry feels too exhausted to answer with anything but a headshake.

“Good.” Len grabs his hands and squeezes them lightly, watching him carefully for any sign indicating that the contact upsets him.

Barry smiles tiredly, glad to have Len there, and lets himself be pushed back so that he ends up lying on the bed.

“Rest,” Len tells him quietly, still holding onto one of his hands, and Barry complies.

Chapter End Notes

So, we have finally reached the chapter I was super hyped about for a while now, as were some of you, I know, and I hope you guys liked it. :)

There were no big revelations, and no questions were answered (probably a few more came up instead), but this chapter was not meant to offer anything in that regard just yet. I wanted Barry to meet some of his former colleagues and friends again, and just experience that and show what a cliff there still is between them.

It was great to have Bruce and Diana make a brief appearance, I think especially with Diana you could see how much Barry’s supposedly betrayal got to her, since she did turn somewhat into a bully there, as Guy pointed it out. She is usually much more collected, but like with Dinah and the others, she seemed to have not much patience or compassion left for Barry. At least, Guy was able to shake her out of her anger, and, yay, Guy was there! ;)

I’m aware that the members of the Justice League we met in this chapter probably won’t win any popularity contests among you right now, and some of you really dislike them for the part they have been playing in this story so far, but you have to remember that there is still a lot of information missing, and we still don’t know what is going on or what/who caused any of it. It is not my intention to portray any of the JL as outright unsympathetic characters, they are still heroes and good people at heart. That doesn’t mean that what they did to Barry, no matter their intentions, is any less horrible or even just excusable, but there are many angles to a story, and the repercussions that will come from this will be harsh on everybody.

The secret GL was Guy, who is one of my top two favorite GLs in the DC universe (at least among the bunch of human ones). Hal is the other one, but due to his status as deceased, I’m not able to use him very much (yet :). I think Guy pretty much surprised anybody by cutting in and aiding Barry, probably Barry most of all, but, then again, Guy is not the type who will not just point out if something is bothering him, even if his
opportunity is unpopular.

Olli, on the other hand, really didn’t get away too well here, his anger towards Barry is very obvious, and he puts really no effort into hiding it. I think Olli a little unlucky regarding this story, I’m not the biggest Green Arrow fan, I like him much, much more on the show, but in the comics he always rubbed me the wrong way due to a number of things he did or said, and because of that, he probably isn’t getting the most sympathetic part here. I do think that comic Olli would have reacted like this in case something like Singularity took place there, though.

We haven’t met too many of the JL members yet, but give it time, this was only an introduction. ;)

I’m sorry if this note is riddled with mistakes, I’m quickly typing it down because I’m in a hurry to catch a bus to visit my family. Today is Father’s Day in Austria, and I’m looking forward to meet my family again.

A huge thank you to all of my lovely readers who took the time to leave me feedback, you are the best, you always brighten my day that way. :)

Next chapter will have Barry and Len share an evening together and dive a little into how things changed now that Barry’s secret is not so much of a secret anymore (not that it has been for a while now).

I’ll be back in two weeks! :)
Barry gets some curry, and Marco gets the flu.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my amazing editor Quintessenza, who, btw, passed his master thesis defense and did so with flying colors! :D Congrats once again, my friend! You did great! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry slows down and comes to a halt before an intersection. He waits among the other pedestrians for the lights to change so that he can cross the street to his block.

He awkwardly pulls his coat a little tighter around himself with the hand that is holding his groceries while the other one keeps a firm grip on his umbrella despite the ongoing wind. Trying to keep warm in this weather that is still nothing but a cold, cloudy, and wet misery is nearly impossible, and choosing to walk the four blocks to the small supermarket he has been getting his groceries from since Mrs. Ming’s store closed no longer seems like such a smart idea, no matter that he saved a couple of bucks that way.

Barry presses his lips together in a grim line and listens to the faint patter of the rain against his umbrella as he shifts his hold on the grocery bag.

It is still odd doing his shopping anywhere else but at Mrs. Ming’s store.

Or rather, Mrs. Ming’s former store…

Barry shakes his head lightly, unwilling to let his mind drift in that direction.

His mood has been glum as it is, he doesn’t need it to worsen if he can help it.

The few people around him start to move, causing him to turn his attention back to the street in front of him, and he moves along with them, grateful that not many residents of this area are out right now.

It is rather late, close to ten, and with how bad the weather is, it is unsurprising that most people seem to have chosen to stay inside.

Barry counted on that when he decided to do his shopping tonight, since crowds are still hard for him to deal with at the moment, and while he tries to tell himself that it is getting better, he knows that it’s not true.

Maybe, he muses somewhat downtrodden, he did a little better for a while, but then his unwilling trip to the Watchtower happened, and that was an experience that has reopened old scars he hoped had
healed by now. 

Inhaling the cool air that smells of rain, he tries to steer his thought in a different direction as he would rather not remember that day altogether if he can help it.

The notion that something like that can upset him so much is frustrating. The whole thing had been one big disaster, mostly because of how horribly he handled it, undoubtedly making himself look suspicious that way, and he will not be even surprised if the JL is going to keep checking up on him now after that performance.

Shivering, Barry focuses on the sidewalk ahead of him and speeds up a little. He can’t get home quickly enough, it is getting colder by the minute, and while his landlord has decided to cut down on the heating, his apartment still provides protection from the biting wind.

Even so, the thought of his home is not as alluring as it once was.

He feels somewhat claustrophobic these days when he spends his time behind those familiar walls.

Or maybe claustrophobic is not the right word; it is more something akin to restlessness.

It has been over two weeks since he left his apartment to visit Len and the others, and while Eddy’s and Mary’s doors are always open to him, even there he can’t find refuge from the apprehension that is currently following him around like a clingy child.

*They know*, Barry thinks, the thought forcing itself upon him out of nowhere. The slight sickness from earlier returns, and he shivers as a heavy, tight knot of worry settles in his guts.

They know.

They have to, after Sam listened in…

But, do they?

Barry isn’t sure. Len told him that everything is fine, that he doesn’t need to worry. He never outright said that Sam didn’t inform the others about who Barry actually is.

Who he once was.

Barry hasn’t asked him directly about it either, so far.

Because he is a coward, and he apparently prefers to live in uncertainty instead of knowing for sure whether he still has a place among them or not.

The rain picks up, the patter turns into drumming, and Barry notices with relief that he has nearly reached his apartment building.

His steps slow down somewhat when he spots a man standing in the open doorway, bathed in the light falling from the hallway behind him. It is one of the other residents he met before on the stairs but never actually exchanged a word with. The guy, probably in his early thirties, is smoking and writing some message on his phone. He doesn’t even spare Barry a glance when he passes him.

Barry keeps his head down, and is ridiculously thankful for how most of the people living here prefer not to get involved with anybody who doesn’t concern them directly.

Making his way up the stairs, Barry tries to get his heart to slow down as it keeps beating frantically inside his chest. There is no reason for that, or for how loud the rushing of his pulse is in his ears, but
he knows from experience that his body will start to calm down the moment he feels safe again behind his apartment door with the world firmly locked out.

At times, it is exasperating how incapable he is to deal with what happened to him, not only the JL business but everything. Barry knows that growing annoyed at himself isn’t going to help, though, thus he tries to ignore how off balance and shaken he feels once again.

Quickening his pace, he makes his way up to his floor and quietly counts the steps he takes while tightening the grip around the grocery bag.

It helps a little, and as he reaches his door a few moments later, he no longer is as agitated.

His gaze drifts over to Eddy’s entrance as he pulls out his keys, and he pauses for a second. Frowning, he can’t help but wish that his friend didn’t have an appointment with Dr. Elias tonight.

Eddy is good company, and his presence always helps to calm Barry’s nerves. The thought that his friend will probably not be back till the day after tomorrow doesn’t sit very well with him. It is also just as troubling that Eddy still is seeing that man for help in the first place, since the uneasy feeling Barry has regarding the scientist persists, but he keeps that piece of mind to himself these days.

Eddy usually takes his concern with humor, but Barry knows that he doesn’t share his suspicion regarding the doctor. The last thing Barry wants to do right now is alienate his friend, and considering that Eddy seems to have taken no harm from his meetings with Elias so far, there is really no reason for him to worry so much.

While the doctor’s involvement with Cameron still doesn’t sit well with Barry, he tries to at least consider that it was nothing more but a bad choice that man made. Whenever Eddy talks about Dr. Elias, he comes off decent enough, after all.

That aside, there aren’t many people Eddy can go to for answers and help.

Barry turns his attention back to his door and grips the handle with a quiet sigh.

Tonight, it is only going to be him and a cup of tea, it seems, since Eddy is gone, the Rogues are away on a meeting with one of Gael’s middlemen, and Mary is working late-

Barry freezes when he is greeted by light falling from his apartment instead of the darkness he remembers leaving behind. His heart nearly jumps up his throat, and he stumbles a step back-

Len steps into his view, and the grip of horror loosens around Barry’s chest immediately.

“L-Len,” Barry croaks, and coughs lightly, embarrassed by how faint and scared he sounds. He wishes he could just once not react so easily unsettled.

Len’s brows are slightly furrowed as he lets his gaze wander over him, and there is that familiar concern in his hazel eyes without which he hardly ever looks at Barry these days.

Then, he makes a step back and to the side, allowing Barry to enter.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” Len tells him after the door is closed, and Barry nods with a faint smile.

“I-I kn-know.” He shifts a little awkwardly and tenses up once more when Len unexpectedly reaches for the bag in his hand.

“I’ll get it to the table while you take off your coat,” Len suggests, and Barry nods somewhat jerkily, still a little thrown off balance by his friend’s unexpected presence.
It is then, as Barry’s eyes follows Len to his kitchenette, that he picks up on the faint curry-smell in the air. He momentarily halts from taking his coat off and realizes in a mixture of wonder and incredulity that his two heating plates are currently occupied by his pan and one of his pots.

“Y-y-you’re c-c-cook-king?” Barry asks in surprise.

As long as he has known Len, the other man has never even once attempted to make as much as scrambled eggs.

Barry can’t help but glance around, trying to spot Lisa somewhere.

“I thought I’d try my luck.” Len shrugs as he starts to put the groceries away.

“Y-you…” Barry breaks off, still rather flabbergasted, but a smile starts to tug at his lips as he takes in the scene in front of him.

Len is cooking for him.

“D-d-do y-you e-ev-ven kn-know h-hwo t-t-to c-cook?” Barry asks amused while he puts his coat on the coat hook next to the entrance.

“I can read,” Len points out drily and nods to a sheet of paper that is resting next to him on the kitchen table. “It’s hardly rocket science.”

As if a higher deity was listening in on them and wanted to prove Len wrong, the pot choses just that moment to boil over, causing the spilling water to hiss as it touched the hotplate.

Len exclaims an annoyed curse and hurries to quickly push the pot off the plate.

Barry smiles fondly and joins his friend to see whether he can assist him somehow.

The dish Len intends to prepare turns out to be curry with tofu, soybeans, and rice, a dish Barry immediately takes a liking to, though he quickly realizes that Len burned the rice. He ends up putting a new pot with rice on while his Len silently scrubs the bottom of the burned one, glaring angrily at the thing as if it somehow personally offended him.

When Barry points out that he probably just didn’t stir it enough, the dark look is focused on him.

“I did stir it,” Len grumbles, frowning. “I think your damn pot is broken.”

Barry chuckles, moving the wooden spoon through the slowly soaking rice grains while also keeping an eye on the cooking curry. “I-I d-don’t th-think th-that’s h-how th-that w-works.”

Len grunts and turns on the hose to rinse the pot.

“Y-you h-had y-your m-meet-ting w-with G-Gael’s f-friend?” Barry asks as he watches Len and feels a comfortable warmth settle over him. Despite how down his mood has been earlier, having his friend over is a pleasant surprise and the fact that he decided to make dinner for him is still slightly awing to him.

“Yes,” Len agrees, stepping closer to Barry while reaching for the spoon which Barry hands him willingly, allowing him to take over once more. “Everything went well.”

“G-Good,” Barry says, relieved to hear so.

The small, nagging voice, reminding him how dangerous it is for Len and the others to do a job for
Gael, still persists though, and the memory of Len, pale as a ghost and slowly bleeding out, comes to his mind, unexpectedly and painfully.

Barry swallows and averts his eyes.

It has always been difficult to know that his friends put themselves in danger, but the thought of losing them has turned into something that is keeping Barry up at nights these days. Whether it be by them eventually not making it back from one of their jobs or simply turning away from him.

“Stop worrying,” Len tells him. He meets Barry’s guilty expression with a calm one. “It’s going to be an easy job.”

“Th-the o-one y-you d-d-did f-for G-Gael wh-which l-lead y-you t-to b-be sh-shot w-was a-also s-s-sup-posed t-to b-be a-an e-easy o-o-one,” Barry points out quietly.

“This one is different, just like the last couple ones,” Len assures him. “Neither Amunet nor the Blue Velvet have time to try and go after us, right now. They’re too busy keeping each other off their throats.”

Barry hums quietly, not commenting on how either of those parties have surprised them before, and instead decides to set the table.

The rest of the cooking goes smoothly, and about half an hour later, Barry tries the first spoonful of curry, feeling Len’s look on himself as he chews on the food, enjoying the warmth and spiciness that spreads through his mouth.

“I-It’s g-good,” Barry tells Len, and he doesn’t miss how very pleased his friend looks by this judgement, even though he tries not to let it on. The notion that Len would go through the hassle to prepare something for him is just as nice and touching as earlier, and he can’t help but smile as the heavy worry that has been holding on to him for the last weeks finally starts to subside somewhat.

His current relationship with the Rogues still feels like a big question mark to him, but he knows that this is mostly on him. He is behaving like a coward, avoiding them because he is afraid of where things could be heading for them from here, and the idea of losing them is just too frightening.

Len is reminding him tonight that he doesn’t seem willing to join them should they decide that they still hold onto old grudges, and that knowledge is comforting enough so that a weight lifts from Barry’s chest he hasn’t even been aware of, and breathing seems much easier again.

It is unfair of him to expect the other man to turn his back on him like that, and Barry knows that. He should trust him more, and it is probably insulting how little he really seems to do so in the end.

Unfortunately, being left behind is not something new to Barry, and as he studies Len quietly, the taste of curry still coating his tongue, he can’t help but recall the people he once called family and friends.

All of them gone, now.

Barry thinks that one of the reasons he is so apprehensive about dealing with this head-on is that he never understood what he did wrong, what made them all leave in the end, and how he can avoid causing it to happen all over again if he doesn’t even know why they choose to turn their backs on him?

A warm, calloused hand covers his, pulling him out of his own head, and he focuses back on Len, who meets his eyes with a calm but slightly grim look.
I know you’ve a reason to be worried,” Len starts, and Barry shudders when the other man’s thumb starts to rub the back of his hand lightly. “You lost a lot, and that would mess with anybody, but…” He hesitates for a second, setting his mouth in a thin line as he studies him with faint anger Barry knows is not meant for him. “We aren’t them.”

Barry swallows tightly and averts his eyes to the plate in front of him. Len’s hand feels heavy, warm and grounding, and he turns his own, so that he can return the hold, giving it a light squeeze.

“I-I kn-know…” Barry agrees quietly, his words hardly more than a whisper.

Len and the Rogues are probably as different from the people Barry used to surround himself with as it gets. They aren’t the typical kind of good people whose company he used to seek out, they are criminals, much more flawed than the average person, all of them coming with their own baggage, and they aren’t particularly concerned with rules or the law.

Despite all of it, they are his friends, even more than that, and over the years their presence in his life has become something warm and reassuring, like a well-fitting glove that protects him against a harsh, cold wind.

“I-I c-c…” Barry swallows and grits his teeth momentarily. His voice sounds feeble as he proceeds, glancing up to Len with a pleading look. “I-I c-c-can’t l-l-lose y-y-you…”

“You won’t,” Len tells him firmly and squeezes his hand tightly. “I told you so already, nothing has changed.”

“B-But S-S-Sam kn-knows-”

“It doesn’t matter,” Len interrupts him, and he sounds so certain about it that Barry feels the lump in his throat return along with the itching in his eyes.

“H-H-How c-c-an it n-n-not?” Barry croaks. “Th-th-they kn-kr-know th-that I-I… I-I w-w-was…”

He can’t even get himself to say it. Len knows his secret, knew all along, but Barry still can’t say it out loud.

There has probably never been a moment where he regretted his past as the Flash as much as he does now.

It took his family away, his friends, it landed him in prison, and now he is going to lose his new family all over again because of who he once was. Because of how he was stupid enough to believe that he could help to make a difference.

“Barry,” Len says his name quietly, comfortingly, and changes the grip on his hand so that he can hold it with both.

Barry scrubs at his eyes, somewhat annoyed at himself for not being able to hold it together, but mostly just bone tired, and he tries to tell Len that it is okay, that he is fine, though only a strangled noise escapes his lips that sounds awfully close to a sob.

“Baby.” Len brushes his lips against Barry’s fingers, causing him to shudder and freeze in surprise.

They haven’t had any intimate sort of contact since Barry’s kidnapping, not to such a degree at least. Len still touched him, offers comfort that way, but he has kept it clearly platonic for Barry’s sake so far.
It is a kind of restrain Barry has been grateful for so far since the notion of any sort of intimacy was ridiculously intimidating and frightening to him after what Cameron did to him.

Now, it still feels overwhelming, scary even, but there is no trace of the terror Barry knows would have come along even just a month ago. He lifts his gaze and meets Len’s, who seems to have waited for him to do so.

There is warmth in the hazelnut colored eyes, sadness too, and it catches Barry off-guard how expressive they really can be when Len allows it.

“You should give them more credit,” Len tells him, his lips still so close to Barry’s hand that he can feel the warmth of his breath against his skin, causing him to shiver. “They wouldn’t kick you out just because of who you once were.” The corners of Len’s mouth lift slightly as he goes on. “By now, all of them see you as a part of our group, and we Rogues don’t give our trust away that easily.”

Barry returns Len’s look with wide eyes, hardly noticing the warm tears that proceed running down his cheeks.

“I-I’m n-n-not a-a c-criminal-l…” Barry points out, and he could kick himself the second his mind catches up with what just left his mouth.

To his surprise and relief, Len only snorts amused and arches an eyebrow. “Yeah, kinda hard to miss that one.” Then, the other man presses his lips once more against Barry’s knuckles, causing him to exhales a soft, surprised puff of air.

“Despite of what you fear–” Len’s eyes meet his firmly, though there is a softness to them, a warmth that eases some tension out of Barry despite the intensity of the gaze. “-none of us is going to turn our backs on you. You became a part of our lives a long time ago, and you care about what could happen to us, enough so that you keep worrying yourself sick at times. People like you are a rarity, being able to call someone like you a friend even more so, and even the thickest of them knows that. You’re always welcome among us.”

A smirk slides over Len’s lips and humor glints in his eyes as he adds. “And you can’t even imagine what kind of shit storm Lisa or James will kick up if one of the others decides that they can’t let bygone be bygone.”

Barry blinks rapidly, his view blurred with his tears, and he tries to say something, express how much those words mean to him, how much his friends mean to him, but instead he whispers faintly, “Th-they kn-kn-know.”

It is not a question this time.

Len frowns but doesn’t look like he is surprised by his statement. Instead, Barry feels how he exhales a soft, weary sigh against his knuckles and watches him sit back. His hands don’t let go of Barry’s, though.

“They are smarter than they let on most of the time,” Len finally says with a crooked smile that doesn’t look particularly amused. “I think they do.” At Barry confused look, he elaborates. “We… haven’t really talked about it so far.”

Barry, despite how certain he was that the Rogues probably discussed what to do about him, can’t say that he is all that surprised about it now that Len tells him so.

Len is a master at avoiding a topic he doesn’t want to touch on; he probably didn’t give the other Rogues much of a chance to talk this through, even if they wanted to. It surprises him, though, that
Lisa hasn’t called her brother on it so far, she usually doesn’t tend to take his nonsense.

Then again, maybe Len isn’t the only one who doesn’t really want to talk about it.

The thought is, oddly enough, disconcerting and comforting at the same time.

What if Len is right and the Rogues don’t want things to change either?

Barry bites his lower lip and lowers his gaze to his meal, absentmindedly studying the bright color of the curry that has probably gone cold by now.

The idea of just pretending that nothing happened crosses his mind, and he knows how ridiculous it is, but a part of him, the cowardly one, really wants them to do just that.

Even more than that, he wants things to return to like they’ve been before, when he could come over to their hideout without being unable to meet Sam’s eyes when the other man picks him up. When he didn’t feel like he has to lock himself away in Len’s and his room because he is scared of…

Of what exactly he can’t say.

Of them attacking him? Shunning him?

Probably, the last more so than the former, and the thought that this could not be the case, that Len could be right, makes Barry decide to allow himself to hope.

He wets his lips, though his tongue is just as dry as the rest of his mouth, and looks back at Len, who is watching him quietly. “C-c-can I-I… c-come o-ov-ver t-tom-m-morrow?”

Len doesn’t look surprised by his request, but some of the tension still eases away from his shoulders. He smiles and squeezes Barry’s hand lightly. “Of course.”

He presses a faint kiss on Barry’s knuckles, which causes his stomach to flutter and brings heat to his cheeks.

“The others will be glad to have you over again,” Len says, his lips still touching Barry’s skin, moving against it lightly while he meets his eyes. He doesn’t need to tell him that so does he.

“I-w-w-want th-things t-t-to g-go b-back t-to n-norm-mal,” Barry tells Len quietly, and it catches him off-guard how exhausted he sounds as he says so.

“So do we.” Len sits back, and he too clearly shows now that the last couple of weeks of additional stress did leave their traces on him. He looks tired, but even so, it seems a weight has been lifted off him as well, and Barry is humbled by the sudden realization that this could be just as hard on his friends as it is on him.

“Th-th-thank y-you.” Barry squeezes Len’s hands, and the gratitude he experiences just then is nearly smothering.

The thought, that he can really mean so much to them is alien, nearly absurd, but he decides to trust Len, and in the end, he will be able to see for himself anyway.

“We should go on eating before the curry turns entirely cold,” Len tells him, and Barry agrees easily, glad for them to let the topic rest for now.

The curry is already cold, Barry notices as he takes another bite, but even so, it seems much tastier than before and is still able to warm his inside like a soft light.
“Turn the damn TV down, pirralho,” Marco grouses from his spot at the couch, glaring menacingly at Axel, who sits not too far away from him on the ground in front of said television.

“I can’t, otherwise I won’t hear anything of what is going on over your fucking moaning and bitching,” Axel replies easily without taking his eyes off the screen and stuffs his mouth with a handful of popcorn.

“I’m not moaning and bitching.” Marco hisses, and the teen gives him an unimpressed look over his shoulder.

“Like hell you aren’t.” Axel snorts and turns back to the TV. “You just have a flu, but you behave like it’s something deadly and everybody has to feel sorry for your sorry ass.”

“You little shit-,” Marco starts, but Barry chooses the moment to enter the living room, a steaming mug of what is most likely tea in hand, as well as a bowl, and he breaks off.

“E-veryth-thing a-alr-right?” Barry asks, though he is already facing Axel with a chiding frown.

“I didn’t do anything,” Axel protests annoyed and glares at Marco. “That big baby there keeps bitching-”

“A-Axel.”

“-complaining about the volume, but he’s groaning all the time like he’s about to die, and I can’t hear anything that’s going on!”

Marco takes offense to that, he hasn’t been groaning, and even if that was the case, he is by far not the worst when it comes to being what Lisa likes to call an overgrown man-child when one of them gets sick. Sam probably takes the title of the most insufferable person when he has some ailment, at least among the Rogues.

And what the fuck does that little shit know? His head feels like it is about to burst open any moment even without the blaring TV!

“M-Marc-co’s s-s-sick,” Barry reminds Axel as he stops next to the Rogue and hands him the tea.

“A-and a-as f-f-far a-as I c-c-can r-rem-m-m-eber, y-you d-d-didn’t d-do m-much b-bet-ter wh-when y-you w-were s-s-sick y-yours-s-self, l-l-last t-t-time.”

“I was nowhere near as bad as that cry-baby,” Axel protests, and ignores the dirty look he gets from Marco in return.

God, he really hates that brat. Why the heck does Allen want the little pest around? He is nothing but an annoying leech.

“Y-you w-were,” Barry assures him with a chuckle. “Y-you k-k-kept g-going o-on a-ab-bout h-how y-you w-w-were s-s-sure y-you’re g-going t-to d-die.”

“I wasn’t,” Axel denies darkly, though his cheeks visibly flush.

Barry shoots the teen an amused look but leaves it at that. He turns to Marco and nods to the mug in his hands. “D-Drink, i-it’s m-malv-va t-tea, i-it w-w-will h-hel-lp y-y-you t-t-to g-get o-ov-ver y-y-your f-f-flu qu-quicker.”
“Thanks.” Marco briefly studies the slightly golden tinted liquid and takes a sip. It doesn’t taste particularly good but not horrible either, and when he notices Barry’s encouraging expression, he sighs and takes a couple more sips.

“I’ve a-als-so m-m-made y-you ch-ch-chick-ken s-s-soup,” Barry points out and puts the bowl next to the tissue box and the glass of water on the chair that has been placed next to the end of the couch where Marco’s head is resting. “Y-y-you’re p-p-prob-bably n-not h-hungry, b-but j-j-just i-in c-c-case.”

“You’re worse than any mother could ever be,” Marco remarks with a roll of his eyes but flinches when the movement causes a pang in his right temple.

“Totally,” Axel agrees readily and shoots Barry a grin. “You’re like the moms on TV.”

Barry takes the barb with good humor and tells Axel to turn the volume down another notch, much to the teens irritation. Then, he returns to his spot at the table, going back to the latest sketch or doodle he is currently working on.

Over the next couple of hours, Marco lies on the couch, feeling miserable and sick, and disgusting due to how his nose won’t stop running, and he keeps coughing up slime. He sips the tea occasionally, and is promptly provided with a new one by Barry once he empties the first mug.

Marco doesn’t comment on how Barry makes sure to check up on him ever half an hour, like he is some nurse hired to make sure he isn’t succumbing to his flu.

Should anybody ask him, Marco would insist that it is annoying to have the blonde do so, since he is a grown man and really doesn’t need anybody to look after him while he is sick. He usually gets through it on his own just fine, after all.

The truth is, though, that it is unexpectedly nice to have someone make sure that he has enough to drink and his medication, and tell the little brat off when he gets purposefully annoying because he finds it funny that Marco doesn’t really feel up to make true on his threats.

It probably is because despite Axel’s and his quips, Barry is not a clucking hen or hovering, he just makes sure that Marco feels not as shitty as he could, considering his current state.

In a way, and that is something Marco won’t tell anybody else either, it is a relief to have the blonde behave more like himself again after how jittery and nervous he has been for the last two weeks, mostly locking himself away in Len’s room whenever he was over and avoiding the rest of them like he was afraid they would lynch him should he give them the opportunity to.

The thought causes a grim smirk to settle over Marco’s lips as he absentmindedly watches a catfight between a bunch of C-list stars on TV.

Barry is still walking on eggshells around them, and grows so palpably uncomfortable when the Flash or any other superhero is brought up, that they’ve pretty much stopped talking shop around him altogether. Not that they did talk a lot about their profession with him present in the past, since Barry always seemed bizarrely uncomfortable when it came up.

Not really a surprise, now that they know for sure that their initial assumption about Allen and his past as the former Flash turned out to be true.

Marco cranks his head back a little to glance at Barry, who is once again sitting at his spot at the table, though he isn’t sketching but staring down at the paper with a lost, slightly grim expression.
Imagining that this man can be the same man who fought them countless times is nearly absurd.

The Flash, the former one, has been a formidable foe, intimidating even when they had one of their numerous heated confrontations, and Barry…

Barry doesn’t look like he could cause anybody any trouble even if he tried, at least in a physical way.

Trying to see Barry behind the mask of the former Flash isn’t exactly impossible, though, at least if you ignore his appearance. Despite how weak and timid he looks, Marco has no problems to imagine that Barry would have once been stupid and self-righteous enough to step in the way of the likes of them. His morals and need to help are still very much there.

Turning back to the TV, Marco frowns.

Probably everybody would have been happier if the secret stayed just that. It hasn’t really changed things between them, other that it makes having Barry around a whole lot more awkward for everybody included, but that is likely due to the fact that they all quietly agreed on not touching upon Barry’s past.

At all.

As far as Marco knows, Barry isn’t even entirely sure how much they know, but he seems fine with keeping it that way, or is probably too scared to outright ask, and the rest of them aren’t much better. Neither really wants to have this conversation, and it doesn’t help that Len is very apprehensive about how the rest of them would react if they were given the opportunity to talk it through.

It really is idiotic, but Marco guesses that he would probably not act much differently. He doesn’t have a partner right now, but he too belongs to the protective type, and considering that they haven’t even talked the whole thing through among themselves just yet, that is other than for a very brief, tense discussion the day after the Justice League picked Barry up, he can’t hold it against Cold that he is worried and careful.

The notion that Len expects them to harm Barry is both ridiculous and somewhat insulting, though. They’ve known Barry for years now, and he is spending enough time with them these days, that his absence is palpable to the rest of them. Barry is by far not someone who demands a lot of attention, pretty much the opposite, but his quite presence has become something familiar, and even though Marco and some of the others started out irritated by Len’s decision to suddenly include some outsider who, of all things, had worked for the cops once, it proved impossible not to grown fond of him over time.

Despite initial troubles and reluctance on some of their parts, Barry created a spot for himself among them, and Marco doubts that any of them really are able to hold the other man’s past against him, especially since they had some time to get used to the idea that he could have been that annoying, meddling speedster once.

People change, and Barry clearly chose them as his friends, despite who they are. What also doesn’t hurt is the fact that, no matter how begrudging Marco is about admitting it, he is sure that Barry has always been such a damn likable and decent person. The only problem back then was that they were working on opposite sides of the law.

Sighing, Marco decides not to ponder on that issue anymore for now, his head is already hurting enough as it is.
Whatever reality show the brat is watching isn’t particularly interesting, and he tries to nap for the next hour or so, which doesn’t work, not that he really expected it to. He is pretty sure it has less to do with the TV than with how he aches all over, and that his lungs seem to have decided that now is the best time to act up.

Around ten, Barry bids them goodnight, and Axel changes the channel to an animated show called *Venture Bros* that is actually quite entertaining. Marco ends up watching it with half lidded eyes, feeling sorry for himself but glad that the brat seems to grow tired too and thus at least keeps his mouth shut.

Marco doesn’t notice that he has dozed off till he picks up on some quite talking next to him, and the lack of the background noise the TV provided before.

“- not tired,” Axel grumbles moodily, and when Marco glances over to them, he is somewhat surprised to see Barry standing next to the boy, who is rubbing his eyes and clearly belying his earlier statement with a wide yawn.

“G-go t-t-o b-bed,” Barry tells Axel with a fond smile. “I-it’s alr-r-ready p-past m-midn-night.”

“So what?” Axel grouches but gets up, yawning once more. “I’m no toddler, you know?”

Barry meets the teen’s frown with an amused rise of his eyebrow, which causes the brat to roll his eyes and mutter, “Fine.”

Marco watches Axel stalk off, grumbling something about pestering adults, and can’t help but snort. Barry turns to him in surprise, just now noticing that he is awake too.

“S-sor-ry,” Barry apologizes. “D-d-didn’t m-m-mean t-to w-wak-ke y-you.”

Marco waves him off and pushes himself back, so that his upper body is leaning against the arm of the couch his head had been resting on so far. “I can never sleep well when I’m sick.”

Barry gives him a sympathetic look and picks up his half empty mug of tea to get him a fresh one. Marco doesn’t even bother to try and protest. By now, he is certain that Barry just can’t help himself when it comes to looking after others.

The quiet is a welcome change, and he rests his eyes till he hears the other man return. He nods his thanks as he accepts the fresh tea, and sips listlessly on it.

Picking up on Barry watching him, he looks over to the blond, giving him a thin smile. “Guess I’m not the only one who has trouble sleeping tonight.”

Barry averts his eyes, frowning briefly, before his expression relaxes again, and he shrugs. “It’s full moon, I’ve always trouble sleeping those nights.”

“Y-yeah...” Barry shifts his weight, and Marco doesn’t miss how a faint, pained expression flickers over his face, or how he digs the ball of his hand into his abdomen in response.

“You’re getting sick too?” He asks, and it wouldn’t surprise him as this bug has been making its round through the Rogues for nearly two weeks now, and Barry has been around, even if it was sporadic for the most part.
Barry stills for a moment, and his hand falls back to his side. “M-Maybe,” he agrees tiredly but doesn’t sound like he really believes so.

It is also possible that Barry is simply worried, Marco guesses. Probably, due to the same reason why he himself is in an especially sour mood, even more so than just over feeling like crap.

Glancing back to the clock above the entrance, he sees that it is already half past one, which means that Len and the others have been gone for over six hours by now.

Tonight’s heist should already be over, if everything worked out. There can always be complications, of course, no matter how well you plan anything out, but a delay doesn’t necessarily mean one must expect the worst.

Still, they have been gone for a while now, Marco expected them to be back around midnight, and judging by the tense line of Barry’s shoulders and the slight frown that is back on his face, so did he.

It is a job they pull for Gael, outside the Gems, in Metropolis of all places. They tend to do favors for Len’s friend that have them work outside their territory, occasionally, which came in handy especially in the last couple of months of them having to avoid any attention inside the Gems’ borders, but a job on the Man of Steel’s turf of all places had them all hesitate about accepting it.

Nobody wants to piss on the turf of one of the big three, but apparently, none of the heavy hitters are currently within Metropolis city borders, at least according to what people said through the grapevines, and this little run will get them quite some money in return.

Marco’s brows furrow as he stares absentmindedly at the mug he is still holding.

He had been looking forward to tonight’s heist, he is itching all over for some action, and while they aren’t exactly in dire need of cash, this favor for Gail provides them an opportunity to do a job as a team. After the couple of heists, they did individually or just in pairs over the last months, every one of them was looking forward to finally pull a thing as the Rogues again.

Of course, that was when Marco’s body decided to show him the bird and catch that damn bug from James. It’s frustrating to no end, pulling something bigger is always a welcome change after keeping a low profile, and even more so now that there has been a restlessness clinging to him that is unusual in its intensity.

Thanks to the flu, he just will have to wait, sit this one out, and hope that Len finally starts to recognize that they are doing nobody a favor by being sitting ducks like they were for the last few months.

With how they haven’t had any trouble whatsoever since their latest run-in with Cameron, Marco is sure that Len will give his okay for the next heist inside the Twins within the next couple of weeks. Especially if tonight goes well.

In all honestly, Len’s paranoia is beginning to piss Marco off, and he knows that he isn’t the only one. It’s clear why Len wants to avoid that they are put behind bars right now, since there is a possibility that Amunet would use that opportunity to go after Barry and that way get back at him while they are out of the picture.

There hasn’t been any sign of that crazy bitch for nearly half a year by now, though, and Marco is getting more and more convinced that she probably just lost interest in Barry, especially now that she is busy taking over the territory the Blue Velvet had claimed over the last years.

With Cameron out of the picture, the organization shows a surprising lack of drive when it comes to
keeping a grip on the Gems. There’ve been a couple of bigger gang wars between Amunet’s men and the Blue Velvet, but nothing near as violent as was expected with the sudden shift in power.

“M-Mayb-be y-y-you sh-shoul-ld g-g-go t-to b-bed?” Barry asks and pulls Marco out of his thoughts.

“Why even bother?” Marco shrugs. “Won’t be able to rest there any better than here.”

Barry pinches his lips in the way he always does when he doesn’t agree with something, but he doesn’t press the matter. “Y-you w-w-want s-s-some h-hot ch-ch-choc-colate?” he asks instead. “I-I th-th-think I-I’m g-g-going t-to m-make m-mys-self s-some.”

“Sure,” Marco agrees, though the sweet beverage doesn’t seem any more appealing to him than anything else does right now.

While Barry is gone, Marco makes a brief trip to the restroom to relief his bladder before he takes a quick shower. He’s been sweating like crazy, and the hot water helps to get rid of that uncomfortable feeling and relax his muscles somewhat.

He returns to the living room about fifteen minutes later, a fresh pair of loose pants and a t-shirt on, and is surprised when he spots Barry sitting on a second chair next to the couch with a mug in his hands. The hot chocolate that is meant for Marco rests on the other chair, next to the tea, and as he comes closer, he is amused when he spots a couple of marshmallows floating on top of the warm liquid.

“Marshmallows?” Marco asks with an arched eyebrow. He can’t remember when he last got the tacky sweets in hot chocolate. Or hot chocolate in general, to be honest, as he isn’t really big on sweets.

“I-I th-thought i-if I-I’m m-making h-hot ch-ch-choc-colate, wh-why n-not g-g-go a-all o-out w-w-with i-it?” Barry explains with a grin.

“You spoil me,” Marco replies with a snort and sits down on the couch. He picks up the mug and takes a small sip. It’s good, not too sweet, but chocolaty. He hums in enjoyment and looks at Barry. “That’s not made with that cheap cacao powder James uses, is it?”

Barry smiles and shrugs. “D-don’t l-l-like th-that o-one v-ver-ry m-much, a-and L-Lisa s-s-sup- prised m-me w-w-with s-some S-Switz-zer ch-chocol-late y-yesterd-day.” The smile slips off his face, and he averts his look back to the mug in his hands.

It’s not hard to guess what soured his mood. Lisa really puts a lot of effort into trying to get Barry to understand that he is still welcome, and the blonde probably just remembered again why that’s the case.

“The marshmallows are also yours?” Marco takes pity on him, not least because he isn’t comfortable being reminded of the proverbial elephant in the room either.

“N-no.” Barry looks a little guilty at that but chuckles. “Th-those a-are J-James’.”

“You’re stealing from the candy stash of a friend?” Marco grins, arching an eyebrow. “Why, Allen, who would have thought that you’ve it in you?”

Barry chuckles. “J-Jam-mes w-won’t m-mind, I-I’m s-sure.”

Marco smirks and takes another sip, enjoying the richness of the drink. “Yeah, he probably won’t.”
He shoots Barry an amused look. “Not with you, you’re on the same level with Hartley when it comes to the people he adores.”

A brief surprised expression crosses Barry’s face before he settles on a fond but somewhat sad smile. “J-James h-has a-a b-big h-heart.”

“And a small brain,” Marco agrees drily and smirks when he gets a miffed frown in return. “Right, that was a little mean.”


“The palhaço certainly gives his all to come over like an idiot at times,” Marco points out and leans back into the couch, yawning lightly.

“H-He i-isn-n’t s-s-stup-pid,” Barry tells him firmly.

“No,” Marco agrees willingly enough since he knows that it is true. James is no idiot and certainly no retard, his mind is just not entirely sound, though Marco doubts that it would get them anywhere should he point this out to his companion. Barry knows so himself, after all, even if he would use nicer words to describe the same thing.

“I-It’s n-not h-h-his f-fault,” Barry goes on, and again Marco has to agree.

James isn’t responsible that he is behaving more like a child than an actual adult the majority of these days. There are probably special meds that could help, or him visiting a shrink, but they aren’t exactly living a life that provides any of them with an access to either.

“I know, Allen,” Marco says and nearly rolls his eyes over how grimly the other man is watching him now. “I didn’t mean to badmouth our poor Trickster, stop glaring daggers at me.”

“I-I’m n-not,” Barry denies and averts his eyes down to the mug resting on his lap. “A-And y-you r-r… r-real-ly sh-sh-shouldn’t s-say s-someth-thing l-like th-that. H-He kn-knows h-h-how y-you t-talk b-beh-hind h-his b-back, h-he’s m-much m-more a-at-tent-tive th-than y-you g-g… g-g-give h-him c-cred-dit f-for.”

The sadness is thick in Barry’s voice, and Marco isn’t sure how to respond.

There has been a sudden, unexpected shift, and the playfulness from earlier has left Barry for a much sullener, downtrodden mood.

Absentmindedly, Marco picks up that Barry is pressing the heel of his hand against his abdomen again, though he himself doesn’t seem aware of doing so as he stares down at his lap with a tired, somewhat lost expression.

It is hard for Marco to be around people like Allen, at times. The kind who feel and hurt for others because all the awfulness in their lives somehow still failed to turn them into cynic, mean assholes. It always makes his own shortcoming appear much more glaring than it usually does.

Marco wonders, as he studies the other man, how often people talked in a demeaning way about him behind his back.

“James knows we don’t mean anything by it,” Marco says, and while he never bothered to worry about that, he is pretty sure that the other Rogue really does so. Not to mention, that Hartley certainly makes it known whenever he thinks they go too far, and James isn’t helpless either since he knows how to get back at them when he thinks it’s necessary.
Barry’s frown deepens momentarily, his shoulders oddly slouched, like he is sinking in on himself, and Marco decides that his earlier assumption that Allen could get sick probably wasn’t too far off as he does look rather pale, miserable even.

Then, a pained expression flickers over Barry’s face, and he shifts in his seat while digging the ball of his hand firmer against his lower abdomen once again.

“That looks like it hurt,” Marco remarks, giving his friend a sympathetic look.

“I-I...” Barry stops and takes a deep breath. He is relaxing again, sitting back with a soft huff, and Marco doesn’t miss how pale he suddenly is.

“Maybe you should go back to bed and rest,” Marco suggests. “Sleep probably will do you some good.”

“I-I’m o-ok-ay,” Barry dismisses him but shoots him a faint, weary smile. “J-Just a l-little w-wor-rried.”

He doesn’t need to elaborate why that is the case.

“They’re fine,” Marco assures him. “They probably made a quick trip to the Saloon to celebrate before coming back.”

Which is most likely the truth. They usually get smashed after a heist like that, all the adrenalin and endorphins that come hand in hand with a successful job ask for a celebration.

The notion alone that the others could be doing just that, spending their money on cheap booze and whores, causes Marco’s mood to nosedive, and he silently curses them and his damn shitty luck for getting sick.

“Y-you’ll b-be b-back o-on y-your f-f-feet i-in n-no t-time,” Barry comforts him as he seems to guess what causes him to glare at the mug in his hands.

“Yeah, doesn’t change that I still missed the job.” Marco grunts before he lets his head drop back to rest on the back of the couch.

Fuck his luck. He has been itching for a heist like this one for weeks.

“Y-you g-g-got s-some g-great h-hot ch-choc-colate i-ins-tead,” Barry reminds him and adds when Marco shifts the glare towards him, “a-and m-marsh-m-mallows.”

“Cute.” Marco grunts but feels a grin tug on his lips despite how pissed he feels over being forced to rest. He glances back to the table where Barry sat earlier, and since he doesn’t feel like wallowing in self-pity anymore, he asks, “What did you draw?”

Barry appears a little surprised for a moment, then a faint blush settles over his cheeks and he nervously averts his eyes.

Ah.

Marco smirks amused, and wonders how many sketches of Snart Barry has done by now. He probably could fill a folder as thick as a phone book with them.

“You know, it will eventually go to his head if you keep singling him out as your model,” Marco remarks and takes a sip of his hot chocolate, not missing how the flush on Barry’s cheek deepens.
“D-Don’t b-be s-sil-ly,” Barry mumbles and frowns halfheartedly at Marco.

“Me?” Marco chuckles and settles a little deeper, noticing with relief that the throbbing behind his temples has subsided somewhat. “I’m just observing.”

Barry rolls his eyes, though the flush doesn’t recede. “R-Right.” He shakes his head, a smile tugging on his own lips as he proceeds. “F-For h-how m-m-much y-you c-com-mplain a-ab-bout A-Axel wh-when h-he i-is a-ar-round, y-y-you a-are h-hardly a-any b-bet-ter wh-when i-it c-c-com-mes t-to b-being a-an a-an-noy-ing b-brat.”

“Like hell I am,” Marco objects, somewhat irked by the comparison to the teen. “I’ve never been such a brat even during my worst as a teenager.”

Barry grins, clearly not believing him and seems bemused by his protest, but he doesn’t disagree. Instead he points out, “W-we a-all a-w-w-were t-teen-nagers o-once, b-being s-somewh-what i-ins-suffer-rable i-is j-just p-p-part o-of th-that.”

Marco snorts and can’t really find it in himself to be annoyed at Barry for how he always finds a way to be reasonable when it comes to the kid. “No, he’s a brat, it’s simple as that. You’re just too nice.” He steers their conversation back to the former topic by asking, “So, what are you doing with all of these sketches of Snart, anyway? You’ve to have enough to repaper your living room with them by now.”

It never will fail to amuse Marco how Barry’s attempts to glare fail spectacularly at being effective whenever he gets scandalized by them ribbing him a little. Not that him glaring really is ever that intimidating, since Barry is just too nice of a person to pull something like that off. In his case, people generally back off because they don’t want to hurt him or disappoint him, not because they’ve to worry about physical consequences. Or even a verbal confrontation, really.

“Th-that’s n-none o-of y-y-your b-bus-siness,” Barry replies tersely, and his frown deepens when Marco huffs a laugh.

“Don’t give me that evil eye, I’m sick, remember?” Marco points out, amused.

“Y-y-you s-seem t-to f-feel w-well e-en-nough t-to b-be a-an-noy-ing a-ag-gain,” Barry replies audibly miffed for a second, but it is probably mostly embarrassment that makes him feel somewhat defensive.

“You’re a heartless fellow, Allen, if you think it is okay to insult people when they are sick and helpless,” Marco tells him with fake earnestness, which causes Barry’s frown to slip as he laughs.

“Y-you’re s-such a-a d-drama qu-queen,” Barry remarks, chuckling. “W-way w-worse th-than S-Sam.”

“And you’re a liar.” Marco sniffs. “There is no way to be worse than Scudder when it comes to that, and you know that.”

Barry smiles and turns his eyes back to the mug that is resting on his lap. “E-Ever-yo-one o-of y-you i-is j-just a-as b-bad a-as th-th-e o-o-ther.” There is fondness in these words, and before Marco can retort, he goes on. “I-I’n n-not s-sketch-ching L-Len a-all th-th-e t-time.” He takes a sip of his drink, and keeps the mug close to his lips for a moment. His gaze that is now directed towards the dark hallway behind the entrance becomes unfocused as he seems to think about something.

Marco watches him and waits. He is sure that Barry is about to elaborate, and while a part of him suddenly feels the need to steer their conversation towards a different topic, an even bigger one is
curious about what the other man will say. Barry usually is just as tightlipped when it comes to his relationship with Len as it is the other way around, and while Marco isn’t in general that interested when it comes to that kind of stuff, especially in regard of the other Rogues, he can’t deny that he is somewhat interested to learn more.

With a soft sigh, nothing more than an exhale, Barry sits back so that he is resting against the back of the chair and reaches up to rub his eyes.

“I-it j-just…” Barry lowers his gaze to his lap once again, frowning faintly. “I-it j-j-just h-helps m-me t-to r-rel-lax.” A blush spreads over his face, and he glances to Marco, clearly uncertain and embarrassed. “S-sk-ketching i-in g-g-gener-ral h-helps m-me w-w-with th-that,” he adds and looks away again.

“Art can be quite meditative, I’ve heard,” Marco remarks, and while he usually enjoys making his friends feel uneasy and embarrassed to a degree, as that can be greatly entertaining, it’s not the same with Barry, not anymore. With him, Marco always feels like someone who is kicking a puppy.

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees and turns back to him with a surprised but grateful expression. “I-It r-real-ly i-is, a-and I-I d-don’t a-alw-a-ways n-not-tice wh-what I-I s-s-start t-to d-draw wh-when I-I l-let m-my m-mind w-wander.” He shrugs half-heartedly, and Marco doesn’t miss how his flush intensifies somewhat as he proceeds. “U-U-usu-al-ly i-it is th-the th-things I-I l-like, p-peo-ple I-I f-feel c-comfortable a-around…” He gives Marco a rueful smile. “M-Mos-ty l-ly i-it’s L-Len, b-but i-i-it’s n-not o-only h-him.”

It is odd to think that Barry could see them as a source of comfort and calm, considering how Marco often experiences his friends as the epitome of madness and, more often than not, feels the urge to tug at his own hair when he is around them these days.

Then again, Barry is the kind of person who can probably see the good in anybody.

Even in the worst.

Marco suddenly has to smirk and chuckles. “Go to heaven for the climate. Go to hell for the company.”

Barry arches an eyebrow at that, and gives him a surprised smile as he studies him curiously. “Th-that’s f-from M-Mark T-Twain, i-isn’t i-it?”

It is Marco’s turn to looks surprised then, and he eyes the other man with a considering look. “Yeah, it is. You’ve read him before?”


Marco hardly notices it when his lips morph into a grin, and he studies the other man with new-found respect and interest. He didn’t know Barry had read Mark Twain, he assumed, like Roscoe or Len, the man sticks to non-fictional stuff, since he was a scientist himself.

This is a pleasant discovery, and what is even better is the fact that Barry seems to have enjoyed that brilliant man’s works. The ones he’s read, so far, at least.

Trying to talk with the other Rogues about Twain’s works would be idiotic, most of them are not big on reading fiction, and Hartley and Lisa, who do occasionally like to read a novel, never found a liking for that author.
It is a pity, really, but Marco made his peace that he is forced to live among cretins when it comes to literature.

Apparently, that is no longer the case, and despite how he still feels very much sick, his body aching and limbs heavy, he can’t stop the excitement that blooms inside him at the notion that he could finally have found someone else around here he could share his fascination over that genius man with.

“You’ve read *The Prince and the Pauper*?” Marco inquires and pushes himself up in a mostly sitting position, his exhaustion temporary forgotten.

Barry watches him with a surprised, slightly confused expression, though there is bemusement and familiar fondness in his eyes and he shakes his head. “N-no. Wh-What’s i-it a-ab-bout?”

Marco tells him only a rough summary because he intends to lend Barry the book and let him experience the story on his own. He also tells him about *The Life in Mississippi* and *The Mysterious Stranger*, and is pleased when Barry agrees to read them too.

They end up discussing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, another novel Barry has read, and it is much to Marco’s annoyance when the others eventually return, close to three in the morning, since Barry immediately gets up to get to Len, happy to see them return in one piece but still worried about the delay.

Like Marco expected, the other Rogues clearly went for a drink to celebrate before returning, and it irks him somewhat that Barry isn’t pissed about it. That way, he would likely not keep sticking to Len’s side like they are glued together, or follow him to their bedroom no five minutes later, while Mick, Digger, Sam, and Roscoe decide to be their usual annoying selves and start a game of poker at the table, not even thinking about keeping their voices down.

Marco gets up, flips Sam off and curses him darkly when the idiot tells him that he still looks like shit, and decides to retreat to his room for tonight.

He takes the mug of tea with him.

Chapter End Notes

So, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. It is one without a lot of action and a slower pace (and I know I keep my pace slow as it is, but I’m sure you get what I mean ;) ) since I wanted to explore the ramifications of Barry’s last trip to the Watchtower and the Rogues learning for sure that he was the second Flash.

They handled that revelation probably differently than many of you expected, but the way they all reacted and kind of non-dealt with it so far came very natural to me when writing those scenes. They are all unsure how to handle knowing for sure now that Barry was their enemy once, and that isn’t because the Rogues still hold a grudge or anything like that, but more due to the circumstances and them being unwilling to confront the whole issue head-on. Uncertainty on both their parts play a lot into it, and Len being super grumpy around the other Rogues whenever Barry’s past comes up because he feels protective of Barry doesn’t help with it. ;)

It will take a few more chapters before the whole topic is really directly touched upon,
since I know from experience how even something you would assume should be easy to overcome if you just talk about it, turns out to be hard for people to touch upon in real life for various reasons – communication can be hard, I guess.

It was also nice to give Barry and Len some alone time, with them doing something mundane as preparing a meal - and how sweet is Len attempted to cook for Barry? :) There are a lot of great stories on ao3 with Len being very skilled when it comes to cooking and baking, which I always find quite amusing, since the Len I grew up with, the one from the comics, certainly prefers to live off cheap fast food since it is more convenient. Barry certainly didn't exaggerate when he said that Len usually doesn't even make scrambled eggs (not that he can't prepare easy dishes, he just generally can't be bothered to do so), and him cooking for Barry was pretty much an attempt to cheer him up and do something nice for him.

Showing how the Rogues think about the whole situation through Marco's eyes also turned out in a way I really like, and I'm glad that I was able to give Barry and Marco some time to interact, since one on one interactions between Barry and the Rogues are much sparser than I would like them to be. I think Marco is going to seek out Barry's company much more often from now on, now that he finally found someone he could share his *cough* obsession *cough* over Mark Twain with.

I also want to tell you, my dear readers, that I’m utterly floored by the amount of response I got for my last chapter! :) It was amazing for so many of you to let my know what you thought of it and your assumptions about what is going on. Thank you all so much for doing so, it really means a lot to me, especially since I had a very stressful two weeks due to exams. Getting your comments really brightened my days when I mostly felt like bashing my head on my desk because I couldn’t push another formula into my head. ;)

Next chapter will be up in two weeks time and have Jay pay Barry a visit again, but it won’t end in any tears, I promise.

Have a wonderful time till then! :)
Barry startles up when a knock cuts through the otherwise quiet of his apartment.

Feeling a little disorientated, it takes his drowsy mind a moment to catch up with where he is, causing a familiar fear to bear down on him as he tries to blink the sleep out of his eyes.

Pushing himself up with a soft groan, he notices that it’s still bright outside, and a glance to the clock shows that it is shortly after three in the afternoon.

He must have fallen asleep when he sat down on his couch earlier, after he made himself some soup for lunch.

Coughing lightly, Barry rubs his eyes and glances to the door.

He isn’t expecting anybody-

His phone!

Stumbling to his feet, he swiftly walks over to the kitchen table where he usually leaves the cell phone. It still feels strangely light to him as he picks it up, and his stomach sinks when he notices the missed calls.

From Jay.

Another knock follows, and he turns back to the door, feeling briefly indecisive about what to do, whether he should answer or not.

Barry feels groggy, a little under the weather with his throat aching, and he would prefer to have his peace for the rest of today. Jay probably knows that he is here, though, likely heard him stumble around, and it would really just be plain impolite to ignore him.

There is also the slight fear still persisting inside him that reminds him of how much trouble he can get himself into if Jay suspects that he is up to something.
The rational part of his mind knows by now that this will most likely not happen, that Jay is trying to help him these days and clearly makes an effort to trust him.

That is also the reason why he usually calls nowadays whenever he wants to pass by, and Barry really appreciates it since this eases his worries a little when it comes to Jay possibly surprising him while Len is over or he is at the hideout.

Unfortunately, he forgot to deactivate the silent mode of his phone this morning, since his head has felt like it was stuffed with cotton from the moment he got up, and Jay probably got worried when he didn’t answer.

Since the beginning of the year, after the older man noticed the shift in Barry’s behavior, but especially since his little involuntary trip to the Watchtower, Jay has started to check up on him more often.

It annoys Barry, seeing that he doesn’t need Jay’s help, he can look after himself just fine, and it makes it more dangerous to have Len or one of the others over or visiting them.

Still, even so, there is something undeniably nice knowing that the older man is trying to look out for him. Jay caring about him and being so kind once more without the ongoing suspicion visible in his eyes, is something Barry didn’t realize he had missed so much till he got it back.

Another knock pulls Barry from his thoughts, and he calls out. “J-Just a-a m-m-moment.”

He grabs his sketch block from the couch table and closes it, hiding the scene of the Rogues playing poker, which he currently is working on, as it would do him no good if Jay noticed it by accident. Even with how much more relaxed the older man’s attitude towards him has become over the last months, he will certainly not take well to learning of their friendship.

Barry tucks away the sketch block under the cushion of his couch and somewhat reluctantly makes his way over to the entrance of his apartment.

Taking a deep breath, he tries to settle his nerves, and opens the door.

As expected, Jay is standing in front of it, a friendly smile on his lips. Barry doesn’t miss the concern that lies behind it, though, or the flicker of a frown with which the other man takes him in for a second.

“Hello, Barry,” Jay greets him, meeting his eyes. “I’m sorry, did I wake you from a nap?”

Barry returns the smile faintly, and shrugs. “I-It’s f-f-fine, I-I d-d-didn’t m-mean t-to f-f-fall a-as-sleep-p a-anyw-way.” He makes a step aside to give Jay space. “C-Come i-in, I-I’ll m-make y-you s-s-some c-cof-fee.”

Jay hesitates to follow his invitation, clearly not missing that Barry is still feeling exhausted. “I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude like that, I just wanted to make sure…” He breaks off, briefly looking lost for something to say, but eventually proceeds. “I can come back another time.”

Barry waves him off, but still very much feels like his head if filled with cobwebs. “’t’s f-f-fine, c-come i-in.”

The concern persists in Jay’s gaze, but he decides to take him up on the offer and steps in. “Thank you.”

Barry smiles wearily and closes the door behind him.
While Barry busies himself with preparing the warm beverage, Jay takes his by now usual spot at the table and stays quiet for the most part. He probably picks up on the fact that Barry still isn’t fully awake yet and gives him time for his brain to catch up with the rest of his body.

“Y-you’ve b-been v-v-visit-ting M-Max a-and B-Bart ag-gain?” Barry asks as he puts down Jay’s cup next to him and makes his way to sit opposite his guest.

“No, I was meeting up with another friend I haven’t seen in a while,” Jay explains and leaves it at that, his not unkind but dismissive tone making it obvious that he doesn’t want to elaborate on it any further which is fine with Barry. He knows that many of Jay’s friends are connected to the superhero community one way or another, and while Jay is surprisingly open about this part of his life these days, Barry really prefers to keep any of it as far away from himself as possible. Thankfully, the older man respects that and never tries to force the topic onto him.

That is, other than for when he sought Barry out after his involuntary trip to the Watchtower. Jay quickly picked up on how upsetting that experience was for him, though, and has refrained from trying to bring it or anything else regarding the JLA up since then.

It is odd, how mindful Jay really is when it comes to the whole affair. Barry still doesn’t know whether it is too good to be true, whether he can trust it, because he expected Jay to insist on talking with him about what a mess of an interrogation he’d had with Dinah.

He never did.

There is no way that Jay didn’t notice how suspiciously nervous Barry was that afternoon, how his stammer got nearly so bad that he couldn’t talk at all, but much to his surprise and gratitude, he didn’t accuse him of hiding anything.

Barry is still not sure what to make of it. He is a horrible liar, has always been, but especially these days with how easily he grows nervous, even if there is no real reason for it, and a part of him keeps worrying about Jay maybe knowing more than he lets on about where and who Barry spends his time with.

That is impossible, though. It has to be, because even if Jay really believes Barry about his innocence regarding Iris’ death and Wally’s abuse, the Rogues are still criminals, and him interacting with them is undoubtedly a crass violation against his parole restrictions.

Unwilling to worry about that right now, Barry forces the thought out of his mind and takes a sip of the nearly hot coffee in his hands. The drink’s bitterness makes him grimace slightly, but it is a nice distraction at the same time, and it helps with the taste that has been coating his tongue since he got up this morning.

He really hopes he isn’t getting sick again. There is still enough of the money left he got from Mrs. Ming, but he doesn’t want to spend it on medicine if he can help it. His next rent is due soon, which will take a big part out of his savings as it is, and the thought is disconcerting, since his search for a job still hasn’t gotten him anything but rejections so far.

“You look worried,” Jay remarks, causing Barry to snap out of his own thoughts and focus back on the other man. He didn’t even notice how his mind had drifted off, and he quickly stammers an apology.

“That’s fine,” Jay assures him kindly, though he keeps watching him thoughtfully. “Is it because of your job searching?”
Familiar humiliation settles around Barry like a heavy coat, and he averts his eyes down to the mug in his hands, unable to meet Jay’s just then.

“I’m look-king,” Barry tells him, and he nearly cringes at how defensive he sounds.

“I know,” Jay agrees. “I’m no insinuating that you aren’t, Barry. I’m just curious.”

Barry bites his lower lip, still not able to meet Jay’s eyes, and despite the other man's reassuring words he wishes there was a way to explain that he is trying, really trying, but that nobody seems to even consider hiring someone like him. Which is absurd, since he isn’t the first person with a criminal record trying to find someplace to work, and others are able to do so eventually, but…

He is like the full package when it comes to what people imagine as an undesirable employee, and Barry is very much aware of his many shortcomings. There is his awful criminal record, his horrible stammer, how nervous and skittish he becomes whenever he is having a job interview.

It is as frustrating as it is tiring.

At times, he feels like he is up to his knees in thick molasses, hardly able to move forward even just an inch.

“How many interviews did you have so far?” Jay inquires, and Barry shoots him an unhappy look as he sinks in on himself a little more.

They usually don’t talk about Barry’s current lack of occupation, since Jay knows that it is a sensitive topic for him, but apparently, that has changed.

“T-t-twenty-o-one,” Barry replies quietly, feeling the heat creep up his cheeks, and he can’t help but wonder how much of a failure he must look like right now to the other man.

Jay doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and Barry keeps his eyes on the mug in his hands, from which the warmth is slowly seeping in his fingers.

“None of these offered you the job afterwards?” Jay finally asks, and he doesn’t sound contemptuous or reproachful, not that Barry really expected him to.

Barry swallows and shakes his head.

It is ridiculous, embarrassingly so, him being unable to even be hired as a cleaning help in a rundown restaurant, and Jay has to think so too, anybody who learns of how he is failing again and again to get work has to eventually come to that realization.

Barry certainly does.

“Has your parole officer tried to arrange any interviews for you?” Jay studies him with a frown that deepens when Barry can’t help but smile bitterly. “Sh-she h-has.”

Mrs. Jenkins certainly makes sure to remind him after each failed interview how much time he costs her, how it shouldn’t be impossible for him to get hired at the places she sends him to. She is getting increasingly fed up with him, and while Barry is still sure that, at first, she gave him interviews at places she knew he would never get hired, his continuing failure to find a job has become only just an annoyance to her by now.

Jay doesn’t say anything, and Barry can feel his gaze heavily upon himself. There is still no reproach, though.
“Did any of them tell you why they decided against hiring you?” Jay eventually asks, and Barry can’t but shoot him an incredulous look.

“Barry, just because you are an ex-convict doesn’t mean that you should not be able to get a job,” Jay points out seriously, and Barry averts his eyes again, shame washing over him like icy water.

“I’m not saying that I think that is because of you,” Jay proceeds, voice a little softer. “It’s quite the opposite. It seems strange to me that nobody considers hiring someone with your qualifications. You are clearly a smart guy, and you were able to hold a job for a long period of time after your discharge from prison. Those are things people look for when they consider the option of hiring an ex-convict.” His frown deepens again, Barry doesn’t need to look up to see it, its intensity is palpable.

Jay sounds a little bitter as he proceeds. “It’s just difficult for me to believe that nobody would take advantage of someone like you considering with how little they can pay you and get away with it.”

Thinking that Jay could be angered by the fact that anybody who hires Barry would pay him way below his qualification is nearly absurd. After all, it hardly matters that he has a scientific degree when he it comes to scrubbing dirty pots or mopping the floor, does it?

Barry stays quiet, not sure how to reply, and takes a small sip of his still warm coffee, concentrating on its bitterness and aromatic taste while he can feel Jay continue to study him.

“I take it that they did not let you know what caused them to turn you away,” Jay eventually says, and Barry presses his lips into a thin line, gaze firmly on the dark beverage in his hands, as he wordlessly shakes his head.

An uneasy silence settles between them, and Barry keeps his gaze down, feeling exceedingly uncomfortable in his skin.

“This doesn’t say anything about you,” Jay tells him firmly, breaking the building tension, and his words are unexpectedly kind. “You are a smart, hardworking man, Barry, and I know that those people not hiring you makes you feel like this is on you, but that’s not the case.”

Barry swallows thickly and blinks. His eyes are itching again, as is his throat, which swiftly leads to a small coughing fit that has been waiting to act up the whole time now.

Jay gets up and snatches him a glass of water, and Barry is both relieved and touched when he notices that the other man keeps his distance as he puts the glass down next to him, mindful of not getting too close, because he knows by now how distressing that is for him.

The water helps, and Barry shoots Jay a grateful look when he finally regains his breath. His expression quickly changes to a much more bitter and downtrodden one, then, and he puts the glass back down. His voice is still hoarse as he quietly points out, “I-I’m n-n-not s-stupid, J-Jay. I-I kn-know y-y-you m-mean w-well, b-b-but th-th-the f-fact i-is th-that I-I’m a-a m-m-m… m-m-murderer a-and r-r-r…” He breaks off, since saying those words out loud is hard, but he eventually presses on. “P-p-peo-ple l-like m-me a-are h-har-rdy l-l-look-ked f-for, e-even wh-when i-it c-com-mes t-to b-bad-dl-ly p-paii-d a-and h-hard ph-physical l-labor.”

Barry chuckles humorlessly, an unhappy, pained smile tugging at his lips, and he reaches up to rub his eyes. “N-n-not t-to m-m-ment-tion m-my l-lit-tle s-speech p-prob-blem o-or th-that m-my n-n-nerv-voi-ous d-dem-meanor p-prob-bably p-puts th-them o-off a-all o-on th-their o-own.”

“That is nonsense,” Jay insists firmly, and Barry glances up to him, surprised. He is caught off-guard by the vehemence behind these words, and slightly worried by the anger he can see on the other
man’s face as he proceeds, “We both know that you are none of those things, and your speech impediment is not something anybody can hold against you either, especially under your current circumstances and the stress you’ve been under over the past months.”

“Th-th-they d-d-don’t kn-know th-that,” Barry argues weakly, suddenly feeling sick. Having Jay say that, stating so clearly that he doesn’t believe in Barry’s guilt anymore, and coming up with excuses for his trouble to speak clearly, is oddly unsettling.

And confusing.

Things have been shifting between them for a while now, but it is now that Barry really notices how much they have changed.

Jay doesn’t really think that he is a murderer anymore? A rapist? Does he really believe otherwise now?

A full-body shudder overcomes Barry, and he nearly lets go of his mug, the need to find some comfort almost overwhelming, but he keeps his hands where they are, unwilling to embarrass himself anymore in front of Jay by hugging himself like a scared child.

“No,” Jay agrees, grimly. “They don’t, but I know that there is something suspicious about over twenty people turning you away.” His expression softens as he adds. “You’re giving yourself much too little credit, Barry, you did achieve a lot in your life, and anybody who looks up your resume can see that. What happened to Iris and Wally doesn’t taint that, and there are many people out there who actually did the horrible things you were convicted for, and they still manage to find work. Anybody with a lick of sense in them should gladly hire someone as diligent, smart, and kindhearted as you.”

Barry feels himself at a loss for words, moved by what Jay has just said, and he quickly lowers his head, reaching up once more, this time to wipe away the tears that threaten to fall if he lets them.

His throat hurts, as does his chest, and he feels overwhelmed by the kind words, by how badly he wants them to be true, by how badly he wants to be the man Jay has just described.

Anything, but the failure he feels like these days.

“I know that this has to be very hard on you, and I’m sorry I didn’t realize how difficult things are for you earlier,” Jay goes on, quietly, and Barry wishes he could get a grip on his emotions, because he doesn’t want to cry in front of him.

“Barry…” Jay sounds hesitant like he is debating with himself whether he should go on or not, and when he does, Barry feels himself freeze at what he says next. “Garrick Laboratories would be glad to welcome you among its scientific staff.”

Eyes wide, Barry looks up, staring at Jay unabashedly, not sure whether he imagined the other man just offering him a job at his company. This could mean a world of trouble for Jay should anybody find out about it, but even after a long moment he doesn’t show any signs that he is about to go back on the offer.

Which is stupid, really, really stupid, because Wally would never forgive Jay if he hired Barry.

Barry is unsure about how much Wally knows about Jay being back into his life as it is, though he doubts that his nephew has not taken notice by now.

If Barry accepts, it will most likely cause Wally to cut all ties with Jay, and by the grim but resolute look in the other man’s eyes, he seems to be aware of that risk. Probably hopes for the best, but still
not blind to it, and it leaves Barry confused.

Jay would do that for him?

Why?

Wally means so much to Jay and Joan, he’s like their grandson, and Jay would throw that away just so he could help Barry? Offer him a job in his laboratories?

It is then that it hits Barry that he will be able to work as a scientist again if he accepts, not a forensic scientist, but still in a similar field of work, and the thought is nauseating.

Barry doesn’t understand where this strong reaction to the mere idea of putting back on a lab-coat and working inside a laboratory comes from, for a brief moment he is seriously worried that he is going to throw up then and there.

The intensity of the sensation quickly wanes, but leaves behind a bad aftertaste, and his heart is beating much too harshly against his chest.

“Is everything alright?” Jay asks, worried, and Barry, who briefly curled in on himself relaxes and sits back. He notices with surprise and slight embarrassment that the other man has gotten up, ready to act if necessary. It causes Barry’s cheeks to grow hot, and he glances back to the table.

“S-s-sor-ry… I-I d-d-don’t kn-know wh-what j-just…” Barry breaks off, unsure how to explain his reaction since he himself doesn’t know what exactly caused it. He reaches for his mug, pulling it closer but not drinking from it, and licks his lips nervously.

“Th-th-thank y-y-you,” Barry says quietly and glances up to meet Jay’s eyes who studies him with a concerned frown. “F-For th-the o-of-fer… f-f-for c-car-ring a-at a-all, i-it…” He chuckles nervously. “I-It’s b-b-been a-a l-long t-t-time s-since… I-I…” Breaking off, Barry forces himself to take a deep breath while he tries to gather his thoughts that seem to stumble over each other in his mind, making it difficult for him to think clearly.

“Th-thank y-y-you,” Barry repeats eventually, holding Jay’s gaze firmly. “I-It m-means a l-lot t-to m-me, J-Jay, b-b-but…” He smiles slightly, sadly, and shakes his head. “I-I c-c-can’t a-ac-c-cept y-y-your o-offer.”

“W-Why?” Jay asks, frowning, looking like he was certain that Barry would take him up on it.

“I-I…” Barry licks his lips, shrugging helplessly. “I-I j-just… I-I…” A shiver goes through him, and he pulls his arms close, pressing his elbows against his ribs, ducking his head. “I-I j-just c-c-can’t… I-I’m s-s-sorry.”

“Barry.” Jay still sounds very much confused over his response, but there is also a strongly comforting quality to his words as he addresses him. “You don’t need to apologize, I’m not angry at you because of it or anything like that. I’m just surprised, I though…” He breaks off, and Barry sees how a sad, tired emotion flickers across his face before he sighs softly.

Suddenly, Barry wants to know what crossed the other man’s mind, then, because he doesn’t want Jay to think that his decision is because of him.

“I-It’s n-n-not y-you,” Barry blurts out, not understanding why, but it’s important to him that Jay doesn’t believe that to be the reason. “I-I j-just c-c-can’t w-w-wor-rk a-as… I-I j-just c-c-can’t w-work i-in th-that f-field a-anym-more… I-I… i-it’s n-not b-bec-cause o-of y-you, I-I j-just… c-c-can’t…”
It is a very lacking explanation, mostly so since Barry himself does not understand in the first place why the idea of working in Jay’s company is so unsettling, but the grim self-reproach on the older man’s face is once again replaced by puzzlement.

Jay doesn’t ask him to clarify, thankfully, and instead nods, accepting his words for what they are. The sad fondness lingers behind, though, as he watches Barry and speaks, “That’s okay, you’ve been through a lot, and I know that the past left marks behind on you. It would have on anybody in your situation.” He gives him a small smile. “You don’t need to explain yourself to me, but I’m here if you need someone to talk to, or just someone to listen.”

“Th-thank y-you,” Barry tells him quietly, his voice wavering a little.

It’s not the first time Jay offers to listen to him, and Barry never really considered that possibility, simply because of what happened between them, but somehow it is different this time.

For some reason, Barry finds himself wanting to trust Jay again, something he hasn’t in a very long time.

Things between them are changing, have been for a while now, and the mere idea that they could go back to how they once were, is still ludicrous, but maybe things he thought irrevocably damaged could be mended more than he allowed himself to hope.

Barry is grateful when Jay changes the topic, as the conversation about his current lack of a job has been about as exhausting and taxing on him as he expected it would be. He is still a little uncomfortable when Jay inquires whether he has had the opportunity so far to use the annual pass for the art museum he got from Max for Christmas.

“It’s not yet,” Barry admits reluctantly. He feels guilty about the fact that, like the cell phone, the pass is a present he would rather keep locked away in his sock drawer if he can get away with it.

They are mindful, generous presents, but they are also too much, and the feeling of owning owing the two men quickly attached itself to Barry the moment the received them.

It’s not as bad, anymore, though.

“What do you think of joining Max and me when we visit the museum with Bart? I think that would be a good opportunity for you to use it,” Jay suggests. “We don’t have a certain date in mind yet, and we are flexible for the most part, but it has to be on the weekend because of Bart being in school the rest of the week.”

Barry, not for the first time since Jay arrived to his doorstep, feels taken aback by the unexpected offer. A part of him panics slightly at the idea of spending time with Bart while Jay and Max are around watching him, waiting for him to slip, but he quickly quiets it, reminding himself firmly that things aren’t like that anymore. That Jay doesn’t believe that he is sick like that, and maybe it’s the same with Max, not that Max ever seemed especially wary or suspicious whenever he was close to Bart.

Still, the offer makes him a little uneasy, and Jay seems to notice, as he adds, “You don’t have to, of course, but you would be more than welcome, and Bart would love having you with us.” He considers him for a moment and adds, “You can also bring Eddy’s nephew along, if you want. Max told me that Bart took quite a liking to the boy, and I think it would do him some good to have someone closer to his age around in case we get too boring for him.”

Barry involuntarily tenses up hearing Jay mention Axel, and he searches the other man’s face in
alarm since Jay knows that the teen is not Eddy’s nephew or related to him at all.

“Relax,” Jay tells him as he watches his reaction with a returning frown. “Barry, I didn’t bring Axel up to upset you. I just thought the boy would like to tag along since Bart is coming too, and I know that he means a lot to you.” When Barry fidgeted nervously at that, Jay exhales a soft, tired sigh, though the annoyance Barry expects isn’t there. Instead, the other man gives him a faint, rather forced smile. “There is so much damage done I won’t ever be able to repair, isn’t there?” He chuckles humorlessly and rubs his eyes. He mutters under his breath, nearly too quiet for Barry to catch it, “What a stupid question.”

*It is, in a way*, Barry thinks silently, and he doesn’t like to be reminded about how broken the relationship they once had is. He isn’t lying to himself, of course he is more than aware of how things can never go back to how they were after what happened, and he didn’t mind that too much. He told himself that it doesn’t matter, and for the longest time he believed it, but things have changed once more, Jay has started to become a part of his life again, and despite the anger he still feels deep down towards the older man, the wish for them to rekindle again is strong, maybe even stronger than the animosity the last decade left behind.

“I-I’d l-l-like t-to b-bring Ax-xel a-al-long,” Barry blurts out and meets Jay’s eyes firmly, though his heart is beating like crazy in his chest. “I-I’ll a-ask h-him wh-wheth-ther h-he w-wants t-to j-j-join u-us.”

The gratitude with which Jay watches him then catches Barry off-guard, makes him a little uncomfortable, but strengthens the hope that maybe, just maybe, he could get some part of his former life back.

He missed Jay, like he misses most of the people who turned their backs on him after that fateful night. Jay and Joan have always been on another level, like Bruce and Hal, they were people who Barry considered family, and for the first time it looks like he can become a part of the Garricks’ life again.

There are the Rogues, a voice reminds Barry, pressing on despite how he tries to quench it before it could touch upon the problem he usually tries to avoid thinking about. Eventually Jay will find out about them, and then everything will fall apart once more.

Barry swallows and breaks his eye contact with Jay.

Guilt settles into his guts, heavy and cold, and not for the first time he asks himself why things can never be easy.

“I’m sure Bart will be excited to hear that you’re going to join us,” Jay says, and he sounds lighter, more cheerful. “I’ll let Max know, and he’ll discuss the details with you over the phone if that’s alright with you.”

“S-sure,” Barry agrees and coughs lightly since his voice sounds much too feeble, even though the idea of spending time with Bart is uplifting, and he is really grateful that he is given this opportunity.

His stomach sinks somewhat when he notices the serious way Jay is now watching him, but before he can start to worry, he speaks.

“I’m glad you agree to this,” Jay tells him earnestly. “I know that it can’t be easy for you, and the fact that you’re trusting me enough to do this means a lot to me.”

Barry nods and tries not to notice how the lump in his throat has returned, or the pang in his chest.
He doesn’t mind when Jay decides to change the topic, then, and breathing becomes easier again when he listens to how much better Joan is doing these days.

When the other man leaves about an hour later, Barry, not for the first time over the last months, feels sad to see him go, but at the same time there is a calmness in him that makes it easy to return to the couch and get some more sleep.

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“You look like you are in dire need of some hot chocolate,” Mary tells Barry in lieu of a greeting after she opened her door to him. She gives him a sympathetic look and lets him in.

Barry tries to return it, but it probably falls flat. He just feels exhausted, and mustering up a smile seems like too big of a task just now.

“Th-thanks,” Barry says nonetheless, welcoming his friend’s kindness, and while Mary heads to heat up some milk, he makes his way over to her couch.

The warmth of the apartment is a nice change after the cold, wet weather outside, and while February is slowly coming to an end, the winter has returned full force once more with snowstorms and temperatures plummeting past the freezing point.

After taking off his wet coat and taking a seat, Barry lets himself sink into the cushion, exhaling a soft, tired sigh, and closes his eyes for a moment.

It is nice being here in Mary’s apartment, there is something undeniably comforting to it, to the welcoming warmth that seems to engulf him whenever he is over.

Sometimes, Barry wishes he could stay here, hide away from the world outside, and just spend his time drinking hot chocolate and watching old classics with Mary. It is a silly notion, but it is comforting, and after days like today he would give a lot for things to be that easy, even if it is only for a little while.

“You’re up for some whipped cream?” Mary calls from her small kitchen, and Barry, who is still resting his head on the back of the couch with his eyes closed, has to chuckle.

“D-Def-finit-ley,” Barry agrees, and picks up the faint smell of the hot beverage that starts to fill the apartment. It’s pleasant and soothing, and lulls his tired mind close to nodding off.

Not wanting to fall asleep on Mary, Barry forces himself to open his eyes and sit up, shaking his head lightly to get rid of some of the sleepiness that has attached itself to him. It is probably also the warmth that makes him feel drowsy, something that happens a lot these days since his landlady seems to have taken pity on her tenants and is actually running the heating system of the building. The temperature still hardly ever pass 70 °F but it is a steep improvement to how it has been before, and every single person in the complex is grateful for it.

Mary’s soft steps reach Barry, and he turns to see her enter the living room with two big mugs in her hands. Both are of the set Barry got her for Christmas, with cute little kittens and paw prints decorating their crème surface.

“One hot chocolate for you,” Mary says with a warm smile, her eyes crinkling a little, as she hands him his mug. “Something warm and sweet to get you much more comfortable again.”

“Th-thanks, Mary.” Barry accepts the mug gladly and skids a little over to give his friend space to sit down next to him.
“You know, I just had that feeling that it would be a good idea to pick up some whipped cream when I went to the store yesterday,” Mary informs him, holding her warm drink securely in both her hands.

“Y-your S-Spider-S-Sen-nse t-tingled,” Barry agrees, causing his friend to chuckle amused and shoot him a fond look.

“I hope I won’t wake up tomorrow and find myself up the ceiling,” Mary jokes back and leans close to him, as if to let him in on a secret. “I hate heights.”

“Y-You’d o-overc-come th-that f-fear i-in n-no t-time,” Barry assures her and takes a sip from his mug. The hot chocolate is rich in flavor, warm, sweet, and for a second everything is right with the world as he hums in enjoyment of the wonderful taste.

“You like it,” Mary states, not in the least surprised, though her eyes are still dancing with glee over his positive reaction.

“A-Alw-ways,” Barry agrees, and they share a grin.

“I’m glad.” Mary adjusts her seat, so that the side of her upper body is leaning against the back of the couch, and pulls up her right knee, close to her chest, and rests her chin on it. She studies him for a moment, expression soft and fond, but also a little sad, because Barry doesn’t doubt that she knows what is burdening him down.

“You want to tell me about the job interview?” Mary offers, like she always does when he decides to come to her because all the rejections are getting too much for him, and he doesn’t want to bother Len or the others with it.

Barry doesn’t understand why it is like that, because he knows that neither Len nor any of the others hold it against him that he is unable to get a new job. They are very supportive even, offering comfort in their own ways, but he still feels like such a failure around them, especially these days.

It is different with Mary, and Eddy too to a degree. Facing them after he once again wasn’t able to convince someone to give him a chance isn’t as bad, or as humiliating, and Barry knows that it isn’t fair, that it is on him and not the Rogues, but they still haven’t talked about it, and he can’t be entirely sure, the mere idea that they are aware of who he once was is still making him feel like he has to be ashamed of who he became when he is around them.

Unconsciously, Barry touches the ring on his left ring finger, feels the smoothness of the jewelry, while he wishes he wasn’t such a coward and could find the courage to talk with them about the whole thing.

They won’t kick him out over it, he is pretty sure of that by now, but it will still change things. It has to, seeing that they were enemies once, and things like that probably can’t be as easily forgiven and forgotten as he wishes they could.

“Barry?”

Snapping out of his thoughts, Barry turns back to Mary, who is studying him with a slight, worried frown, and flushes. “S-Sor-ry, I-I… th-there’s j-just a l-lot o-on m-my m-m-mind.”

“That’s fine, Bear,” Mary assures him and reaches out to touch his upper arm lightly, in a slow, careful movement as not to startle him. “There’s been a lot going on, and sometimes one just needs some extra time in one’s head to make head and tails of things.” She smiles and nods towards his head. “I’m here whenever the place up there gets too crowded. Sharing what is on our mind can help
us to see things clearer.”

“I-I kn-know,” Barry agrees and touches her hand lightly that is still on his arm. “Th-thank y-you, I-I c-can r-really a-ap-prec-ciate th-that.”

“What else do you have friends for,” Mary asks and gives his hand a squeeze before pulling back.

“Y-you’re th-the b-best f-friend o-one c-can a-as-k f-for.” Barry means it. Talking with Mary always comes so easy, and he knows that anything he tells her stays between them, and that she won’t think any less of him because of his worries and fears. Eddy is a lot like that too, though he is a little lacking when it comes to the tact part.

“So are you,” Mary returns smilingly and sips on her hot chocolate. She then rests her cheek on the back of the couch and chuckles. “It is odd how friendship sometimes work, isn’t it? You and Eddy are my best friends now, something I would have never expected when I first came to America.”

“N-No?” Barry asks, curious.

“It’s unusual for girls and women in the village I come from to be that close friends with boys or men. I never thought much of it, but I always assumed that my best friends here would also be women, like it was back home.” Briefly, yearning settles in Mary’s gaze, and Barry remembers that his friend hasn’t seen her family and friends she left behind in Europe in a very long time.

“I like that things are different here,” Mary proceeds as she focuses back on him. “I’m glad we became friends, Barry.”

“M-Me t-too.” Barry really is, and being reminded of how he should be grateful for her, for Eddy, for any of his friends, forces the dour heaviness that has been clinging to him for hours now to somewhat loosen its grip on him.

“I-d-didn’t g-get th-the j-job,” Barry tells her, quietly, still feeling upset about once again being shown the door, but no longer dejected over it as he has been before.

“I’m sorry, Bear,” Mary tells him, earnestly.

“Y-yeah,” Barry agrees, quietly. “M-me t-too… b-but I-I k-keep l-l-look-king.” He huffs a humorless laugh and shrugs. “E-Ev-ventual-ly s-somet-hing h-has t-to c-c-come u-up f-for m-me.” He hopes so at least. Ms. Jerkins is getting increasingly impatient, and he isn’t sure what will happen if he continues to fail at getting a new occupation, one of his parole conditions is to have a steady employment, after all.

Shivering involuntarily, Barry pulls his mug closer and takes a sip, welcoming the sweetness of the drink to distract him from the gloom of his thoughts.

“It will,” Mary assures him and sounds so certain that Barry can’t but envy her a little for it. She meets his doubtful expression warmly and reminds him, “You are an incredibly smart and kind person, Barry, you work more diligently than any other person I know and you always give your best. Anybody who gets you as their employee will be very lucky. That you haven’t found anything so far is just bad luck, but I know that things will look up soon.”

Tentatively, Mary reaches for his hand, and after a moment of hesitation, Barry lets her take it.

“Remember what a difference you made for Bo.” Mary interweaves their fingers lightly and gives him a reassuring squeeze. “She would not have been able to keep her store open without you. You worked so many extra hours to help her, without getting paid, just to help her keep her business
going. That is something not many people would have done, even if they are nice and kind.” She watches him affectionately. “You are a special kind of person, Barry, and people who know you notice that. Bo grew so fond of you that she saw you as her second grandson, and to me you are like another brother.”

Barry freezes for a second, thrown off guard by what Mary just told him.

He knew that Mary and he were friends, but he didn’t think that she saw him as someone that close, as family.

His eyes start to itch, and he swallows thickly, unsure of how to reply. He loves her, like one loves very dear friends, and for a second he recalls his youth, the many foster families and the numerous foster siblings he lived with. There were some he grew fond of, some he looked out for, but they were nearly always younger than him and depending on him.

Older kids usually seemed to feel the same dislike for him like most grown up did, other than Albert, that is.

Albert probably came the closest to being a sibling for Barry, no matter that they knew each other for only a year before the older teen out of his life again.

Thinking back to it, remembering the fondness he felt for him, Barry realizes that it is very similar to how he feels about Mary.

Chuckling, Barry blushes faintly, and squeezes her hand in return. “I-I’d h-have g-given a-a l-lot t-to h-have a s-sist-ter l-like y-you wh-when I-I w-was g-growing u-up.”

“Well, you have me now,” Mary points out, and a warmth blossoms in Barry’s chest that seems like a candle lit in darkness, bringing light and comfort.

“I-I d-do,” Barry agrees. “Th-thank y-you.”

“Well, you have me now,” Mary replies, watching him fondly. Then, a grin tugs on her lips and she shoots him a conspiring look. “Eddy will throw a fit if he finds out that we’ve such a bounding moment without him here.”

Barry snorts, caught off-guard by the mention of his other friend, and, yes, he is pretty sure Eddy will take offence to being left out.

“H-he d-doesn’t l-like i-it wh-when w-we g-get a-all s-sappy a-and e-emotion-nal o-on h-him, th-though.” Barry can think of countless times when Eddy complained about how they were too schmaltzy for his taste, but it is always just a show.

“He also cried when we watched Little House on the Prairie last Sunday,” Mary argues amused.

“He’s all tough macho on the outside, but as soft as a fluffy little kitten on the inside.”

“D-Don’t l-let h-him h-hear th-that o-or h-he w-will s-start w-wear-ring l-leather j-jackets a-and c-crash b-beer c-cans w-with h-his f-foreh-head t-to p-prove h-how m-manly h-he r-really i-is,” Barry points out, but he knows that Eddy would only sulk for a little bit before going back to his usual self. Eddy is a rather secure guy when it comes to his feelings, which is something Barry really likes about him.

“Don’t worry, I’d make him vanilla crescents and everything would be forgotten and forgiven.” Mary grins, her eyes sparkling, cheeks dimpled, and Barry is no longer sure why he felt that downtrodden earlier.
There is really no reason to, he thinks, watching his friend, glad that he decided to come over. Things are always an up and down for him, they’ve always been, and while they seem to be on a continuing downward spiral when it comes to his ongoing bad luck to find a new job, he knows that eventually he will get one, he has to.

Barry can’t let himself be disheartened that easily, he knows he has been through a lot over the last couple of months, and he has a lot on his plate to deal with right now, but he is no longer alone. He has his friends, he has Len, and while a faint voice keeps whispering into his ears whenever he feels upset that they will eventually leave him like all the others, he wants to believe otherwise. He trusts them.

“You feel up to help me with a new project of mine?” Mary asks, causing Barry to focus back on her.

He arches an eyebrow, curious, and nods. “Sure. What project would that be?”

Mary gives him an excited grin and gets up, swiftly making her way over to the cupboard next to her old tube TV. “It’s something really neat, I know you’ll like it,” she tells him with certainty as she picks up a box Barry immediately recognizes as a puzzle box, similar to the ones Mrs. Ming liked to get to spend her evenings with.

“I got it from one of the girls, it was a present she got for Christmas, but she really isn’t into puzzles,” Mary explains as she comes back to him and retakes her seat on the couch, one hand still holding her mug, the other box she then offers Barry to take a better look at. “She said I could have it, because I told her once I’m curious to try one myself. Isn’t that sweet?”

“I-it i-is,” Barry agrees and takes in the picture that is printed on the cover. It’s a fantasy one with some girl that looks like an elf, who is sitting on the edge of a pond with a black panther-like creature resting next to her.

“Would you like to help me put it together?” Mary asks, and Barry easily agrees, since he is a fan of puzzles himself, something Mrs. Ming introduced him to.

The thought of his former employer causes a slight pang in his chest, but it isn’t as intense as it was for the first handful of weeks after learning of her death. By now, usually a fond nostalgia quickly follows the pain over the loss of her, and it’s like that now too.

Barry knows that Mrs. Ming would have liked the puzzle, and the thought alone is comforting. He gives Mary a heartfelt smile and nods.

“O-Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, who would have thought, Jay passes by without things ending up in tears of misery for Barry – YAY! :D

On a little more serious note, I like how the interactions in this chapter show how much Jay’s opinion of Barry has changed, and how much his support still means to Barry, even if Barry is unsure how he feels about his former friend suddenly wanting to be there for him again.
I know that many of you don’t exactly like Jay, which is understandable considering how he treated Barry for a large part of this story, but I’m quite happy to see those two on the way to possibly rekindle again. Jay would be a strong ally, especially when it comes to the JLA.

The idea of Barry forgiving Jay is not very popular among my readers (I dare to assume so, at least ;), but I like the idea of Barry being able to do so, since he pulls a lot of strength from the ideology of moving on and working towards a better future instead of growing bitter and hateful – which would be also a completely understandable way to response to something like what he lived through. I don’t thing I would ever have his strength in such a situation, tbh, but I guess that is one of the reason why Barry intrigues and fascinates me so much as a character. He is a symbol of hope in the comics, and I think keeping hope even in the worst of situations is an incredible powerful gift, even more so than his speed.

Anyway, the possible budding friendship between Barry and Jay aside, I’m sure we can all agree that Mary is a real marvel when it comes to being there for her friends (Eddy is too, but no spotlight for him in this chapter – he will be back soon ;). Barry certainly is happy to have her in moments he feels like he can’t face the world or even just his other friends.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, and I want to thank you again for how awesome you are with leaving me comments and sharing your thoughts in regard of Singularity. That is just plain amazing and means a lot to me. ;)

Next chapter will have us accompany Barry on his trip to the history of art museum, and we will see Axel, Bart, and Max again! :D

I hope you all are enjoying summer, and I will be back with the next chapter in two weeks as usual!
Trip to The Museum

Chapter Summary

Barry, Axel, Bart, Jay, and Max spend an afternoon at the Central City history of art museum.

Things go smoothly, for the most part.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has not been edited, so please excuse any errors you may come across. My wonderful beta is currently on a family trip and thus unable to edit it for me. I went over it multiple times, and tried to find as many mistakes as possible, but English is still a foreign language to me, so I’m sure I’ve missed some.

I still hope you are able to enjoy the read! :)

I’m also posting this chapter a little early since I’m sick, I’ve an inflammation of the middle ear (which sucks especially when it has over 30°C outside), and I feel a little bored from laying around and resting. I hope you don’t mind, next chapter will be up on the usual schedule. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So, that’s what a museum looks like on the inside?” Axel asks as he takes his surroundings in with a critical frown. He doesn’t seem especially impressed, and Barry refrains from pointing out that they are still in the entrance hall of the huge building.

Axel has been rather reluctant about the idea of joining him to the art museum from the very beginning, insisting that it was destined to be a boring trip by default, since, as he informed Barry with a serious look, art itself is boring. Barry held his tongue, and kept quiet about the fact that Axel usually seems more than willing to doodle himself, or that he likes watching Barry draw whenever they are at his apartment and nobody else is around in front of whom the teen thinks he has to keep face.

In the end, it probably was the thought of seeing Bart again that caused Axel to change his mind and agree to tag along. Despite their rocky start, they two boys seem to have become friends, and they both jumped on the opportunity of spending an afternoon together despite not having seen each other again after their initial meeting in November.

“It will get much better once we enter the first gallery,” Bart promises, who seems to wholeheartedly understand Axel’s skepticism, probably because he himself didn’t react any differently to it when he visited the museum the first time around.

“If you say so.” Axel sound less than convinced as he keeps looking around, his gaze passing over all the other visitors who decided to visit KC’s art museum this Friday afternoon.
“I’m sure you’ll end up liking it, Axel,” Jay assures the boy, and Barry notices the fondness in the older man’s eyes as he watches the kid. He likely isn’t surprised that Axel’s enthusiasm is quite limited, since he himself is dealing with teenagers a lot due to his work with the Justice Society.

Axel shoots Jay an unimpressed, doubting look and grunts non-verbally before he makes his way over to one of the stands next to the big inside well that is the center piece of the entrance area. There, he picks up a leaflet that is holding a map for the building and starts to look it over with the critical frown staying on his face.

Bart swiftly follows, and Barry grins bemused when the kid start to inform Axel that there is a section of pictures that is full of people being decapitated and otherwise killed in rather gory ways. It doesn’t surprise him in the least when Axel’s interest seems to pique at that.

“Of course, he would remember that part of our last trip.” Max snorts, watching the kids with a fond smile as he joins them after picking up two headsets for the boys so that they can listen to the audio information provided by the museum.

It is probably an attempt to get them to remember something from this trip later on, and Barry, who never tried one of these, finds the idea of offering such a way to deliver information about the art pieces very smart, especially for kids who aren’t that interested in being here in the first place and probably won’t bother reading the written information offered next to the paintings.

“At least, he remembers something,” Jay provides somewhat exasperatedly, though the amusement clearly shines through as he watching the boys debating about which way would be more brutal to go, being drowned or set on fire. He turns his attention to Barry, then, and asks, “Do you have any section in mind you’d like to visit first, or is it alright for you if we follow the suggested path?”

Barry shrugs. “I-I’m f-fine w-with p-pass-th-through th-then s-sect-tions i-in th-then s-suggest-ted o-order.” He hasn’t been in here in over a decade and can’t really recall which parts of the museum caught his interest the most the last time around. Not to mention, the layout of the different exhibitions must have changed by now.

They start their trip, after Max handed the headsets to Bart and Axel. The latter seemed a little reluctant to put it on, probably thinking he looks nerdy running around like that, but eventually followed suit when Bart informed him that they could choose Bruce Willis as McClain to tell them about the single pieces. Hearing that, Barry decided to borrow one of the boys’ headphones before the end of their trip since he finds the idea of such a thing quite hilarious.

The crowd quickly thins out as soon as they leave the entrance area, much to Barry’s relief, and he is glad that Max suggested today for their visit, since most museums are overrun on the weekends compared to the rest of the week.

The first section offers an exhibition about art in old Egypt, canopic jars, a burial case, statuaries, jewels, and much more of that kind. Barry finds himself browsing the section with rapid interest, reading most of the offered information about the origins and meanings of the single pieces, and he is both surprised and pleased when he notices that both Axel and Bart seem honestly taken by it as well.

“Dude, you think there are still organs in there?” Axel asks Bart, both of whom have stopped next to Barry to study a collection of different canopic jars. He seems a little freaked out by that idea, eying the stone vessels with a wary expression.

“I guess,” Bart offers, unconcerned. “But they have probably dried to nothing more than dust by now.” He makes a face. “Ugh, imagine they fall down and break open, that would be a mess.”
Axel grunts in agreement, still frowning, and glances to Barry. “Did all Egyptians do that stuff? I mean have their organs put in such jars after they died?”

“No, o-only th-the o-ones w-who c-could af-ford s-such a-a b-burial,” Barry explains.

“Why did they only leave the heart inside the body of a dead person?” Bart asks, curiously.

“They b-believ-ved th-that th-the h-heart w-would b-be w-weight t-to d-determ-mine wh-whether th-they h-have l-lead a g-good l-life.”

“What?” Axel asks. “So the heavier the better?”

“N-Not n-necessarily,” Barry says, smiling. “I-It w-was w-weight ag-again th-the p-p-princ-iple o-of t-truth a-a-and j-justice, wh-which w-was s-symb-bolized b-by a f-feather. S-So a-a l-lighter h-heart w-was p-probably b-better i-in th-that c-case.”

“Against a feather?” Bart brows knit at that, and he looks confused by that piece of information. “Of a bird? Which one? And why a feather?”

“I d-don’t kn-know wh-which b-bird th-the f-feather b-belonged t-to,” Barry admits. “I-It d-did s-symb-bolize th-the g-goddess o-of t-truth and j-justice, M-Maat, th-though.” He can’t help but smirk as he adds. “A-And i-if th-they s-scale sh-showed th-that y-your w-wrongd-doing o-outweighed th-the g-goodn-ness i-in y-your h-heart, i-it w-would b-be s-snatched aw-away a-and d-dev-voured b-by a t-terrifying b-beast c-called th-the g-gobbler.”

“The gobbler?” Axel arches an eyebrow. “They certainly outdid themselves with the originality of the name.”

“I-It’s sh-short a-and t-to th-the p-point,” Barry suggests since he himself always liked the name, even though he too thinks it sounds a little silly.

“What happened to the person whose heart was eaten by the gobbler?” Bart asks with a mixture of curiosity and concern, apparently slightly disturbed but also fascinated by the concept of a heart eating judgement monster.

“They c-ceased t-to e-exist,” Barry explains and looks back to the showcase. “A-and i-if th-they w-were w-worth-thy, th-they w-were al-lowd t-to m-move o-on t-to th-the a-afterl-life.”

“They ceased to exist?” Axel asks skeptically. “That’s it? No eternal hell or stuff?”

“W-well, n-no, b-but th-think a-ab-bout i-it,” Barry suggests. “I-Isn’t th-the th-thought o-of j-just n-not b-being th-there a-anym-more j-just a-as f-frighten-ning? A-All o-of y-you s-simply g-gone?”

“That’s awful,” Bart interjects, sounding quite bothered by that idea. “So they weren’t able to see their loved ones ever again?”

“I-It w-was th-their i-interp-pretation o-of wh-what c-could p-possib-ly h-happen a-after d-death,” Barry explains. “L-Like t-today, th-there w-was n-no w-way t-to b-be s-sure o-of wh-what w-will h-happen a-after o-one’s d-death.”

“Still sucks,” Axel insists and eyes the canopic jars darkly.

“Y-You c-can a-alw-aays d-dec-cide t-to b-believe s-someth-thing e-else,” Barry offers. “Th-There’s n-no w-way t-to b-be s-sure i-in a-any c-case.”
“I don’t like it,” Bart decides and turns to Barry with an uncertain look. “I want to meet all the people again I loved when I die.”

“Y-You d-don’t h-have t-to w-worry a-ab-bout th-that, B-Bart,” Barry assures him and cups his grandson’s shoulder lightly, hoping it offers some comfort, as he doesn’t miss that the idea of death and the uncertainty that is connected to it frightens the boy. “Y-You’ve s-still a l-long l-life a-ahead o-of y-you.”

“Provided that you don’t get hit by a car the moment we leave the museum,” Axel agrees, smirking.

“I won’t,” Bart protests, annoyed. “You’ve to worry about that far more than I do.”

“Really?” Axel huffs a chuckle. “Why? From the two of us, I’m by far the smarter one. You airhead nearly run into the door on our way in.”

“Did not!”

“Right.”

“I didn’t! I totally saw it!”

“So, you wanted to smack into it on purpose?”

“Shut up!”

“Boys, keep your voices down,” Jay warns them as Max and he join their little group. Both men have stayed back so far, and Barry wonders whether they wanted to give him some time alone with the kids.

The thought makes him feels uneasy, and he shoots Jay a slightly concerned look, wondering whether they noticed that he touched Bart.

It is a stupid fear, one utterly unfounded, but it is still persisting, especially with Max being around as well.

“Barry told us that the Egyptians tend to weight their hearts against a justice feather,” Bart informs the older men, sounding both excited and unsettled. “And that a monster called the gobbler ate it when the person turned out to be bad.”

Barry shifts awkwardly, and shoots both men a nervous look, but is relieved when he notices that neither of them seems annoyed by his brief history lesson. He didn’t mean anything by telling the kids about it, but he knows that the way the old Egyptians imagined what their afterlife would be like can be considered as somewhat scary.

“All the more reason to do your homework,” Max tells Bart with a much too serious expression that causes the boy in question to roll his eyes and Barry to relax in turn.

They move on to the next section soon afterward, which is about art in ancient Rome, and both boys seem to find the sculptures of the many naked men more than hilarious, while Axel eyes the partly clothed women with badly hidden interest.

Barry tracks along with them, feeling more comfortable in their presence than Jay’s and Max’, partly because he is still worried that he could do or say something wrong around the men that could cause old suspicion to flare up again, and partly because he enjoys answering the boys’ questions regarding this era.
He always liked Roman history, he can still remember the hours he spent hidden away in his old school library, reading books upon books about the empire and its people. Books in general offered a safe haven from everything that went on in his life unlike anything else ever could.

It isn’t lost on him how Bart enjoys having his attention, and how obviously happy the kid is to have him for himself for the most part, though he doesn’t seem to mind sharing him with Axel. Being reminded of how much he means to Bart is touching, and while it is still hard for him to understand why the boy likes him so much, he is grateful for it all the same.

In a way, it reminds him of how Wally tended to stick to him, always basking in his attention and approval when he was still but a child. Barry was always ready to offer it to him, since he knew what it meant to have someone like that, a person who is there for you, especially if your life at home doesn’t offer much warmth or comfort.

The thought of Wally causes Barry’s mood to sink somewhat, and he decides to focus back on the presence, since both Axel and Bart deserve better than him getting all melancholy because he can’t get over the guilt of his past failures.

The next hours fly by, and it is when they reach the middle of the second floor that Bart spots the sign of the museum cafeteria and promptly points out how close to starving he really is.

“You’re such a glutton,” Axel remarks with a slight scoff, causing Bart to shoot him a glare, but before he can protest, Barry interferes, “I-I’m a l-little h-hungry t-too.” He looks to Max and Jay. “M-Maybe w-we c-can t-take a qu-qu-quick b-break.”

“Oh course,” Max agrees, knowing like Barry that Bart is probably really feeling hunger pains by now, seeing that he didn’t snack on any energy bars since they arrived, and a growing speedster needs much more nourishment than an adult one.

“I’m also quite hungry,” Jay adds, studying the menu that is printed on the back of the small map he picked up on the way in. “They have scalloped cod with rice or spaghetti with meatballs as their special offer today.”

“Spaghetti!” Bart immediately decides to nobody’s surprise, and Axel quickly agrees, “Definitely spaghetti, who wants stinking fish?”

“A-Axel.” Barry gives him an admonishing look, which causes the teen to heave a sigh and lift his hands placatingly. “Right, I forgot that you do.” At Barry’s deepening frown, he quickly adds, “And that’s cool, because fish is super healthy and all that jazz.”

Barry chuckles and shakes his head. “Y-you l-liki-th th-the c-cod a-at M-Mrs. M-Ming’s Ch-Christmas p-party,” he reminds him, but immediately regrets it, because bringing up their gone friend is still painful for them both.

To his surprise, Axel snorts and shrugs. “Yeah, well, she was a hell of a cook, and it was drenched in that awesome sweet sauce, so I would probably have eating it even if it tasted like Styrofoam.” There is a slight sadness clinging to the teen’s words, but he shoots Barry a grin. “Not to mention, my taste buds have been ruined by all the healthy stuff you always force me to eat anyway, so I’d probably end up liking the cod.”

“He forces you to eat greens too?” Bart asks sympathetically. “Max does the same with me. It’s horrible.”

“It is not, if it weren’t for me you’d have gotten scurvy by now,” Max disagrees and shakes his head,
amused. “And scalloped cod is hardly that healthy anyway.”

“It’s still fish,” Bart insists, shivering in disgust as if the mere notion of it tasted foul in his mouth. “I’m not going to eat that if I can have spaghetti.”

“That’s fine,” Max assures him, and with everybody agreeing on the break, they start to make their way to the cafeteria.

Barry hands Axel ten dollars to get himself some food, and he is glad when the boy accepts the money this time, unlike earlier, when he insists on paying for his ticket himself.

“I’ve money, you know. I can pay for my own ticket,” Axel told Jay and him, rather annoyed, after both debated about who was supposed to pay for the teen since the older man insisted that he was the one who suggested Axel to tag along in the first place, and thus he should be the one who buys him the ticket.

Barry reluctantly agreed, but was a little mollified by the fact that Axel earned the money by helping the Rogues out with small repairs at their different hideouts. Len, despite his initial dislike of the boy, has grown quite fond of him and seems to have decided to take him under his wings. It is a nice change Barry very much appreciates, especially because it allows Axel to spend his time not only slouching around but learning things.

The cafeteria is mostly empty with only a handful of other visitors around, so it is easy for Barry to get one of the tables for them while the others are busy with getting their food.

Like the people on the table next to his, Barry pulls a wrapped sandwich along with a thermos can out of his backpack and places it on the table, once again glad that Max informed him about the museum allowing visitors to bring their own meals along.

Bart, after returning with Max and the rest, eyes his ham and cheese sandwich with a rather disapproving look but refrains from saying anything, probably because his guarding told him not to beforehand, for which Barry is grateful. He does still have enough money to pay the rent for the next two months, but only if he didn’t spend it on any additional things like eating out, and while he doesn’t mind paying for Axel’s food, he thinks it would be a waste to get something from the menu for himself when he just can prepare a snack at home.

“I’m starving,” Axel declares. “All that running around really went to my reserves.” He picks his fork up to start and dig in, quickly followed by Bart, who wholeheartedly agrees with his sentiment.

“Th-then e-enj-joy y-your m-meals,” Barry tells them and decides to fill himself a cup of the tea before starting with his sandwich. He doesn’t feel particularly hungry, but he hardly ever does these days, and he has to keep a close eye on his eating schedule to not lose weight again by accident.

“What did you bring along,” Jay asks him after he took a bite of the hamburger he got himself.

“It’s a ham and cheese sandwich,” Axel answers in Barry’s stead, giving the snack in question a look similar to the one it grot from Bart earlier. “He’s living off that stuff these days.”

“A-Axel,” Barry says in a warning tone, and feels his cheeks grow uncomfortably warm. “I-I h-happen t-to l-like h-ham a-and ch-ch-cheese s-s-sandwiches.”

The boy clearly doesn’t believe him but shrugs, “Right.”

An uneasy silence follows, and Barry wishes Axel would not have pushed the focus on his food. The little appetite he could muster earlier is already gone again, and he picks the sandwich up with a
faint frown, avoiding anybody else’s eyes.

“Ham and cheese sandwiches are fine and all,” Axel presses on, and while he sounds slightly apologetic now since he must have noticed the shift in Barry’s mood, he still insists stubbornly, “but eating it all the time has to suck. Why don’t you ask Garrick or Max for money, they clearly have en-”

Barry shuts the boy down with an angry look, and while he knows that Axel only is trying to look out for him, he can’t but feel annoyed how he has to bring that up now, after they had a clearly relaxed, nice couple of hours.

“I-don’t n-need a-any m-mon-ey f-from a-anybody,” Barry tells Axel firmly and looks to Jay and then Max with what he knows must come over as a rather petulant expression, but he can’t help himself. He feels vulnerable in situations like this one, especially since a part of him knows that he shouldn’t be so proud and stubborn, and just accept help.

There is still the chance that things would change again, go back to how they were a year ago, two years ago, though, and the notion of owing Jay or Max money is simply frightening because of that.

“I’m d-doing f-fine,” Barry insists, and is somewhat surprised when neither Max nor Jay protest as it is a rather obvious lie. Turning back to his food, he takes a bite. It tastes stale in his mouth, and his stomach feels a little queasy again, so that he washes it down with a gulp of his tea.

It is only a moment later, when he notices how tensed the atmosphere on the table has gotten, that he regrets his strong reaction to what was essentially his young friend only trying to look out for him.

Glancing to Axel, he notices the teen glaring down at his food with his lip pressed into a thin line, but despite the anger, the hurt is even more obvious on his face.

Being rebuked for caring is something that can cut deep. Especially if it is from a person that means a lot to you, and you don’t have many of those.

Barry knows what that feels like.

“A-Axel, I-have t-to b-be c-careful wh-what I-s-spend m-my m-money o-on r-right n-now,” Barry reminds Axel quietly. “As-soon a-as I’ve a-a n-new job, I-c-an sp-spend m-more o-on f-food ag-ain.” Not to mention, that it is a vast exaggeration that he is only living off ham and cheese sandwiches, seeing that he eats at the hideout these days more often than not, anyway, and Len keeps bringing food over when he passes by.

“You’ve been looking for a damn job for nearly two months now,” Axel tells him, and Barry is taken aback by the anger that blazes in the teen’s eyes as he looks back at him. “You really think that is going to change anytime soon?”

“Axel,” Jay reprimands him sharply, but the teen sneers at him and pushes his chair back to get up. “What?!! I’m only saying how it is! And don’t do as if you care whether he starves or not! You guys are so full of it, you say you want to help him, but you don’t do shit!”

Not waiting for a response, Axel whirls around and quickly stomps out of the cafeteria, ignoring the curious and annoyed looks the other visitors shoot his way.

“I’ll t-talk t-to h-him,” Barry tells Jay, who seems about to get up, and gives Bart an apologetic look. “W-We’ll b-back qu-quickly, A-Axel j-just n-need a-a m-mon-ment t-to c-cool d-d-down.”
Barry follows Axel into the hallway that lies in between two of the section at the third floor, ignoring the glances of the people he passes on his way out. He is surprised and relieved when he spots the teen near one of the big windows not far from the exit of the cafeteria, where he is staring out of it with a dark look, probably glaring down at the traffic on the close-by main street.

His steps slow down, and he comes to a halt about four feet away from Axel.

“I-I’m s-s-or-ry,” Barry apologizes after a short silence passed between them, with the boy keeping his eyes firmly on the outside world. “I-I d-didn’t m-mean t-to s-snap-”

“I know,” Axel cuts him off, sounding both frustrated and annoyed. He turns to face him, and while he still looks angry, it is no longer to such a degree as it was just a few minutes ago.

“I get it, okay? I know that it sucks to ask others for money, especially guys like them.” Axel shoots a glare in the direction of the cafeteria. “They think they are so much better than us, but they are the worst.” Another sneer passes Axel’s face, and Barry is quite caught off-guard by that strong reaction. He didn’t know the boy felt so negatively about Jay and Max, and he starts to wonder what the reason for that could be, and who exactly he means by them.

“But you’ve other friends too,” Axel reminds him and turns his eyes back on him. “Ones you don’t have to feel bad about getting help from.”

It’s clear that he is talking about Len and the others, probably Eddy and Mary as well, and Barry feels a slight headache start to rise at the base of his head. They have had this conversation before, more times than Barry cares to count, but usually Axel backs off rather easily.

He wonders what caused that to change today of all days. Was it him bringing his own lunch along? Or the money he gave Axel?

“I-I k-know, b-but I-I’m s-still d-doing f-fine o-on m-my o-own,” Barry tries to make his friend understand and ignores the very incredulous look he gets in return. “I-I a-am. I-I kn-know th-that I-I p-probab-bly m-make i-it l-look l-like th-th-e s-situation i-i-is w-worse th-than i-it r-real-ly i-i-is, b-but th-that’s b-bec-cause…” He falters and breaks off.

The bouts of depression he is suffering from these days are not something he wants to share with Axel. He knows that he will do better again as soon as he can find himself a new job, and for now he can only press on, but he isn’t sure how to explain that to Axel, who obviously notices how dejected he feels at times.

“I don’t want your life to suck,” Axel tells him, eyes on the ground and hand pushed into the pockets of his hoodie.

Barry gives a laugh at that, surprised by the statement that is incredibly endearing at the same time. “M-Me n-neither,” he assures Axel and steps closer to him. “A-And i-it d-doesn’t, th-this i-i-is o-only a-an-nother r-rough p-patch th-that w-will p-p-pass.”

Axel seems to have a hard time to believe him, so Barry adds, reaching out to cup the teen’s neck lightly. “M-My l-life c-could n-never s-s-suck a-as l-long a-as I-I’ve p-people i-in i-it th-that a-are a-as d-dear t-to m-me a-as y-you a-are.”

Eyes growing wide, Axel stares at him rather flabbergasted while a faint blush creeps across his cheeks, and he ducks his head. “I told you not to be so damn mushy all the time,” he grumbles, and while he tries to sound annoyed, it isn’t lost on Barry how pleased he really is by those words.

Barry chuckles, the weight that has been pressing down on him starts to lift again, and he makes
another step closer, so that he can press his forehead against Axel’s who tenses up in response to that unexpected gesture, but only for a second.

“Th-Thank y-you f-for c-caring s-so m-much,” Barry says and squeezes Axel’s neck lightly. When he pulls back, his chest is filled with deep affection for the young teen, who regards him as someone worth his protection which is incredibly touching.

Axel watches him with what Barry thinks is awe when their eyes meet again, though he quickly catches himself, and averts his eyes to the window next to them, huffing. “You know, someone has to look out for you since you clearly don’t.”

“I-I c-can c-count m-m mys-self l-lucky i-in th-that c-case,” Barry says, meaning every single word. He then nods back to the cafeteria, suggesting, “L-Let’s h-head b-back, I-I th-think w-we’ve h-had th-the o-others w-worry e-enough.”

“Who cares whether they worry?” Axel scoffs, and frowns as he looks back towards where the rest of their little group is still waiting for them.

“Th-that’s n-not n-nice,” Barry tells him earnestly, and meets his rebellious glare firmly. “J-Jay a-and M-May h-have b-been n-nothing b-but k-kind t-to o-others s-so f-far.” When Axel seems about to protest, he adds, “A-And B-Bart c-clearly l-likes y-you.”

This shuts Axel up momentarily, before he crosses his arms and grumbles. “The kid is okay, I guess, but I really couldn’t care less about the old geezers.” He presses on when Barry is about to reprimand him for his language. “But I’ll tag along, because I apparently have to keep an eye on you.”

Barry smiles at that and reaches out to give the teen’s arm an affectionate squeeze. His expression turns sombre, then, and he studies Axel quietly. When he speaks, the regret rings with his words, “I-I’m s-sorry I-I s-snap-ped a-at y-you. I-I sh-shouldn’t h-have d-done th-that.”

“It’s cool,” Axel waves him off and shrugs. “You’ve a lot on your plate to deal with, and that would put a strain on anybody’s nerves.” His expression turns somewhat guilty. “I’m sorry about saying that you won’t find a job soon. That was utter crap, and I know you will.”

It is a kind thing to say, and Barry can only hope that Axel is right.

They eventually return to the others, where Bart is already apprehensively waiting for them and notably relaxes when he notices that things between them seem to be alright again.

After they are done with their break, they proceed to the next and second to last section of the museum, one Barry has been looking forward to quite a lot.

While he studies the paintings, and gets immersed into the different styles of the artists whose works are displayed here, Axel and Bart quickly grow bored after about twenty minutes, and ask whether they can skip the last section and go ahead to visit the gift shop at the entrance floor.

“As long as you two don’t bother any of the other visitors, I don’t see why not,” Max allows, which gets him a grin from Bart and an eyeroll from Axel.

“W-We w-won’t t-take t-th-hat l-long,” Barry assures both boys after he noticed that it is already close to half past five, and he is honestly surprised that they kept going that long without protesting earlier.

“That’s fine.” Axel shrugs. “I keep an eye on the squirt, so don’t worry and enjoy your fancy art.”
“I told you already, don’t call me that. I’m no squirt, Axel,” Bart whines, which gets him a snort from the older boy. “Whatever you say, squirt.”

“You’re a squirt!”

“If you say so, squirt.”

“Stop it!”

“Keep it down,” Max reminds them with an exasperated sigh, prompting both boys to head towards the staircase outside the exhibition room.

“They hit it off rather well,” Jay observes as he watches Axel and Bart retreat.

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees readily, happy about that fact, since he knows that both can benefit from such a friendship.

“Axel is a nice kid,” Max remarks, and he sounds surprisingly earnest as he does so, so much so, that Barry shoots him a skeptical look that isn’t lost on the other man. It causes Max to chuckle and point out, “He is stubborn, has a foul mouth, and quite a temper, but that’s hardly different from other teenagers his age.”

Barry has to smile at that and guesses that the other man is right if you look at it like that.

“Not to mention that he obviously cares about you,” Jay adds, and there is no reproach in his eyes when Barry shoots him a worried look. There lingers a by now familiar sadness, though, and Barry averts his gaze, turning back to the painting he has been studying earlier, because it fills him with unease to think that he is the cause for the older man feeling that way.

“What style is that? Renaissance?” Max asks after a minute or so ticked by, catching Barry by a little by surprise since neither of his two companions has talked a lot to him over their visit so far. He turns to him, needing a moment to find his voice, but eventually replies, “N-No, i-it’s M-Man-nerism.”

Barry turns back to Tiziano’s piece and studies it, the elegance of it, the emotion it gets across with each single brush stroke.

“I didn’t know you had a keen interest in art,” Jay remarks, and when Barry glances to him, he sees that the older man is studying the painting contemplatively as well.

“I-I d-didn’t r-really h-have t-time f-for i-it wh-when I-I s-still w-worked a-at th-the C-C-P-P-D,” Barry explains and ignores the pang in his chest the mention of his former job as a forensic scientist causes.

Jay hums. “Joan is also very interested in art, especially Surrealism and Modern Art.” He chuckles fondly at the thought of his wife. “She has a bookshelf full of literature about them and their pieces.”

Barry smiles and agrees, “I-I kn-know. Sh-she d-did t-tell m-me a-about it.”

This is apparently news to Jay, who looks quite surprised by learning so.

“M-Man-nerism i-is p-probably m-my f-favorite,” Barry tells him hesitantly, not sure why Jay would want to know, but he doesn’t see how it could hurt either. “I-It a-and S-Surrealism, th-that i-is.” He shoots Jay a small, amused smile. “Th-though J-Joan c-can’t s-stand D-Dali, a-and I-I p-pret-ty m-much a-ad-dore a-anything h-he e-ever c-creat-ted.”

There is something oddly liberating to Dali’s picture, Barry thinks, something so out there and
bizarre but at the same time tangible in its otherworldly beauty. Looking back to Mars, Venus, and Amor, Barry feels the itch to pick up a pencil and draw in his fingers.

He hardly ever dares to wander from sketching things he has seen, or maybe silly little doodles, but watching the painting in front of him, he feels the urge to try something else, something more.

Not that it would turn out being any good, since he knows that his artistic skills are not enough to produce something as beautiful or touching as the pictures he has in mind…

“Joan is going to pick up an art class when we move back to Keystone this spring,” Jay informs Barry. “Maybe you’d like to join her?”

The offer comes unexpected, and once again Barry is not sure what to make of the other man’s willingness to welcome him back in his life.

“I-I d-don’t kn-know,” Barry says, shifting uneasily. “I-It d-dep-ends o-on wh-whether I’ve f-found a j-job b-by th-then a-and…” He glances back to the painting and frowns. “I-It’s p-probab-bly n-not a g-good i-idea.”

For a long minutes, they all stay quiet, since everybody knows what Barry is getting at.

“You can think about it,” Max suggests. “It’s still some time till then.”

Jay doesn’t say anything else to it, but Barry can feel the sad, heavy gaze of his again, and wishes things wouldn’t have to be so damn complicated.

In the end, Jay’s hands are pretty much tied in this matter, just as Barry’s are, since neither of them want to cause Wally or his family any additional grief or give them reason to start and avoid the Garricks.

“Maybe you can tutor Bart in painting?” Max asks, and Barry directs his attention to him, shooting him a look that is both incredulous and amused. The other man shrugs and goes on, “Bart really enjoyed the brief lesson you gave him back in December, and he has been relentlessly doodling his school books full since then. If you’ve time for it, I’m sure he would love to pick some more tricks up from you. I’d pay you, of course.”

“You d-don’t n-need t-to p-pay m-me f-for s-someth-thing l-like th-that,” Barry disagrees firmly with a slight frown.

“You’d tutor him,” Max reminds him, but Barry waves him off.

“I-I’d l-love t-to h-help h-him i-if h-he’s i-interest-ted i-in l-learning s-some m-more a-about d-drawing, b-but I-I w-won’t t-take a-a ny m-money f-for it,” Barry insists, somewhat irked by the offer, seeing that it is Bart they are talking about.

To his relief, Max agrees, “That’s fine too, of course.”

Barry eyes him a little warily but eventually nods. “Ok-kay, i-if h-he’s i-inter-rested i-in i-it.”

“Great, I’m sure Bart will be excited to hear that,” Max tells him, and Barry has no problem believing that.

Contrary to Barry’s initial apprehension, their conversation becomes much more relaxed once their topic shifts to how Bart is doing in school, and how well Joan’s is doing now after her treatment is nearly over.
It takes them about another half an hour till they are done with the section, and Barry decides to come back for the rest another time since he doesn’t want to keep the boys waiting any longer, even though Max went to check up on them.

In the end, they day turned out to be quite enjoyable, despite the few hiccups on the way, and Barry readily agrees to another trip in the future when Bart asks him about it, much to the boy’s delight.

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It is during Barry’s third trip to the Saloon to celebrate Mick’s birthday in the beginning of March that he takes notice of a small handwritten sign in the bar’s window that informs him that the position of barman/waiter is currently open.

Infected by his friends’ jovial mood and the alcohol, Barry allows himself to let go of his worries for the night, though, and forgets about it quickly again. Instead, he enjoys a couple games of poker and having Len close-by. So close, that is, that their tights are pressed against each other’s during the majority of the night, something that should be overwhelming and intimidating, especially under these circumstances, but isn’t. Barry feels save amid his friends despite all the noise of other patrons and the ongoing ruckus around them.

He doesn’t give the sign in the window another glance for the rest of their stay.

It is later, after Mick started a drunken brawl, breaking one of the tables, and Charlie kicked them out for the night, that Barry lies awake in the early morning hours, listening to Len snoring at the makeshift bed next to his, that he recalls the handwritten sign and starts to mull over it and the unlikely opportunity it offers.

Hours later, close to midday, after weighing the pros and cons more times than he cared to count, Barry finally comes to a decision and put the matter aside for now to allow his tired mind to rest.

Closing his eyes and pulling his blanket over his head so that it cuts out the light of the morning, it takes Barry only a few minutes until the exhaustion catches up with him, and he drifts off to sleep, a tiny spark of renewed hope shimmering in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

So, that was a nice little trip, and despite some rough patches, Barry seemed to have had a good time everything considered. :)

I love museums, especially those about art and history, and it was fun to have Barry visit one with the boys. They very much enjoyed being able to spend some time together like that, especially Bart, who is really not seeing enough of his grandfather. It was also Axel’s first visit to a museum, and despite how he tried not let it on, he was pretty impressed by most of the exhibitions – especially the ones that showed scarcely clad women (he is a teenager, after all ;).

Axel really isn’t that fond of either Jay or Max, and it is partly due to how protective he has grown when it comes to Barry, who is pretty much a parental figure to him by now. Another reason for his dislike of the men are the experiences he made when he was
younger. He is a good kid, but he did not have the best upbringing, and he is still carrying the baggage from that around with him.

I hope you liked this chapter, which was more about Barry bonding with Bart and Axel and not so much about bringing the bigger or smaller plots along. I think Barry deserves some break from all the hassle he had to put up with, and next week things will start to move forwards once again, anyway.

After the last chapter, some of you asked me about the reason for Barry’s decision to decline Jay’s offer to work for his company. It will be explained what exactly caused Barry to react the way he did, but it is not something that will come up again immediately. Barry is a very traumatized person, even if he hides that side of himself most of the time, and something about the idea of working in a lab again, about wearing a white lab coat, handling chemicals, set him off.

A huge thank you and free hugs to all of you who took the time to leave me a comment on last chapter! Your feedback is important to me, I love it when you share your opinions or ask questions, and, really, the main reasons why it is so great to post my story online is that I can interact with you guys. :D

Next chapter will be posted again on Sunday as usual, and we will follow Barry as he tries to apply for another job!

Have a great two weeks till then! :)

The First Shaky Steps into A New Direction

Chapter Summary

Barry takes a heart and applies for an unlikely job.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by Quintessenza, who did a wonderful job as usual. Thanks a lot, my friend, you make this story so much better! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A shiver runs through Barry’s body as he walks past the rundown buildings. The wind keeps pushing against him, harshly, and he tightens his grip on his umbrella that is sheltering him from the increasing storm. The rain is drumming briskly against the thin fabric that is keeping Barry’s upper body mostly dry, and he damn’s his luck because of course the weather had to get worse since he left his apartment about an hour ago.

Freezing, he regrets a little to not have stayed in bed, instead, wrapped in his warm blanket.

At least, he doesn’t have to worry about other people who still make him quite uncomfortable when he is on his own. The weather is keeping most of those off the streets and inside, and if the storm kept going, it certainly would stay like that until the first had to leave for work.

Pulling his coat tighter around himself, Barry tries to spot his destination ahead of himself in the dim, artificial orange light of the streetlights.

The lower part of his pants and his shoes are already drenched through, even though he left the bus stop only a few minutes ago, and he hopes that it wouldn’t take long anymore, since he would prefer to keep at least part of himself dry. He doesn’t need to get sick on top of everything else, especially if something should come from this little endeavor.

Barry tenses up slightly when he notices that he is walking up to a little group of people standing close to an entrance of one of the many buildings with rundown veneers the Keys have to offer at every turn. The brief touch of fear vanishes when he notices upon coming closer that those are only a handful of prostitutes who stand huddled together below umbrellas, chattering away while smoking, probably taking a break of their nightly business.

Neither of them spare him more than a glance, and Barry keeps his eyes fixed straight ahead. Advances of the kind they tend to offer always leave him uneasy and rattled.

The tension hardly let off him when he notices a couple of boys in their mid to late teens crowded around a man in his thirties on the other side of the street, and he watches them out of the corner of his eyes with a subdued worry that latched onto him the moment he set foot in this part of the Keys.

The teens and the man are all wearing the same type of leather jacket with the same skull-logo on its
the back, which indicates that they are possibly part of a street or biker gang, neither someone Barry wants to get into trouble with by accident if he can help it.

Thankfully, the bad weather combined with the early morning hour means less traffic which in turn means that an opportunity to cross the street and thus bringing more distance between himself and that group opens up rather quickly.

The rain keeps drumming against Barry’s umbrella, and he listens to it absentmindedly, noticing how it starts to become lighter, while his eyes stay focus ahead.

He swallows tightly, a tight coil of anxiety sitting heavily in his guts, and he nearly slows down as a part of him tries to reason with him what a stupid idea this really is.

Barry shivers and presses his lips into a thin, unhappy line. His hands are clammy, despite the cold, while his heart is beating too quickly, making him feel nearly a little lightheaded while full of nervous energy at the same time.

Nervous and hope.

Barry tries not to promise himself anything from this. It is a farfetched idea, to begin with, not only because he likely would have never considered it under any other circumstances, but also because he doubts that anybody would deem him fit for that sort of position.

Len certainly wouldn’t, nor would any of the others, Barry knows.

If he was honest with himself, he doesn’t do either, but by now he is at the end of his wits and has nothing to lose by giving it a shot.

This mixture of desperation and exhausted apathy is the very reason why he is now here, in this run-down part of the Keys, at around half past three in the morning, without anybody of the others knowing so.

Certainly not the brightens thing to do, and if something should happen and he had to call upon Sam for help, he doesn’t doubt that Len would be furious.

Barry shivers and moves his thumb absentmindedly across the smooth surface of the ring he is wearing. It feels cool, like comfort, and even though there is no way he could have told Len about this plan, he still wishes he was here.

Barry’s grip tightens around the handle of his umbrella, and his steps pick up somewhat as if it would help him to outrun his fear and doubts. It doesn’t help with that, of course, but his actual destination has finally come into view, and the tired part of him just wants to get this over with.

It is when Barry notices that the windows of the Saloon are dark that his determination starts to wane, and he slows down.

The others told him that the Saloon usually stays open till at least four on Friday’s and Saturday’s.

Did he remember it wrong?

Suddenly, the idea to pass by shortly before closing, so that he could catch Charlie after the rough crowd already left and ask him about whether the open position of a barman/waiter is still up, doesn’t seem that well thought through anymore.

A familiar heaviness of disappointment settles into the pit of his stomach as he studies the dark
building, and the thought that he just spent over four dollars on two night lines to get here and would have to do so now again, is immensely frustrating.

Maybe he should just have asked Sam to bring him over, he is pretty sure that his friend would have stayed quiet about it, no matter how pissed Len would have been if he had found out later on.

The deep rumbling of thunder rolls across the column of dark clouds above him, and Barry looks up, frowning, as he tries to think of what to do now.

His thoughts are cut short by the noise of a door creaking as it is being pushed open, and he glances to his side, into the back alley he stopped next to, the one Len and he visited together before.

His heart makes a hopeful leap when he recognizes the hulking figure of the owner of the bar in the faint light that falls through the open backdoor, partly illuminating the area outside where the man is currently throwing bags of trash into a big container.

Without thinking, Barry swiftly enters the dark alley and makes his way close to the fence that is keeping unwanted trespasser away, while calling out, “E-Excuse m-me?!”

Charlie doesn’t look his way as he pulls the lid of the container close to prevent the falling rain to flood it, but still answers in a bored tone, “The bar is closed, pal. Read the damn sign next to the entrance. It’s there for a fucking reason.”

“I-kn-know,” Barry says, swallowing nervously as he steps closer to the chain-link fence. “I’m n-not h-h-ere f-for d-drinks, I-I’d l-l-like t-t-talk w-w-with y-y-you a-ab-b-bout th-the j-j… j-job o-of-fer-r-r-ring.” His cheeks grow nearly painfully hot as his stammer seems to get worse by the second, but the other man has stopped at the entrance and is now watching him, which he takes as a good sign, so that he forces himself to press on. “F-For th-th-the o-open p-pos-sition o-of a-a b-barm-...man.”

There is a moment of pause, then Charlie speaks, the incredulity loud and clear in his voice, “You’re here for the job?”

Barry shifts uneasily and fights the urge to look away, even though he is certain that the other man can’t make his eyes out in the shallow light. “Y-Yes.”

Another pause follows, longer than the last one.

“You’re the guy who’s been tagging along with Cold and his band of idiots, aren’t you?” Charlie asks, though it sounds more like a statement.

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees and wets his lips before he presses on. “I-I’m B-B-Barry A-Al-len.”

“Well, Barry Allen.” Charles grunts, frowning. “I’m sure you’re a great guy and all, despite your crappy taste in friends, but I doubt that you’ve what it takes to work with the crowd that tends to frequent my bar.” With that, he turns and takes the two steps that lead up to the open door.

“W-Wait!” Barry calls out, despite the humiliation over being so easily dismissed that is trying to get him to just walk away. He doesn’t feel only embarrassed for being so clearly not taken serious at all, though. After not even exchanging more than a handful of words with that man and being turned down is both upsetting and frustrating, and he really didn’t come all the way here to not even be heard out.

“I-c-can h-hand-h-mys-self, d-desp-p-ite wh-wh-what I-I m-may l-look l-like,” Barry insists, boring his eyes into Charlie’s, whether he may see it or not, “a-a-and I-I’m p-prob-bably th-th-the m-most
His heart is beating like crazy in his chest, his stomach feels coiled up, like it is tied into a tight know, and he is shakings lightly due to the adrenalin that is coursing through his body. He tried not to think about how this interview would go, he certainly didn’t want to promise himself anything from it, but, even so, he won’t just give up that easily.

Maybe it is that the long string of rejections is really starting to get to him, but he doesn’t want to put up with being dismissed like that again, no matter how unlike any successful outcome is or how intimidating the barman seems to him just then.

“I-I c-can d-do th-this,” Barry tells Charlie, his voice firm despite his stammer, and he can’t but be a little proud at himself for it.

The sound of the falling rain is the only thing that fills the cool night while the barman studies Barry with a frown that is so grim that it somewhat worries him.

Barry stays his ground, though, and doesn’t dare to look away, hoping against all odds that the other man maybe changes his mind.

A scoff startles Barry slightly, and he watches how Charlie crosses his arms in front of his broad chest, an amused grin on his lips. “You’re certainly a modest fella, Allen, aren’t you? Most hardworking and reliable person who’ll every ask for this job?” He snorts and wrinkles his nose. “You know, I don’t even have a problem believing that, seeing what slackers and jackasses I had to deal with so far.”

Charlie turns back to the door, and Barry’s elated hopes that rose with the man’s earlier words quickly crash again. That is, until Charlie calls back to him over his shoulder, “Go to the front entrance, I’ll let you in.” He pulls the door shut then, and Barry is left standing there, alone in the once again utterly dark back alley, and his pulse drumming in his ears.

Barry swallows, blinks, and makes a step back but halts again.

A smile spreads over his lips that morphs into a grin, and he tries to tell himself to not get his hopes up just yet, but Charlie didn’t just ask him to leave after all! He is giving him a chance!

Quickly, as Barry doesn’t want to let the man wait, he makes his way back to the front of the building, the cold temperatures and exhaustion due to his lack of sleep utterly gone from his mind.

Charlie unlocks and opens the door just a moment after Barry arrived in front of it and steps aside to let him in. Barry hesitates for the duration of a heartbeat, eying the the space between the bulky figure and the doorway that isn’t giving him much leeway with unease. The idea to get that close to the man has his nerves on edge.

Pushing past that fear, Barry forces himself to enter and hopes that Charlie didn’t pick up on his pause or notices how hurriedly he moves past him.

“Take a seat at the bar,” Charlie tells him, closing the door again. Barry does as he is told after stashing his folded umbrella in an umbrella stand near the entrances and makes his way across the now empty and mostly dark bar. He lets his eyes move through the room curiously, not missing how different the whole location feels without its usual crowd of visitors.
The ceiling lights are off, but the lights behind the bar are on and illuminating the area around it. Barry takes a seat on one of the stools, feeling nervous once again now that he is in here and about to have an actual interview.

Charlie walks behind the bar, returning to what must be his usual spot, and shoots Barry a curious, considering look as he leans back against the cabinet that probably holds mugs and additional liquor to the one presented on the shelves above it.

“So, after visiting my noble establishment three times, you’ve decided that working with a bunch of rowdy, drunk jackasses is your calling?” Charlie asks, his voice a mixture of incredulity and amusement.

Barry, who feels way less daring than just five minutes ago, needs a moment to get his voice to work. He coughs lightly, and adjusts his seat nervously, fighting the urge to avert his eyes since it has become painfully clear to him that he is all alone in here with the other man, who has easily one hundred pounds on him, of what are mostly muscles.

“I—I h-have n-n-not-iced y-your s-sign,” Barry explains and nods to the window behind him. “I—I m-c-c-cu-rent-ly l-looking f-for a j-job, s-so I—I th-thought th-that’s a-a g-good o-op-por-tun-ity.”

“To work in a rundown bar?” Charlie repeats himself, smirking, and arches an eyebrow. “Don’t take it the wrong way, Allen, I see you’ve guts, but you look like you’re about to piss yourself any moment now because you’re alone in here with me.”

Heat shoots to Barry’s face, and he balls his hands that are resting on his thighs, swallowing a couple of times since the words caught him off-guard, not because he is surprised that the barman picked up on his anxiousness, but because how straightforward he is about it. It is something he probably should have expected, considering that Charlie looks like the type who doesn’t beat around the bush.

“This job would require of you to deal with utter assholes for the majority of the time you’re behind the bar, and some of those fellows can get physical if they’d too much to drink,” Charlie goes on, ignoring his constricted look. “That’s why I stick to guys working for me these days, no lady deserves to have to handle scum like that.” He eyes Barry critically and frowns. “I’ve got to know that the guy I hire can stand his own, and you don’t look like you can even put a fight up against anybody’s grandma.”

The flush across Barry’s cheeks intensifies, but he tries to ignore it along with the humiliation that has settled over him like a heavy weight.

“I—I kn-kn-know h-how t-to p-p-prot-tect m-mys-self,” Barry insists, and it isn’t a lie per se, since he does know how to fight. He usually tries not to get into situations where that knowledge is required, but he isn’t as helpless as everybody thinks he is. Frowning, he averts his eyes briefly, and shrugs. “I—I m-may p-pref-fer t-to t-try a-and a-avoid a-a-ny s-situation th-that i-inv-volve ph-physical v-violen-nce, th-though.”

Charlie barks a laugh at that and meets Barry’s eyes with an amused glint in his eyes that succeeds in making him feel stupid for what he just said, no matter that he sticks to it. If he could prevent a situation from escalating, he would always go for that route.

“You think they’ll give you a choice in that matter?” Charlie asks. “Most of those idiots will be too drunk to even remember that they knocked your teeth out the next morning.”

“P-Prob-bably,” Barry agrees, grimly, “b-but th-that d-doesn’t m-mean th-that I-I c-can’t t-try a-and k-keep th-that f-from h-h-hap-pening i-in th-th e-f-first p-place.”
“Yeah.” Charlie chuckles. “You look like the kind that is all for avoiding conflict.”

An annoyed look crosses Barry’s face hearing that, and he can’t help but feel somewhat insulted by the other man’s words. “I-I ch-choose m-my f-fights, a-and i-it’s t-true th-that I-I w-would r-rather n-not g-get i-into a-a c-conf-f-frontation w-with a-anyb-body, b-but I-I’m n-no c-coward,” he tells the other man firmly and straightens up. “I-I kn-know h-how t-to t-take c-care o-of m-mys-self.”

Liar, a harsh voice whispers in the back of his mind, but he ignores it stubbornly and instead stays focused on Charlie, who watches him once again with a wrinkled nose and annoyed expression. Considering that Barry has never really seen the man without at least a trace of annoyance on his features, he tries to think that this doesn’t necessary mean things already went south for him.

After a minute or so of tense, uneasy silence, during which Charlie considered him with a look that was much too intense for Barry’s liking, but which he held nonetheless, the barman shifts and uncrosses his arms so that his hands end up resting on the edge of the cabinet next to his hips. He frowns down at Barry as he finally speaks, “There was a guy working for me, about five years ago, a rather tall chap, who also knew how to take care of himself.” He smirks grimly, through there is not a trace of humor in his eyes as he proceeds. “He got beaten to death by a couple of fellows on his way home because they didn’t like that he kicked them out when they started to stir shit up.”

Barry isn’t sure how response to that and stays quiet. What Charlie just told him is not something he is surprised to hear, especially in the Keys, but it is still deeply disturbing, even more so because it reminds him all too vividly of when he was mugged on his way home from work a couple years back. He realizes once again how lucky he was that he got away with nothing else but a broken arm and a concussion.

“Listen,” Charlie eventually goes on after he let his words have time to sink in, “working here won’t be a nice job, it won’t suck all the time, but it will be stressful and you’ll have your hands full with stupid wankers who’ll try to get funny with you more often than not.” He gives Barry a levelled look. “Especially with the way you talk, and you’ll have to deal with that shit. Don’t expect me to hold your hand all night because the customers are fucking assholes to you. This job won’t be a breeze, and if you don’t think you can handle that, then don’t waste my time.”

For a long moment, the only thing Barry can do in response to what he has heard is stare at Charlie, mouth slightly agape. It is when the other man snorts and shakes his head over his dumbfounded expression that Barry snaps out of it.

“Y-y-you… th-the j-job… y-you-”

“I’m not giving you the job right away,” Charlie cuts him off, a slowly familiar getting frown back in its usual place as he explains. “I’ll see how you’re doing tonight, and depending on your performance, I may consider hiring you.” He presses on when he sees that Barry is about to thank him, glaring. “Don’t thank me just yet, Saturday’s crowds are the worst, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you no longer want to come back for all the money in the world after it’s over.”

The warning should probably worry Barry far more than it does just then, but he is currently nearly swept off the floor by the sheer euphoria that comes with the prospect of finally finding a new job.

“I-I’ll d-d-do m-my b-best,” Barry promises, and he doesn’t even care that he is grinning like a loon, just being given a chance to prove himself makes him feel lighter than he has in months.

Charlie snorts, shooting him a nearly disgusted look, though there is a slightly amused smirk tugging at his lips. “I hope so, I don’t like to waste my times on slackers.” His demeanor stays relaxed as he seems to consider Barry once more and asks, “You’ve ever worked in a bar before?”
Barry feels his good mood dim a little at that, and he throws the barman a worried look, hesitating a little before he eventually answers truthfully, “‘N-No, b-but I-I’m a-a qu-quick l-learner.”

“Of course,” Charlie mutters and really doesn’t appear like he expected anything else. “What have you been doing before?”

“I w-worked a-as a s-s-salesc-clerk,” Barry explains and lowers his eyes, inadvertently remembering Mrs. Ming and her store. He misses working there. He misses her.

“For how long?” Charlie sounds not really like he is that interested, but Barry guesses a certain amount of background screening is necessary in any job interview, even one as unconventional as this one.

“A-A l-little o-over th-three y-years.”

“And before that?”

This question causes Barry to halt, and he feels himself shift nervously before he can stop it. He glances back up to Charlie, who of course picked up on his shift in mood.

“I see, an ex-con. Great,” Charlie says drily, but it doesn’t seem like this little fact really poses a problem for him, much to Barry’s relief. He should have expected that a man who is having a pub which clientele is nearly entirely made up of criminals, does not have the same qualms about hiring one himself. What does surprise him, though, is Charlie’s next question. “You met Snart and his people in prison?”

“K-Kind o-of,” Barry agrees, glancing to the side, unwilling to discuss this with him.

“You and the Rogues are pretty tight, aren’t you?”

Barry shrugs but nods, “W-we’re f-friends.”

“The Rogues usually aren’t that open about making friends,” Charlie comments and holds Barry’s eyes firmly for a moment, looking like he is trying to gauge something. It makes Barry feel quite uneasy, and the urge to squirm and look away is nearly overwhelming, but he forces him to keep still. He doesn’t want the barman to think that he is hiding something, or, more accurate would be, he doesn’t want him to think that he is hiding something that would cause him trouble later on.

It is unexpected that Charlie picked up on his friendship with the Rogues, even though it probably really shouldn’t be. Len and the others are infamous, after all, and have enough of a status that the other criminals of the Gems respect them and if not that, they at least know that it is a very bad idea to mess with them.

In a crowd like the one that is usually visiting the Saloon, Barry’s sudden presence among them probably caught immediate attention, even if he hadn’t been aware of that.

His break-down during his second visit feels suddenly much more embarrassing, and he wonders how many people tried to listen in to their conversation or watched Len guide him outside after he got too upset.

Barry also wonders whether Charlie picked up on that whole situation, too, and glancing nervously up to the taller man, he can feel his face heat up once again.

“Do I have to worry that Snart and his buddies will kick up shit with the rest of my clientele whenever someone gets funny with you?” Charlie asks, and his words do make it appear that his like
of thoughts went along a similar trail to Barry’s. “I won’t put up with those idiots starting a barfights every time someone tries looks at you the wrong way because you can’t deal with a jackass customer on your own, am I clear?”

“O-Of c-cour-rse,” Barry agrees quickly, cheeks still burning,

To Barry’s surprise and immense relief, Charlie seems to make do with his assurance, since he lets the topic of the Rogues drop.

“I want you to be here at five sharp this afternoon. We won’t open till seven but I wanna have enough time to show you around,” Charlie explains. “On Fridays and Saturdays, we generally stay open till four, Sunday to Thursday we open at six and close at one. Opening and closing usually takes about an hour, though it really depends on what shitheads of customers we’ve to deal with. If they break stuff or there is a barfight, it usually takes a while longer to get rid of all the mess.”

He glances to the watch at his wrist, then, and seems rather annoyed over the time it shows there. He turns back to Barry, and nods to the door, the dismissal clear. “I’m going to catch some z’s before tonight, and you should do the same, Allen. You’ll need it.”

Barry assures him that he will, and nearly scrambles to get out, afraid that Charlie could change his mind after all if he stuck around too long.

The icy air feels no longer biting against his skin when Barry steps into it a moment later, but refreshing, and he takes a deep breath, filling his lungs to the brim. He chuckles softly as he exhales and throws a look back over his shoulder to the once again locked entrance.

This went much better than he thought it would.

He didn’t really expect Charlie to even take his inquiry about the job serious, but the man did.

Smiling, Barry turns to face the sidewalk that would lead him to the bus stop, and his steps feel lighter than in a long time as he makes it way through the persisting drizzle and gloomy streets.

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Unsurprisingly, Len hates the idea of him working at Charlie’s Saloon, just as Barry expected he would. What is surprising, though, is that Len doesn’t really make a fuss about it after he told him what an idiotic whim of an idea it was.

Instead of getting furious, Len watches him with a grim and worried face and tells him to be careful.

“You can’t underestmate the crowd that hangs out there. It is made up of dangerous and mostly mean people, Barry,” Len warns him, seriously, leaning against his kitchen counter with his arms crossed.

“I-I kn-know,” Barry agrees in a subdued voice. His earlier excitement has made way to guilty over having gone behind Len’s back like that. He had some time to think about it on his way home, and he is aware of how hurt he would have felt if their roles were reversed.

Initially, he didn’t really think it would be necessary in any case, as he didn’t expect anything to come from going to seek out Charlie, but things went utterly different than how he expected they would, and he wasn’t simply turned away.

Len studies him silently, visibly unhappy about this turn of events, causing Barry to shift nervously at his spot next to the kitchen table, arms loosely looped around himself.
“Are you really sure you can do this?” Len eventually asks.

“I-I...” Barry frowns and shrugs helplessly, unwilling to lie. “I-I d-don’t kn-know, b-but I-I w-want t-to t-try. I-If I-I c-can p-proof th-that I-I c-can d-do th-this, I-I’ll f-final-ly h-have a-a j-job ag-gain.”

The mere idea fills him with a nearly absurdly intense hope. It’s been more than two months by now that he is without work, and with each passing day, the chance to find something seems to diminish more and more.

Now, after his talk to Charlie, things may change for the better once again, and even though he is aware that the Saloon is hardly an environment he should be around at all, he just wants a job again. The constant fear of what will happens once the money Mrs. Ming left him runs out or Ms. Jenkins decides she has enough of his inability to find new work has been eating away at him, and he would put up with a lot just to get rid of it.

Len probably knows too what a relief this opportunity poses, and that is likely the reason why he hasn’t reacted more negatively to the news so far.

“You don’t have to do this,” Len reminds him, slightly annoyed. “You know that I will help you out financially if necessary, you don’t have to work someplace that terrifies you just so you can make a living-”

“I-I n-need a-a j-job, L-Len,” Barry cuts him off, a sudden bout of frustration overcoming him. “M-Ms. J-Jen-k ins a-a-lr-ready t-told m-me th-that sh-she w-won’t g-give m-me a-a n-long-g-er th-than th-the e-end o-of M-March t-till sh-she w-will r-rep-port th-this a-a a-b-b-b-breach o-of m-my p-parole.”

Ms. Jenkins thinks he isn’t taking it serious, that he is lazing around, or ruining the job interviews on purpose, and nothing he tells her has been able to change her opinion so far.

The idea of being sent back to the heights over this is sickening, much more terrifying than working at the Saloon ever could be, because there he may be surrounded by drunk, to violence prone people, even some who may have abused Barry themselves during their time in the Heights, but none of them are Michael or Puckett.

“The old hag can’t do that,” Len argues, angry now, and while it causes his heart rate to pick up, Barry knows that his friend isn’t upset with him but the situation as a whole. “You won’t be sent back to the Heights over this, you’re the picture book definition of a decent citizen. She only wants to scare you, because she is a miserable old bat who gets her kicks out of that.”

“Y-You d-don’t kn-know th-that.” Barry shivers and tightens his arms around himself. A familiar nausea overcomes him, and he swallows thickly, feeling wrought up and tired at the same time. “I-I h-have t-to h-have a-a j-job, I-I n-need i-it t-to k-keep a-a p-place t-to l-live, w-wh-which i-i s-o-o ne o-of th-the m-main r-requir-ments o-of m-my p-parole. I-If I-I c-can’t f-find w-work, I-I’ll l-lose m-my a-apartment a-and v-violate m-my p-parole r-restr-ictions, a-a-and th-they’ll p-put m-me b-back... th-there.” A weak whimper passes his lips, and he squeezes his eyes shut, shivering once more.

“Hey.” Len sounds much calmer once again, gentle even, and Barry hears him come closer, slowly, as if not to alarm him. “Nob-b-obody is going to put you anywhere.” He stops close enough that Barry can feel his presence, and he startles slightly when he feels Len’s hand cup his neck, the calloused skin on his much softer one. He doesn’t pull away.

“I-I c-can’t g-g-go b-back th-there,” Barry insists, eyes still firmly squeezed shut. “I-I c-can’t.”
“You won’t,” Len assures him and starts to rub his thumb soothingly against the base of Barry’s skull. “I would never let that happen. I won’t let anybody hurt you like that again.”

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat, tearing up at how earnest Len sounds, and the need to lean towards him, to seek out his closeness and the comfort only he can offer him, is suddenly nearly overwhelming. The fear of how he would react to the contact holds him back, though, since he still doesn’t trust himself that he would be able to discern Len from an actual threat if he got too close. It has been like that for months now, and he really starts to get fed up with it and his inability to overcome anxiety.

More than anything, Barry wants to be near Len, like before Cameron got his hands on him.

The memory of that man still holds a lot of power over Barry, no matter that he is actually dead, and the thought that he could experience Len’s touch similar to how it felt when that bastard touched him frightens him.

Small touches, small gestures of affection, like a hand on his elbow, his shoulder, or, like now, on his neck, are okay, but anything more makes him nervous, and more than once Len’s hand was replaced by Cameron’s or Michael’s, or from some other faceless abuser of his past.

It is frustrating, enough so that Barry feels like screaming and kicking at times, but he knows that his anger won’t help, that he can’t do anything but wait and let the scars heal over once again.

“You don’t need to worry about the Heights,” Len tells him and steps a little closer, not enough that they are touching, but only just, and another shiver runs through Barry when warm, soft lips are pressed against his forehead. It catches his breath in his throat, and he tenses up in response as he feels them linger, waiting for what is going to happen next, how he would react should the intimate touch last.

Len doesn’t give Barry’s mind enough times to conjure up panic, when he pulls back a second later. He stays close enough that Barry can feel his warm breath against his skin as he speaks, though, “I promise you that you won’t ever have to get back to that awful place, baby.”

The warmth that blooms in Barry’s chest and spreads through his body is soothing and causes him to open his eyes to meet Len’s, ignoring the couple of warm tears that trail down his cheeks.

“I-I…” Barry croaks and blushes, coughing lightly. He leans slightly back against Len’s touch as he tries again, “I-I d-don’t kn-know wh-wheth-ther I-I c-can d-do th-this, b-but I-I’ve g-got t-to t-try.”

He unwinds his arms from around his chest and reaches up to hold onto Len’s shoulders. “I-I kn-know y-you d-don’t l-like i-it, a-and I-I’m s-sor-ry I d-didn’t t-tell y-you wh-when I-I w-went t-to t-talk w-with Ch-Charlie, I-I h-honest-ly d-didn’t th-think a-a-nyth-thing w-would c-come o-of it.”

A small smile spreads over his lips, remembering that he actually got the chance he was hoping for so very much.

No matter anything else, he got at least that, and even if he fails, Charlie allowing him to try and prove himself breaks the ridiculous long chain of outright rejections.

Maybe, if this doesn’t work out, it would the next time.

“Charlie is a moody bastard,” Len tells him, and meets his surprised, wary look with a faint smirk. “But he is also a good judge of character.” He moves his hand, so that he end up cupping Barry’s cheek, brushing away the trail the tears left behind, an intimidate and calming gesture. “I’m sure he’ll give you the job when he sees how dedicated you are. You’re probably the best thing that can
happen to him and his seedy bar.”

Barry chuckles quietly, blushing a little, and leans into Len’s hand, deeply grateful to have him here at his side. “W-Will y-you b-be th-there?” He asks, even though he knows he shouldn’t. If he wants to work there, he needs to be able to deal with whatever is thrown his way on his own since he can’t expect his friends to be there for him all the time, not that he wants to relay on them this heavy in the first place. The thought of having to go there tonight on his own is intimidating, though, frighteningly so.

“There is no way in hell that I won’t be there tonight,” Len tells him firmly, and Barry feels his smile widen in gratefulness and love for his partner. He cups Len’s hand with his own and squeezes it lightly, wishing he could make him better understand how much this means to him.

“Th-Thank y-you,” Barry says quietly, hardly more than a whisper, and Len’s smile turns warm and gentle, and a little sad.

“I can’t promise you that I’ll always be there for you when you need me, that’s not possible because of who I am,” Len tells him and moves his hand from under Barry’s to take hold of it. He pulls it closer and briefly studies the ring that glints even in the faint light of the cloudy morning that has settled over Keystone City. He lifts his gaze, meeting Barry’s who is watching him quietly. “But I’ll try my best to be there when I can.”

Lightly, Len brushes his lips against Barry’s knuckles, above the ring, and it feels like both a reassurance and a promise.

The tight knot of nervousness in Barry’s belly eases somewhat at that and is joined by the faint fluttery feeling he is experiencing a lot around Len these days.

Slowly, slightly hesitant, he cups Len’s cheek, a faint blush on his own.

They don’t say anything for a long moment, but they still understand each other, and it is nearly overwhelming for Barry how close he feels to the other man, how connected.

It is a gift, he knows, something he never expected to receive again.

“You’ll be fine,” Len tells him, talking about tonight, about the Saloon, and Barry swallows thickly, grateful for his words and confidence in him.

“I-I’ll b-be f-fine,” Barry repeats, wanting to believe it with every fiber in his body.

Len smiles and gives his hand he is still holding a light, reassuring squeeze. “You should try and catch some sleep before tonight.”

Barry doesn’t protest, he feels tired, exhausted even, likely because of his lack of sleep and all the emotional tension that came with him building up the courage to go and talk to Charlie in the first place.

“W-Will y-you s-stay t-till I’m asleep?” Barry is already drowsy enough that he doesn’t feel too embarrassed about asking for this, and he isn’t surprised but still happy when Len agrees.

Len follows him to the bedroom and gets him his loosely fitting pants and shirt he prefers to sleep in while he takes his trousers and one good dress shirt off he put on for the interview.

Drained, Barry climbs into his bed and pulls the thick blanket up to his chin, looking up bleary-eyed but with a smile at Len, who sits down at the side of the bed next to him.
“I’ll wake you up on time,” Len assures him, and Barry murmurs his thanks, eyes growing heavier by the minute.

He falls asleep with feeling Len close to him.

Chapter End Notes

It looks like Barry has been given an opportunity to proof himself, something he badly needed to get for a while. Now we only have to wait and see how this will work out, since working in a bar is a stressful enough job as it is, but I have a feeling that working at a bar like the Saloon can top that easily. At least Len will be around, so I wonder whether we will end up with a barfight or two. ;)

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, I’m quite excited about reaching this part of the story, I have been loving the idea of Barry working as a barman since I stumbled upon it in the comics. It is just so clever and funny, and it is such a pity they didn’t go for it longer than the two or three issues they went with it eventually. There could have been so many hijinks involved with him working at a bar frequented by the Gems’ criminals, even if it was only temporarily (for more than three issues that is) but, how well, it was not meant to be.

We also finally got to know Charlie a little better, he seems to be a pretty gruffy guy, but I have the feeling that he is much nicer than he tends to let on. Not really a wonder, considering what kind of business he runs and whom his clientele is made up of.

I really enjoyed having Barry and Len growing a little closer in this chapter as well. Barry is still recovering from what happened to him when Cameron kidnapped him, but he is slowly getting better, and Len is doing his best to help him along the way. Len really came a long way from the beginning of Singularity when it comes to be a supportive, sensitive boyfriend – or being a boyfriend in the first place. ;)

Thanks so much to all of you who took the time to leave me some feedback. :) You’re just amazing! I enjoy reading your ideas and thoughts on Singularity, you come up with such great ideas, and it never fails to be the best reward for putting this story out there. <3

Next chapter will show us how Barry will cope with working in a crowded bar which clientele is made up by mostly jerks, and what the other Rogues actually think of it!

Also, just on a side note, my birthday is upcoming Thursday, and I’m super excited because I’ll be visiting my family for the most part of the week, and we’ll have BBQ and cakes (cakes are the best part of bdays, at least for a foody like me x)! Quintessenza’s birthday is also coming up, so it would be super nice if you could congratulate him, I’m sure he would be happy about it! ;)

Anyways, see you guys in two weeks! :)
Of Pints and Being Given a Chance

Chapter Summary

Barry works his first night at the bar, and things get a little overwhelming.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited by my awesome friend Quintessenzzza, so if you don’t stumble across an error every other sentence, it’s all due to his editorial master skills! :) Thanks a lot, my friend, for doing such an amazing job once again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air is thick with the boisterous, slightly aggressive energy of people enjoying their Saturday night, meeting up with friends, having a good time, and getting drunk.

Well, Barry is pretty sure that the getting drunk part is on the forefront of everyone’s mind.

There is no doubt about it that any visitor of the Saloon intends to get their fair fill of alcohol tonight, and the further the hour progresses and more beers are ordered, the louder and rambunctious the crowd is getting.

It is already much for Barry to be among them under ordinary circumstances, staying at the sideline, watching and hoping that nobody notices him, hiding away among his friends.

Now, having to actually interact with that rowdy, very impatient crowd that is getting more wasted by the minute, Barry’s body seems indecisive about whether it wants to just let its survival instinct take over and make him scram, or make do with throwing up and coil up in a fetal position behind the bar, hiding till everybody is gone.

So far, the evening went about as bad as Barry feared it would.

Nobody here has the patience or the good grace to put up with his stammer when Charlie sends him out to see how he is doing with waiting tables. It doesn’t help that his speech impediment is acting up so badly that he can hardly get a sentence out at all, and the majority of patrons seems to not only find it annoying but hilarious as well.

Most are mimicking him and make fun of him outright, causing Barry’s embarrassment to quickly turn into mortification, and the worst thing is that Len is right there, sitting at the bar, watching it all.

It is probably a mixture of the fact that Barry is growing upset enough that he can hardly get a word out after an hour and that Len looks about ready to start a brawl which eventually leads to Charlie ordering him to stay put behind the bar and take the orders from there.

The barman makes no secret of how dissatisfied he is with Barry’s performance, likely because it causes a hold-up and more work for him, as more and more people are filling up the location due to
how nasty the weather still is, and it is obvious that he is already regretting offering him this opportunity to begin with.

Barry tries his best to not let it get to him, though his eyes are itching traitorously and the back of his throat is burning with suppressed emotions.

To everybody’s surprise, especially Barry’s own, he turns out to be quite a handy barman, since, despite the ongoing rudeness of the patrons, the annoying and humiliating imitations of him they offer when they order their drinks, it seems to help to have a physical barrier between them.

Not being forced to move through the sea of hot, intimidating bodies puts Barry’s nerves a little at ease after some time, and he is able to relax somewhat. It makes all the difference, as he is working the orders quickly and without a single mistake. Charlie shows him how to pour a pint the right way, and as it isn’t an especially difficult task, Barry latches onto it, puts all of his concentration on it, managing to keep track of who orders what, not mixing up the drinks once.

This does turn out to be rather easy because most of the patrons stick to beer, and Charlie doesn’t exactly offer a wide variety of different brands. Barry, who has never been big on alcohol other than the occasional beer, is grateful for that, and he pretty much only has to keep up with whether someone wants a pint or a bottle. There is an odd one out who wants whiskey, but Charlie shows him which glasses to use and how to pour the right amount, and Barry makes sure to remember every detail for any further customer with that preference.

Charlie’s pissed-off demeanor subsides over the next hours, his rather harsh tone becomes less angry, and Barry is surprised and grateful that the man, despite his gruffness, takes the time to explain and show him how to do different tasks. He even helps when a customer tries to cause Barry trouble by refusing to pay for the drink he ordered.

“You’ve got things mixed up, dude,” The man tells him with a broad grin and a spiteful glint in his eyes. “I already paid, don’t you remember? Are you a little slow too?”

He didn’t, Barry knows so for sure. Charlie told him to always take the money when he hands the drinks over, so that no mix-ups like this one can happen.

Said customer is in his early twenties and doesn’t seem to be one of the bar’s regulars, so he isn’t expecting Charlie, who has easily two heads in size and seventy pounds of muscles on the young man, to calmly make his way around the bar and rather forcefully kick the troublemaker out of the pub.

Any further incidences of that kind stay out.

Close to one in the morning, Charlie sends Barry on a twenty-minute break for which Barry could kiss him.

He ends up sitting in the small stuffy room in the back of the building that offers a worn out couch, trying to convince himself that he can make it through this ordeal despite how emotionally exhausted he feels. It would be only this one night, anyway, and he pushes away the thought of just sneaking out through the back exit, even though it is ridiculously alluring.

To Barry’s utter surprise, the last couple hours till four go by surprisingly fast after he returns to his position behind the bar, and, before long, he watches the last couple of drunk guys make their unsteady way out of the location, leaving behind a nearly deafening silence compared to how noisy it has been earlier.
It is with some regret that Barry starts to clean the counter, since despite how horrible the whole experience has been at first, he did actually start to enjoy it a little towards the end, after he realized he wouldn’t get eaten alive by the patrons, no matter what a nasty streak some of them possessed.

The work isn’t that complicated, it is a bit overwhelming because everything is so new, but Barry is sure that he can get the hang of it fairly quickly.

“You did well,” Len tells him. He stayed behind at the bar, giving Charlie such a challenging glare when he moved to lock the entrance after the other customers left that the man apparently decided that trying to get him to leave was not worth the hassle.

“Th-Thanks.” Barry gives him a small smile and hopes that he doesn’t come over too dejected or disappointed. He knew from the very start that he should not expect anything from this, and he really didn’t, no matter how optimistic he felt after talking to Charlie in the morning.

Len frowns, not missing his disheartenment, and for a second he looks like he wants to reach out and take hold of Barry’s hand that is scrubbing down the counter. Charlie chooses that moment to return from the storage room in the back, though, so he doesn’t.

The barman has two heavy crates of beer in his arms and puts them down next to Barry. “Restock the fridge,” he tells him gruffly and returns into the back, but not before shooting Len another annoyed look.

“H-He r-really l-likes y-you,” Barry jokes and grins when Len glares at him half-heartedly in response.

Despite how exhausting the whole experience was, he does feel lighter, even relaxed now that the night is over. He has been able to push through it, despite how terrified he felt when stepping into the bar late last afternoon.

In a way, that is a reward in its own. Barry proved to himself that he can do this, that he can face something that horrifies him and he won’t be frightened into giving up because of it.

It doesn’t really change much, it certainly doesn’t help with his ongoing lack of a job, but all in all he would mark the last night as a good one.

After stashing the bottled beer in the refrigerator below the counter, he makes his way around the bar, picks up the left behind mugs and full ashtrays, and gets down to wiping the tables. It’s something he doesn’t have to do, since he pretty spectacularly failed in proving himself fit for the job, but he is still filled up to the brim with nervous energy, and he also wants to show his gratitude to Charlie for letting him try for this position in the first place.

Len tags along, helping him to get the dirty glasses back to the counter but he generally sticks to being a silent but comforting presence. Neither of them seem to be in the mood to talk.

The bar seems oddly peaceful, Barry decides as he halts for a moment to let his eyes wander to take it in. It’s a nearly bizarre contrast to what a chaos it has been not even an hour ago.

Charlie returns from the back, a bucket and a mop in hand, and frowns when he spots Barry wiping down another one of the tables. Barry freezes in response and sends him a worried and confused look as he isn’t sure whether he took too much of a liberty starting to clean without asking the man about it beforehand.

For a second, Charlie seems like he is about to say something but thinks the better of it and instead
proceeds with moping the floor. He, once again, shoots a glare in Len’s direction, who has returned to his former seat to finish his beer.

“You’re one shitty friend, Snart, staying behind to watch your buddy clean.” Charlie snorts and smirks when Len bristles at that.

“H-he d-d-did h-help m-me w-with th-the m-mugs,” Barry comes to Len’s defense and nods to the tables around him.

Charlie arches his eyebrows at that and shoots Len a funny but amused look. “Did he now?”

“Go fuck yourself, Charlie.” Len grunts, which in turn causes Barry to freeze momentarily, though he relaxes when he notices that Charlie’s smirk turns into a grin at that.

“You certainly look like you could do with a good screw yourself,” Charlie remarks and ignores the icy glare he gets for it as he starts with the menial task to rid the floor of all the dirt the patrons carried in from the outside as well as the spilled drinks.

Eventually, the bar is clean enough and Charlie tells Barry to get back to Len while he puts the cleaning utensils away in the back.

Then, finally comes the moment Barry has been apprehensively waiting for.

Charlie looks him over silently, and Barry fights the urge to shrink into himself or move closer to Len, because he hates to imagine what people see when they really take the time to take him in.

The frown on the barman’s face deepens, and he heaves a long, weary sigh, causing Barry to feel even worse for the performance he delivered tonight.

“Let’s be clear,” Charlie says, voice as gruff as always, and Barry presses his lips into an unhappy line, averting his gaze as his shoulders slouch under the dismissal he expects. “Under normal circumstances I would not even consider hiring you, Allen, because you’re clearly unfit for waiting the tables here, you’re fucking scared of your own shadow, and you miss the backbone you need to stand up to the motherfuckers that like to hang out here.”

Barry’s breath catches in his throat, and he feels his eyes grow wide, still staring at the floor as Charlie’s words slowly sink in.

Charlie keeps going, not giving him a moment to really digest what he has just heard.

“I’m not in a position to be picky, though,” Charlie remarks, sounding only a little bitter. “I need some damn help with this place because if I’m not able to take a single fucking afternoon off within the next month I’ll snap, and that would lead to me ending up in jail, which is a cesspool I really don’t wanna get mixed up with.” He sighs again and rubs one of his big hands over his face.

When he looks back at Barry, wrinkling his nose, he huffs a laugh. “At least you’re not half bad when it comes to working behind the bar, and it’s not like I’m going to find some other poor bastard who wants to do this shitty job anytime soon. Not with the reputation this position holds.” He scowls at that, probably damning his bad luck, before he focuses back on Barry, narrowing his eyes. “So I’m willing to try this and hire you on probation, but if you mess up within the next month, you can be sure that I’ll kick your sorry ass out without hesitation. Got it?”

Barry should probably say something, anything to show that he did indeed hear him.

Somewhere on the way from his brain to his mouth the words seem to get lost, though, and he can
only stare at the beefy man in front of him, a disbelieving expression on his face and mouth slightly agape.

The sharp laugh Charlie barks startles him out of his stupor, it cuts through the otherwise tense silence that followed his words, and Barry watches him as he shakes his head. “Don’t think that I’m doing you a favor, Allen. I really don’t, once you have worked here for more than a couple of days you’ll probably quit on your own, mark my words.”

Leaving Barry standing there, still feeling both flabbergasted and at a loss of how to react, Charlie makes his way around the bar and grabs two of the beers Barry put in the fridge a little earlier. He puts one on the counter, pushing it towards him, a tired but not unkind smirk on his lips.

“To celebrate,” Charlie says, and Barry is too busy feeling overwhelmed that he doesn’t pick up on the sarcasm the man clearly puts effort into conveying. “You’ll be back tonight at five pm sharp. I want to see how well you picked up the stuff I showed you yesterday before the crowd of assholes returns.” He opens his beer with a lightener, causing it to hiss as the cap comes off.

“Mondays and Tuesdays are your days off; you work from six to roughly three on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays and from eight to around five on Fridays and Saturdays. The time you get out of here depends on how quick you are with closing the bar, but I can assure you that it will hardly ever take less than half an hour. You’ll get 200 bucks a week for your first month, if you’re able to make it through that, it will be up to 325, that’s sans the tips, of course.” He snorts at that derisively, and Barry isn’t sure whether it is because his new boss doesn’t believe that he can get any tips or because of the notion that their clientele would tip in the first place.

When Barry still fails to respond a by now familiar frown is back on Charlie’s face and he asks, sharply, “So, what is it? You take the job or not?”

“Y-Y-Yes!” Barry nearly squeaks, still very much out of his depth, but then it finally catches up with him what just happened and a grin spreads over his lips.

“Y-Yes,” Barry repeats more firmly and he knows that he is probably looking silly, grinning so wide that the corners of his eyes crinkle, but he really couldn’t care less. “Th-Thank y-you…” He breaks off, unsure how to address his new employer.

“Charlie will do,” Charlie tells him with a snort and turns to face Len, who has watched the whole scene silently so far. He scowls at the criminal as he adds, “And you better not pull a show like tonight again, Snart. You made the other guys uneasy with how you kept glaring daggers at them, and I don’t need you to scare my customers off because you feel the need to watch your buddy’s back all the fucking time.”

“Your customers are grown-ass criminals, would be surprised if they aren’t used to worse,” Len points out with a shrug, and unlike earlier, it doesn’t look like Charlie’s words rubbed him the wrong way. Judging by his much more relaxed demeanor and the faint smirk, he too is very pleased by the outcome of tonight.

Len nods to the beer in Charlie’s hand. “Get me one too, I wanna join the celebration.”

“The bar is closed.”

“Don’t be a dick.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t kick you out with the rest of the jackasses, so don’t get funny with me.”

Both men proceed to glaring menacingly at each other, and while this would have put Barry’s nerves
on edge under normal circumstances, he feels way too happy to let this dampen his mood. He steps closer to Len and takes a seat next to him, grabbing the lighter Charlie put on the bar and using it to open his beer. He takes a sip and hands it to Len, smiling as he offers, “We can share this one.”

Len’s expression softens somewhat at that, not enough for most people to notice, but Barry isn’t most people when it comes to his friend.

Charlie only rolls his eyes, but doesn’t comment.

About ten minutes later, when they step outside in the cool early morning air, Barry feels way too wired-up to go home and sleep, and he agrees when Len offers to buy him breakfast in a small coffee shop he knows close-by.

They probably walk much too close for two friends, with Barry sneaking his hand into Len’s, but there is hardly anybody else around, and he doesn’t seem to be the only one feeling daring since his friend indulges him, intertwining their fingers and giving his hand an affectionate squeeze.

In that moment, Barry feels like nothing can hold him back, and he is ready to face whatever’s ahead of him.

***

“Wait, you seriously got hired by Charlie? Saloon Charlie? Of the Saloon, we took you to like three times? The one which all the sleazebags like to visit when they come out from under the woodworks?” Sam asks and eyes Barry as if he wasn’t sure whether he was being serious or lost his mind. “The Saloon that is usually packed with sweaty, stinking guys that can be intimidating as fuck?”

“Sam,” Lisa says his name with a warning undercurrent, shooting him an annoyed look.

“What?” Sam exclaims, annoyed, not taking his eyes off Barry whom he is now watching like he has grown a second head or something similarly bizarre. “I’m just trying to understand whether we’re talking about the same Saloon here.”

“There aren’t really that many of those around,” Mick remarks, and he too seems to have forgotten all about the card game that was going on when Barry and Len entered the living room just a few minutes earlier.

“There could be,” Sam argues, but it is clear that he really doesn’t care about that particular point. Instead, he keeps eyeing Barry with that slightly bewildered look, his can of beer still hovering close to his lips but seemingly forgotten.

Barry, who feels bone tired but much too wired up to go to bed, shifts uneasily in his seat under the scrutinizing looks of his friends. He is not surprised that his new employment caught them off-guard since Len has kept quiet about it, and so did he.

The idea that something could come from this was nearly absurd, and Barry preferred to keep it a secret, not only to save face in the likely case he was rejected, but also because he worried that some of his friends would want to be around when he tried to prove himself to Charlie. Knowing how people would treat him, having Len around had been bad enough, even though he probably wouldn’t have lasted the night if his friend hadn’t been there.

“You think that’s a good idea, Allen?” Marco asks, touching upon the elephant in the room that is probably hovering over all their heads right now. “You don’t do well with crowds, especially male ones.”
Barry’s cheeks heat up, he averts his gaze uneasily and tries not to frown, even though his friend touched upon the most disturbing part about his possible occupation at the Saloon.

The others don’t argue with Marco there, not even Lisa. Len, who is currently in his room and on the phone with Gael, would have told them to shut up. He is rather protective these days, but Barry isn’t stupid, he knows that Len is probably more skeptical about the whole thing than all of them combined.

It is disheartening in a way, but he can’t fault them for it. He himself secretly thinks so too, after all.

“I-I’ll w-w-wait a-and s-see,” Barry croaks and coughs lightly before he proceeds, lifting his eyes to meet Marco’s. “I-If i-it d-d-does-sn’t w-w-work o-out…” He shrugs and tries to smile. “I-I’ll f-f-find s-someth-thing e-else.”

The amazing thing is, that, for once, he isn’t only saying these words but means them. Even if the whole business with working at the Saloon turns out to be as big of a catastrophe as Barry worries it will, it still gives him some hope that he will be able to find something else if necessary. Charlie gives him a chance, unlike any of those many men and women he talked to over the last couple of months. There must be others like him out there.

“It will work out,” Lisa assures him, her smile tight but honest. “You’re a tough little cookie, Barry, and even Charlie isn’t thick enough to not recognize how lucky he can count himself that he got someone like you even considering working for him.”

Barry gives her a grateful look in return. “Th-Thanks, L-Lisa.”

“I doubt that being a tough little cookie will be enough,” Roscoe, who is sitting next to Lisa, remarks drily. “As lucky as Allen is, he will probably have something happen to him within the first week that will cause another trauma—”

Roscoe breaks off and exclaims a pained gasp when Lisa jabs him harshly in the ribs with her elbow, glaring at him warningly. “Shut up, Roscoe. For fuck’s sake.”

Feeling slightly ill all of a sudden, Barry lowers his gaze to his lap, lips pressed into a thin, unhappy line as a shiver of self-disgust runs through the whole length of his body.

“Don’t listen to that jackass,” Mick cuts in, gruffly. “If someone causes you trouble, you tell me, and I’ll make sure they won’t ever walk straight again.”

Startled, Barry looks back up, surprised by his friend’s words. Mick chuckles when he notices his expression and winks at him, a dark, somewhat nasty smirk on his lips.

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, leaning back into his chair and putting his beer down. “Nobody fucks with us, Barry, so don’t get all depressed over what Roscoe said. You’ve to know the guy by now. He’s just being his usual dick-ish self.” He snorts. “Dude can’t help himself.”

Touched, Barry swallows thickly, and he wishes he could express the gratitude he experiences right now, how much it means to him to have them watch his back, despite the fact that they know-

“Who can’t help himself?” James asks brightly as he enters the living room, closely followed by Hartley. His eyes immediately zoom in on Roscoe, probably not missing the glare Lisa keeps shooting her partner, and grins. “Dillon the dick?”

“Shut up, Trickster,” Roscoe grouses, annoyed. “People with an IQ above thirty are talking, so do yourself a favor and don’t assume that you can join in.”
“Fuck you!” James hisses, baring his teeth. “I’m not stupid!”

Roscoe snorts and promptly flinches when Lisa’s elbow connects with his ribs fiercely for a second time.

“Allen found himself a job,” Marco throws in, apparently not willing to listen to another bickering between his colleagues.

“You did?” Hartley asks, excitedly. “That’s great! I told you that wouldn’t take long, Barry. Congratulations.”

Barry can’t but grin a little at that. “Th-Thanks, H-Hartley.”

“What job is it?” James inquires as he takes the empty seat next to Mick and opposite to Barry. “Is it the one at the restaurant?”

There was another interview at the beginning of this week, for a kitchen help, and Barry knew before it even was over that the smartly dressed woman who held it wouldn’t consider him. It was a family restaurant, after all.

“N-No…” Barry shifts and bites his lower lip for a second, shrugging. “I-I noticed th-the s-sign l-looking f-for a b-barm-aan a-at th-th-e S-Saloon a-and…” He breaks off and shrugs.

“The Saloon?” Hartley, who is sitting down next to James, pauses, and eyes him with a confused frown. “Like, our Saloon? The bar? Owned by Charlie?”

Sam snorts, clearly amused and satisfied that he isn’t the only one who has trouble getting his head around the whole thing.

“Really?” James asks, sounding slightly in awe. “You got Charlie to hire you? How did you do that? That man seems to eat people like you for breakfast…” He considers something for a moment and adds, “Well, he seems like he could eat any person for breakfast, to be fair.”

Hartley, unlike James, and a lot like the others earlier, looks not as thrilled for him anymore but concerned.

Thankfully, he doesn’t word his doubts after exchanging a brief glance with Lisa and settles instead for a supportive smile. “That’s quite something, I’m impressed. Charlie usually goes for another type of guys when it comes to help.”

“Yeah, the ones that seem able to chew out rocks,” James agrees easily and suddenly brightens up. “Wait! Does that mean we get discount from now on?!?” He shoots Barry an excited look. “You’ll totally give us a discount, won’t you, Barry-Bear? I mean, we’re your best friends and everything.”

“Yeah, doubt that works like that,” Sam throws in. “At least if you want Barry to keep his job for more than one day.”

“Aww.” James huffs and crosses his arms, frowning irritated. “That sucks, now we’ve an insider at the bar, and we don’t get anything from it.”

“It’s not about us getting anything from it,” Hartley tells him, fondly. “It’s about Barry having a new job. That’s pretty great, isn’t it?”

“Yeah… I guess,” James agrees, but slouches a little lower in his chair. “Still would have been great to get free booze.”
“How much does Charlie pay you anyway?” Sam asks, his focus back on Barry. “That fellow is stingy as fuck.”

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“T-Two h-hundred a-a w-week f-for th-the f-first m-month. I-If I-I l-last th-that l-long, i-it w-will b-be a l-little o-over th-three,” Barry explains, and despite how uncertain everything about this still is, a warmth of excitement sweeps over him at the notion of so much money. That would be nearly double of what he earned at Mrs. Ming’s store, and the notion alone that he can finally start to save up a little safety pillow at the side makes him feel nearly giddy.

Mick whistles, impressed, though Barry is pretty sure that he is mostly putting on a show on his behalf. “That’s not bad, like double of what you made before, right?”

“And you can’t forget the tips,” Lisa interjects. “That will add quite a bit as well.”

Roscoe seems about ready to add something to that, but closes his mouth when he notices Lisa’s warning glare who has been clearly expecting him to do so.

“You’re working tonight?” Hartley asks, reaching for the open bag of roasted peanuts close to him.

“Y-yes,” Barry agrees. “I-I’m w-work-king W-Wednesd-day t-to S-Sund-day.”

“Nice, that means you can relax tomorrow and start planning on how we’re going to celebrate your new job,” Lisa tells him, grinning. “Your birthday is coming up in two weeks anyway, and a bird whispered to me that Len has planned a little something for you as it is.”

“Right! The ice-ho- mmph-” Hartley covers James’ mouth quickly, a slightly exasperated look on his face as he asks Barry. “Can you please pretend you haven’t heard anything?”

“S-Sure,” Barry assures him, both amused and somewhat worried about what surprise they are talking about. It seems to have something to do with ice-hockey, which leaves him pretty lost since he has never been especially interested in that sport. He likes to join Len on the couch when there is a game on, since it can be quite amusing to watch his friend get all worked up over his team losing, which happens much more often than he would ever admit, but that’s about it.

“It’s a pity we’ve a job tonight,” Lisa remarks. “I would have loved to be there on your first official night.”

“I’m pretty sure Allen will be grateful if the bar isn’t too crammed,” Mick points out and flicks the zippo open that has been resting next to his beer so far, studying the flame momentarily, a mesmerized look in his eyes.

“But we can pass by after we’re done,” James suggests. “Charlie is open till two tonight. If we’re quick, we can totally go and see how he’s doing.”

Barry doesn’t point out that he is with Mick on this one. He would really rather not have them there on his first night, it would make him only more nervous, since he doesn’t want them to see how he is made fun of by the other patrons. Not that it’s something he can really prevent, since there is no way his friends are going to stay away from the bar for more than a couple of days at a time.

Still, the idea of looking like an utter idiot in front of them isn’t really appealing, and he would be grateful if he doesn’t have to worry about that on his first night.

“Let’s make sure we pull off the job first,” Sam throws in, a somewhat pinched expression on his face as he picks his cards back up to study them. “I still think it’s a retarded idea to pick now to return to the Twins. The red fuck has been in a particularly awful mood this week from what I’ve
heard. He shattered Murmurs ankle when the idiot tried to rob a jewel store down at Elba’s just a few days ago.”

It takes Sam a moment to realize his faux pas of bringing up the Flash, and when he does he grimaces slightly, shooting Barry an uncomfortable look.

A pregnant silence follows, and for a long moment nobody seems sure what to say or how to react. Barry stays quiet, his throat has closed-up on him once more, and the sudden regret of coming here and not going straight back home to try and catch some sleep hits him with full force.

This is not the first time that someone brought up Wally around him since they learned of his past as the Flash, and like now, it has always caused an uneasy tension to spread among them. Barry usually leaves soon after when that happens, since he can’t help feeling a little uncomfortable, even if they try to ignore what they accidentally touched upon.

He probably should head home, anyway, he needs to try and get some rest before returning to the Saloon tonight, though he doubts that he will be able to sleep. He feels much too wired up and apprehensive, and what just happened won’t help with getting his mind to calm down either.

“Well,” James breaks the uneasy silence, and shoots Barry an unsure look, “but if everything runs smoothly and we’re done early enough, we can pass by and visit Barry.”

Barry gives him a tight, grateful smile, though he isn’t sure what to make of the rest of his friends’ reactions. They don’t look angered, but their expressions are still mostly grim, bothered, and he wonders whether this means that they hold his past against him or something else.

It is confusing, and while Barry knows how lucky he is that they didn’t just kick him out and cut all contact with him, or reacted in a worse way, it still hurts.

“Of course,” Lisa agrees, after she exchanged long, rather dark looks with Roscoe, who ends up rolling his eyes but otherwise stays quiet. She meets Barry’s eyes with a warm smile. “We’ve to buy you a drink for getting the job, after all.”

“Allen can’t drink on the job,” Mick points out, and Barry is glad to notice that his friends are relaxing as well now that they’re back on safer grounds. An easy smirk is back on Mick’s lips as he asks, “You wanna get him kicked out on his first day?”

“Yeah, Charlie is pretty strict on that one,” Sam agrees, tapping his finger against his chin as he seems to consider something. “Didn’t he break that one guy’s arm because he drank a pint during his break?”

Barry visibly bristles at that, and suddenly he realizes that he never really considered the possibly that Charlie can be the one causing him harm if he worked there. Len would have certainly told him beforehand if the man was somewhat unhinged.

“Don’t be an ass, Scudder,” Lisa tells Sam and quickly goes on to explain to Barry, “Charlie did that because that guy stole money from the money box.” She looks back to Sam and wrinkles her nose. “And that guy didn’t drink just one pint, he kept pouring himself shots whenever Charlie went to the back.” She snorts derisively and shakes her head. “Such an idiot, how the hell did that moron think he could trick someone who’s been brought up in a bar? Charlie probably can smell a sip of beer in someone’s breath from a mile away.”

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“With the wind in his back,” Sam agrees seriously, and grins when Lisa flings a peanut at him.
“Don’t look so pale, Allen,” Roscoe says, not missing how uneasy Barry is still feeling. “Charlie will probably be the least of your worries while working there.”

“Oh my god,” Lisa hisses and slaps Roscoe rather forcefully against his upper arm. “Stop scaring him.”

“I’m not,” Roscoe protests, annoyed. “I told him he doesn’t have to be worried about Charlie, didn’t I?”

The look Lisa gives him in response speaks volumes, and James snickers gleefully, pointing out, “And you call me dense.”

“No, I call you stupid,” Roscoe corrects him drily, and grabs his empty bottle of beer while getting up. He turns to Lisa. “I’m going to get some rest.”

Lisa takes hold of his wrist and gives it a firm, affectionate squeeze. “I'll be up in a bit.”

“We’re still in the middle of the game,” Marco reminds Roscoe, frowning.

“Let Allen or Snart take over for me.” Roscoe shrugs and turns to leave.

“Thanks, Dillon,” Sam calls after him, looking irked, probably by the prospect that their wager will be reduced to cents once again should Barry decide to join. “That’s exactly the reason why nobody likes you.”

“Woe me and my bleeding heart,” Roscoe says, shooting Sam a haughty look as he walks out into the dark corridor.

“I-I’m n-not p-playing,” Barry assures Sam and gets up as well. “I-I’ll t-try a-and c-catch s-some s-sleep b-before t-tonight.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Lisa agrees. “You look pretty tired.”

“I-It w-was a-a l-long n-night.” As if on a cue, Barry is overcome by the urge to yawn, and decides to pass on asking Sam to bring him back to his apartment. He will probably sleep better if he stays here, in Len’s and his bedroom, since his friend will likely join him soon to catch up on some sleep as well, and while he is really getting quite tired, the nervous energy still hasn’t let go of him so far.

Barry leaves his friends to their game and goes looking for Len.

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The second shift, much like Barry’s first one, turns out to be bad, which, surprisingly enough, has not that much to do with his stammer or how rude the majority of customers are toward him.

Despite Sunday nights usually being much less busy than Friday or Saturday nights, the ongoing downpour causes the people to flock to the Saloon, so much so that around ten it feels like it must be close to bursting at its seams.

Thankfully, Barry learns soon that it has become somewhat of a standard for people to order their drinks directly from the bar, since Charlie’s last waiter quit a bit over eight months ago, so he just has to help with taking the orders and prepare the drinks.

Still, it quickly turns into an overwhelming situation for him with how crammed it is and the cacophony of the crowd surrounding him seemingly drowning everything else out. It gets so bad that
he momentarily thinks of simply hiding under the bar, making himself as small as possible and
waiting for the worst to pass.

Fortunately, Charlie is quite the pro when it comes to rush-hours like that one and takes it all in stride
while letting Barry know what to do and keeping him busy enough that his anxiety can’t completely
overtake him. Barry still messes up a couple of orders and breaks two mugs by accident, but Charlie
only rebuffs him briefly for it, and tells him to pull himself together.

Barry is glad that he makes no big deal out of any of his errors, and in a way, it too helps to settle his
nerves a little. If Charlie had screamed at him or physically intimidated him, he probably would have
snapped, since memories of what happened when he messed up in the Heights are constantly on his
mind right now, and a part of him expects it to be just like that all over again.

As it is, Barry is able to work through the worst of his anxiety attacks that flare up when there are
just too many people around, when the wall of men gets too dense, and it feels crowded enough that
the simple act of breathing becomes difficult.

Despite all of this, or maybe because of how busy he is kept by the onrush of customers wanting
drinks, he is caught off-guard when Charlie eventually sends him on his thirty-minutes break, and he
realizes that it is already quarter to twelve. Things have calmed down somewhat, and Barry notes
with surprise that, while the bar is still packed, there are noticeably less people around than the last
time he cared to pay actual attention to it.

“Take the trash out to the containers since you’re already heading to the back,” Charlie tells him
gruffly and shoots him a frown. “The fresh air probably will do you some good.”

Barry does as he is told with a faint nod. He feels a little lightheaded as he grabs the two black plastic
bags that are resting next to the entrance leading to the back part of the bar and heads out. The bags
aren’t that heavy, since they are mostly filled up with crushed beer cans and other small trash of that
kind, but he still has trouble keeping a firm grip on them with how his hands are suddenly shaking,
and the moment the cold winter air hits him in the face, he feels his eyes well up, causing a couple of
tears to slip down his cheeks.

His heart is still beating loudly in his own ears as he pushes the heavy lid of the container back and
stashes the trash bags inside it.

Taking a shuddering breath, he stumbles back, feeling suddenly horribly unsteady on his feet so that
he ends up sitting down on the hard stairs, and the biting cold immediately starts to seep through the
material of his pants, but he hardly picks up on it.

He hardly picks up on anything other than how feebly and lost he feels just then.

Barry doesn’t notice when he starts to cry, he just suddenly is bawling his eyes out, unable to stop
the tears of stress since he just needs a moment of relief.

Thankfully, it doesn’t take long for him to calm down and regain his composure, and the nearly
smothering certainty that he can’t go back in there again, neither tonight nor any other night, passes
as well.

Shivering, Barry pulls his knees up to his chest and takes a deep breath, enjoying the icy taste of the
air and the thick smell of rain that stems from the earlier storm.

He can do this, it is just a little much, but he can do it.

Barry exhales a heavy sigh and rubs his eyes, brushing the moisture and the last traces of his tears
away.

“I-I’m f-f-fine,” Barry murmurs to himself, trying to sound sure, probably to convince himself, though his words really only come over as exhausted. He stares absentmindedly at the wet ground in front of his feet, and wonders how Len and the others are doing.

Despite his initial dislike of the idea of having them around tonight, he would give a lot now for a friendly face.

For Len…

Eventually, Barry is startled out of his thoughts when he realizes that he hasn’t checked up on the time and has no idea of how long he has been out here already. Getting up to his feet, he hurries back in, rubbing a hand over his face once more, and hopes that he wasn’t away for too long.

Charlie doesn’t comment on it when he returns, so Barry guesses that his break didn’t last too long, though the other man gives him a long, hard look when he retakes his earlier spot next to him behind the bar. Barry feels his cheeks heat up, and he fights the urge to reach up and rub his eyes once more, just to be sure no traces of his tears are left anymore. He has hoped that enough time passed that nobody would pick up on his brief breakdown, but judging by the way Charlie studies him now, it apparently didn’t.

To Barry’s relief, Charlie doesn’t ask him about it or outright tells him to get his things and leave. Instead, he wants Barry to get back to taking the orders, and that’s that.

His brief crying session seems to be what he needed as he feels less anxious and tense after his breakdown, and shortly after one, Charlie even decides to leave the bar to him while he heads back to take a smoke.

There aren’t that many people around anymore by then, and taking orders and preparing drinks don’t require much talking on his part, so it works out alright. Most customers he has to deal with right now don’t seem interested in him that much either, and other than a few funny looks he doesn’t get a reaction for his stammer which is reassuring in a way he would not have expected.

It is about half past one when a bunch of very familiar faces enters the bar via the restroom, and Barry brightens up the second his eyes fall upon them.

“Barry-Bear!” James shouts in his usual enthusiastic way, voice much too loud and cutting through the otherwise calm murmur the noise level has settled at over the last hour.

The Trickster gets a couple of curious and annoyed looks for it from the other customers, but nobody seems really that interested in the man, or Len and Lisa who are now making their way over to the bar while the others claim one of the bigger tables.

“You survived!” James remarks excitedly, taking a seat on one of the bar stool and adds, grinning, “Not that I doubted it, or anything, but our dear Captain was clearly worried.” He leans closer to Barry, lowering his voice despite Len just arriving right next to him. “He was in a piss-poor mood because he wanted to check up on you- OUCH!”

“Don’t test my patience tonight, Trickster,” Len warns him, after smacking James on his head, and by the sound of it, he didn’t care to hold back.

“I’m just saying how it was,” James whines petulantly with an irked glare as he rubs the back of his head.
“E-Ever-ryth-thing w-went a-alr-right?” Barry asks quickly as he noticed that Len clearly isn’t in the mood for James’ backtalk.

“Everything went well,” Lisa agrees, chuckling and takes the seat next to James. “The job turned out to be child’s play, we went in, got the stuff, and went out, no problem whatsoever.”

“G-Good,” Barry says, honestly relieved, and smiles. “I-I’m g-glad t-to h-hear th-that.”

“How are you doing, Bear?” Lisa asks in return, giving him a once-over, frowning slightly. “Was your night okay so far?”

“Y-Yes.” Barry nods and now that his friends are here, things really don’t seem that tiring anymore. “I-It w-w-was v-very b-busy, b-but Ch-Ch-Ch-Charlie r-real-ly d-did a-a a-great j-job k-keeping t-track o-of e-ev-everyth-thing a-a-and sh-showing m-me wh-what t-to d-do.”

The man in question, who has been drying mugs a couple feet away, snorts at that and shoots him an amused look but instead of responding to his words, he turns his gaze to Len and the others. “You wanna order something or just block the bar for actually paying customers.”

“As charming as ever, I see,” Lisa snarks back, a smirk on her lips, and nods to the mug in Charlie’s hand. “Nine beers, we’ve some celebrating to do.”

“We’re closing in half an hour,” Charlie reminds her gruffly but starts to fill up the mugs, and Barry is quick to join him.

“We’re paying customers,” James reminds him, “And we’ve a lot of money to spend, if you get what I mean.” He wiggles his eyebrows at Charlie, causing the other man to wrinkle his nose and point out drily, “That’s great, and you can spend it during the fucking hours the bar is actually open.”

“But we want to celebrate Barry’s new job as well,” James argues. “Can’t we stick around after you have closed so that we can party some more with him?”

Charlie locks his eyes with James, looking unimpressed. “I’ll haul your asses out myself if you little shits try to make this night any longer for me than it has to be.”

“I-It’s m-a-a-a-a-a-tually p-pretty t-tired,” Barry throws in, and he really is, enough so that he too is hoping his friends would not try to stick around longer than two, even though he is really happy to see them.

“You look it, sweetie,” Lisa agrees, sympathetically, “and don’t worry, we just wanted to pass by and see how you’re holding up. After this round, we’re leaving so you can close in time.”

“Sam can pick you up after you’re done,” Len interjects as he studies Barry. “You don’t have to take the night busses to get home.”

“Great, does Sam know about that too?” Sam asks sarcastically as he comes up behind Len, closely followed by Mick and Hartley.

“Because you won’t spend the next three hours getting smashed as it is?” Lisa returns with a snort and ignores the miffed glare she gets for it.

“I don’t know how often I’ve to tell you guys that to get it through your thick skulls, but I am no fucking taxi,” Sam grouses, and Barry wonders what happened during the heist to cause his friend’s mood to drop like that since he has been in pretty high spirit when he brought Barry over to his apartment earlier last afternoon.
Sam notices Barry’s worried expression then, and the anger in his eyes briefly flickers up, accompanied by annoyance, before it subsides again just as quickly and he huffs a sigh. “Stop looking at me like a kicked puppy, Barry,” he grumbles. “I’ll pick you up.”

“Y-You d-don’t h-have t-to-”

“Ignore Scudder,” Len interrupts him. “It’s no problem, he’ll pick you up.”

“You know what, why don’t you go fuck yourself-”

“Hey,” Charlie cuts Sam off, annoyed. “You wankers wanna start something, be my guests, but you won’t do it inside my fucking bar.”

“Because it’s such a classy environment to begin with.” Sam rolls his eyes, grabs two of the beers that Barry poured, and makes his way back to where they others are sitting.

Barry looks after him, still confused over his friend’s odd behavior and not liking how ready for a fight he seemed. When he glances back to Len, he can’t help but frown slightly, since Len’s temper doesn’t seem much better.

“It’s nothing,” Len tells him, apparently picking up on what is going through his head. “Scudder and I had a run-in with someone and that left the idiot in a pissy mood, that’s all.”

That answer doesn’t exactly explain a lot, and it certainly doesn’t help with settling his concern, but Barry doesn’t inquire any further seeing that here is hardly the right place for it, and Hartley chooses that moment to ask him about how his night has been so far.

Barry spends the next ten minutes talking with his friends, glad to have them around and grateful for them being safe. Charlie soon has enough of the Rogues blocking the bar and tells them to scram, since they are disturbing the business, or so he claims they do, seeing that only one other guy ordered a beer since their arrival, and Barry had no trouble getting the order done with the others around.

While most of his friends return to their table, Len stays at the bar with his beer, and Barry tells him about how his first real night of his new job has been. He leaves out pretty much anything concerning his anxiety and the rudeness many of their customers displayed towards him, since Len really doesn’t need to know about that.

His partner probably does, anyway.

Charlie, despite his earlier words, locks the bar with the Rogues still inside, and tells Barry to start cleaning while he goes to take stock and count tonight’s intakes.

It is when Charlie returns about twenty minutes later, after Barry has scrubbed down the bar and most tables expect the one his friends are still occupying, that he tells them to leave.

They do so without a fuss, even James, and Lisa gives Barry a quick hug prior to following the others into the men’s restroom, “You look like a real professional already the way you pour our beers. Charlie can count himself lucky that you applied for the job.” She gives him a wink, and Barry watches her and the rest go with a comforting warmth settling in his chest.

Len stays behind, and doesn’t even bat an eye when Charlie shoots him a nearly murderous look as he follows Barry back out of the restroom.

“That’s not going to become a common thing, Cold,” Charlie warns and nods to the bar, “You keep your ass plastered on a barstool, I don’t need you wander around like that’s your damn living room.”
Len agrees calmly and retakes his earlier seat at the bar while Charlie sends Barry to pick up crates of alcohol from the storage to restock the bar.

Half an hour later, when the closing is done and they wait in front of the mirror for Sam to return and pick them up, Len leans over and kisses Barry’s cheeks tenderly, surprising him.

Their eyes lock, and Barry feels the faint, fluttery sensation in his stomach, causing his face to grow warm, as he notices the affection and warmth with which Len is watching him.

“I’m glad you did okay,” Len tells him quietly, and Barry feels his lips spread into a soft smile as he responds, “I-I’m g-glad y-you d-did t-too.”

Sam appears soon afterwards, and they return home.

Chapter End Notes

It seems that Barry found himself a new job, and that at one of the unlikeliest places ever, at least if you consider his traumatic past. Watching him grow into his new occupation will be interesting and probably not easy on him, but, as Lisa stated, he is a tough little cookie, so I’m sure he’ll be able to handle it. Not to mention, the Rogues are going to look out for him – woe the idiots who decide to pick on Barry, it won’t end well for them. ;)

A couple of you were worried about Barry possibly getting a position at the bar, understandably so, seeing that the Saloon doesn’t seem to be the right place to work for someone with Barry’s baggage, and at the last segment of the chapter, you see that it takes a toll on him. It is not the healthiest choice of a job for him, I agree with that, but I think one of Barry’s admirable traits is his ability and willingness to adapt – not to mention, I love the idea of him working at the Saloon, there is just something funny but at the same time sad about how a man like Charlie, a man with rather questionable morals, is willing to give him a chance while nobody else is.

Touching upon Charlie, it seems that the man is not as intimidating as he seemed at first – well, that’s not right, he is plenty intimidating, but he seems to be a decent enough fellow despite his initial appearance and gruff demeanor. ;) He even let Len stay behind to wait for Barry, though, Len would likely have put up a fight if Charlie tried to get him to leave.

The Rogues seems to be rather sceptical about the whole idea, but they are willing to watch out for Barry, which will make it interesting to see what happens when some idiot is giving Barry grief while they are present as well.

Once again, I want to thank everybody of you who left me a comment so far, I enjoy reading those immensely. It really helps me when your share your thoughts with me and give me feedback that way! I really have amazing readers in that regard. ;)

In the next chapter, we will have a call from Jay, celebrate Barry’s birthday, and get to see some of Len’s more romantic side. ;)
I hope you all will have a wonderful two weeks till then!
The Slow Progress of Recovery or The Birthday Surprise

Chapter Summary

Barry gets a birthday surprise.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is super long, like 28 pages in Word or 12,5 k words, and I’m so grateful that my beta was able to work through it in time. You and your editing skills rock, Quintessenza! :D

Unfortunately, from here on, many of my chapters are on the longer side, and I can’t expect my dear beta to work through chapters like that every two weeks, it’s simply too much work for him. Thus, I’m going to cut the longer chapters in half, aka split them. Which turned out to be quite a pain in the butt, since I can’t just evenly cut them in half due to the narrative flow. That means that some chapters are going to be between 3,5 k to 5 k words from now on, which isn’t exactly short, but I wanted to let you know anyway.

I was thinking about splitting this chapter in half as well, but I promised you that you’d get to read about Len showing his romantic side in this one, and I don’t want to disappoint you.

Quintessenza did an amazing job working through the whole thing, he deserves all the Kudos, and I want to point out once more how much better of a reading experience this story is lately, thanks to him and the effort he puts into editing it. Thank you for your help, my friend! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Barry is startled awake by a ringing sound, and in his drowsy state, as he pushes himself up into a sitting position. It takes him a moment to realize that it isn’t the alarm function of his mobile phone signalizing him that it is time to get up and get ready but that someone is calling him.

“Someone is calling you,” Eddy provides helpfully from his spot at Barry’s kitchen table while munching away on popcorn he brought over earlier.

“Your observation skills are truly amazing, Mr. Sleuth,” Mary remarks, shooting her friend an amused look. She sits opposite Eddy, working on the puzzle that is currently taking up most of the table’s surface and is the actual reason his friends are over.

The puzzle is a gift from Mary for his new job, and after surprising him with it yesterday evening, they agreed to start putting it together today after having some home-cooked lunch. Eddy, who never
misses out on an opportunity to get free food, quickly agreed to help, though he has hardly touched any of the puzzle pieces thus far other than handing them to Mary.

Rubbing his eyes and reaching for his phone that is still vibrating slightly on the couch table, Barry realizes guiltily that he must have fallen asleep. He took a break from trying to put the puzzle together and lied down with a hot-water bottle for a bit.

The pain in his abdomen has been acting up stronger than usual today, and by now he is quite certain that for every good thing that is happening to him, something not so good has to follow. After finally finding new work, it probably should not surprise him that some little ache is starting to bother him again in turn. Not that he would pick this over being without a job, seeing that he can deal with a little pain just fine, and he is certain that it will go away soon enough.

“My mind’s as sharp as glass, little lady,” Eddy tells Mary with a fake frown. “Nothing goes past me.”

“Really?” Mary grins and nods to the puzzle in front of them. “How come you’re this bad at puzzles, then?”

“I’m not bad at puzzles.” Eddy scoffs and crosses his arms as he lifts his chin a little. “I could solve it in no time, I just don’t want to, because it’s about as exciting as watching paint dry.”

“It’s not,” Mary protests with a laugh, and Barry smiles along with her, glad to have them over. It’s always easier for him to wake up from an unintentional nap when someone he trusts is around him. It helps him feel safe in a way his locked door alone can’t offer.

His relaxed mood doesn’t linger when his gaze falls onto the display of his phone, and he picks up on who is calling him.

Hesitating for a second, Barry wonders whether he could just ignore the call since he knows his new employment would inevitably come up and Jay’s possible reaction worries him. Eventually, he will have to talk with Jay again, though; otherwise, the older man will certainly assume that something is wrong if he keeps avoiding him.

Thus, Barry accepts the call and answers, voice sounding much too thin to his own ears, “H-Hello J-Jay.”

“Hello Barry, I hope I’m not disrupting you with anything?” The other man asks, his tone light and friendly.

“N-No,” Barry returns and rubs his eyes once more. “I-I j-just n-napped.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” Jay says, apologetically, and Barry can’t help but smile at how honest he sounds.

“Th-that’s f-fine, I-I d-didn’t m-mean t-to f-fall as-sleep a-as it i-is,” Barry assures him and shoots a glance over his shoulder, to where both Mary and Eddy have fallen quiet. They are now watching him with a mixture of worry and annoyance, with the later one stemming solely from Eddy who seems unable to overcome his dislike for Jay, despite how much the older man’s stance towards Barry has changed.

“You have troubles sleeping?” Jay asks, concerned, and Barry turns back to frown down at his small couch table. The thought that Jay worries about him still makes him feel odd, a little uneasy and grateful, but there is still an undeniable anger present as well.
Usually, it isn’t really a problem, he is aware that Jay’s earlier behavior towards him must have left scars and it is a kind of anger that generally isn’t too potent or overwhelming. Tired as he is and with how vulnerable his new job makes him feel, the sudden urge to grit his teeth and hang up is nearly too strong to resist, though.

“Barry?” Jay’s voice calls him back from the fog of dark thoughts, and the concern from earlier is much more palpable now, but there is a careful quality to it as well like the older man can sense he is causing him some discomfort.

“S-Sorry,” Barry murmurs as he rubs his free hand over his thigh in a nervous gesture, the fabric of his pants scratching against his palm which helps to make him feel somewhat, grounded. “I-I’m j-just n-not e-entirely a-awake y-yet.” He tries to keep his tone lighter and let some of the joy he feels when thinking about his new job infuse his words as he goes on. “A-And I-I’ve h-had t-to ch-change m-my s-sleeping s-sched-dulea l-little.” Joy flicker up in his chest at what he says next, even though he knows that his new job is a delicate issue. “I-I f-found a n-new j-job.”

“That’s great, Barry,” Jay says, the happiness and relief so thick in his voice that Barry has to smile despite his still persisting worry about what the older man will think of it once he learns where he is working now. “I knew you would find something, my boy. I’m really proud of you.”

Barry freezes, and his throat closes up while his mind goes blank for a second.

A part of him wants to protest, call Jay out on using that endearment on him that has once been common place among them, tell him that he has no right to do so.

Things between them are better now, no longer as tense and raw as they were even just about half a year ago, but they aren’t where they once were, and Barry isn’t sure what to make of Jay talking to him like that once more.

Jay seems to have noticed his slip as well since an uneasy silence is all that can be heard from his end of the line for a long moment, and suddenly Barry feels the urge to coil up overcome him.

Eventually, Jay is the one breaking the tension by speaking again, “What job is it?”

Barry swallows and licks his lips nervously, pulling up his knees so that he can sling an arm around them loosely, feeling safer that way. His voice breaks the moment he tries to speak and he ends up coughing lightly before trying again, cheeks uncomfortably hot.

“I-It’s th-the p-pos-sition o-of a b-b-barm-man,” Barry informs him, and he hopes he doesn’t come over as reluctant as he feels about sharing this little detail.

There is a pause on the other end of the line, and when Jay speaks again, he doesn’t sound as excited anymore over Barry’s new job. “In the Keys?”

Barry swallows and shifts nervously. “Y-Yes, a-about th-thirty m-minutes a-away f-from m-my a-apartment.” He doesn’t know why, but he tries to sound thrilled, and he really is, but talking with Jay about this somehow dims his happiness over his new job. He doesn’t want Jay to think that it is something he can’t handle, even though working in a bar in the Keys would probably cause anybody who knows him to doubt his sanity.

It is nearly palpable that Jay wants to point just that out. He probably wants to ask him what he was thinking when choosing to work at a place like that, but he is also very much aware of how much effort Barry has been putting into finally finding someplace to work since his employment at Mrs. Ming’s ended.
That is probably the reason why Jay stays quiet on that issue and instead says, “I’m happy you found a new job, Barry. You put so much effort into this, and it is great that it finally paid off.” He hesitantly adds after a brief pause, “You take your phone with you to work?”

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees, and feels the lump in his throat return, swallowing around it with some difficulty, because he knows why Jay is asking that.

In case something happens, he could call him, and while Barry can’t say for sure that Jay would be the first person he would turn to in case of an emergency, he is still touched by the offer.

“Good.” Jay sounds a little less tense, then, relieved even, and when he proceeds, his tone is lighter once more. “When are your days off?”

Barry settles back into the couch as he answers, “M-Mond-day a-and T-Tuesday.” He chuckles. “Th-That’s p-prob-bably wh-why I-I n-nodded o-off b-before. W-Weekends s-seem t-to b-be g-generally r-rather b-busy a-at th-that p-place.”

“I can imagine,” Jay agrees. “Do you have a probation period?”

“Y-Yes, th-the n-next m-month.” Barry still is a little unsure how to feel about that. He doesn’t want his current excitement to turn to disappointment in the end because he can’t prove himself to Charlie. Though, at the same time, he is nearly more worried that he will throw in the towel himself since the two nights he was working there were extremely taxing on him, even if it was more so emotionally than physically.

“I know you will do your best,” Jay tells him firmly, surprising Barry by how certain he sounds about it, “and if this new boss of yours has any sense, he will keep you.”

It is touching and reassuring that Jay says that, causing Barry to close his eyes and smile. “Th-Thank y-you.”

Having still someone from his past left who cares about him is undeniably nice, even if he often doesn’t know where he stands towards Jay.

“Your birthday is coming up,” Jay remarks, changing the topic a little abruptly, though Barry welcomes it. “Do you plan on celebrating it with your friends?”

Len’s surprise crosses Barry’s mind then, the one he isn’t supposed to know anything about, and like usual when he thinks of the Rogues while talking to Jay, he starts to feel a little anxious.

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees, and swallows because his throat is suddenly much to dry.

“Good.” Jay seems honestly happy to hear that. “You’ve something particular in mind?”

“J-Just s-staying h-home a-and h-have a n-nice e-even-ning t-togeth-ther,” Barry explains and throws a glance back to his friends, Eddy is still watching him like a hawk while Mary has returned to work on the puzzle. “M-Maybe g-going o-out, w-we h-haven’t s-settled o-on a-an-yth-thing j-just y-yet.”

Eddy’s frown eases somewhat at that, and he shoots him a knowing look, smirking. Of course, he would immediately pick up what they are talking about.

“That sounds like it’s going to be a nice evening, I hope you will have a good time,” Jay tells him. It causes Barry to feel guilty about lying to him, though there is no real way it can be avoided, as the majority of his friends is made up of very infamous criminals.
“Do you have anything planned for Monday afternoon in two weeks yet?”

“N-no.” Barry turns back to his couch table, surprised about that question. “N-Not y-yet, wh-why?”

“Joan and I would love to have you over for dinner, to celebrate your birthday, even if it is a little belated,” Jay explains, warmly.

“Y-You’re b-back i-in C-Central?” Barry asks in surprise, hardly picking up on the actual question at first.

“Not yet, but the moving company is going to get to work this Friday, and Joan and I will follow at the beginning of next week.”

“So sh-she’s d-done w-with th-the th-therapy?” Barry realizes just now that he totally forgot to ask about Joan’s current state. He knows that she has been doing increasingly better, but when he asked Jay about when they would be able to return to the Twins a couple of weeks ago, he wasn’t able to say for sure.

“She will have to go to check-ups in Central for a while longer but her last cancer scans have been clear and the doctors think that it will aid her recovery if she returns back home.” Jay is clearly grateful for that, and even though they are only talking over the phone, Barry knows that he is smiling.

“That’s w-wonderf-ful, J-Jay, I-I’m r-really h-happy f-for y-you t-two,” Barry says, and the thought that Joan is doing so much better again after having to face chemo and all the other tiring stuff her treatment involves, makes him truly grateful for how this turned out. He hasn’t talked to her in a while, not since they saw each other last year, but Jay always gives him her greetings, and he knows that she is thinking of him too.

“So am I.” Jay chuckles. “I don’t think I have been this overjoyed since she agreed to marry me.”

Barry’s smile dims a little at that, but he tries not to let the sadness that is lingering at the edge of his mind overshadow his good mood.

“Both, Joan and I would really love if you could join us, Barry,” Jay says and brings the conversation back to his initial question. “Max and Bart will probably also be over, and we could celebrate both, Joan’s recovery and your birthday at once.”

Barry doesn’t consider his birthday worth to take the spotlight away from Joan recovering from cancer, and he tells Jay so.

“Joan doesn’t see it like that,” Jay assures him, “and she is very much looking forward to seeing you again, Barry.”

Barry pulls his knees closer and rests his forehead on them, closing his eyes. Jay is right, Joan probably really thinks that his birthday is just as important as her regained health, and it is humbling to imagine that anybody can see him as someone with so much worth.

“It will be a nice evening, Barry, with just us five,” Jay promises and adds with an audible smile, “and now we have even more reason to celebrate because of your new job.”

“Y-Yeah,” Barry agrees, half-heartedly. He has already made his choice the moment Jay mentioned that Joan wants to see him again so that there is no reason in prolonging it, even though he still is uncertain whether it is appropriate for him to take any of the focus away from her by being present.

“I-I’ll c-come.”
“Good,” Jay says, audibly meaning it, something that tugs at Barry’s heart and causes the lump in his throat to uncomfortably swell up once more. “I will talk to Max, I’m sure he can give you a lift over to us.”

Barry nearly protests though he knows that it doesn’t make any sense since Max would likely insist on doing so anyway and not having to use the bus to get there is something he definitely prefers.

They talk for a few more minutes, about how Joan is planning to redo their garden, how Jay is going to join Joan at a yoga class, and about how Bart is doing, before the older man has to rather abruptly end the call, probably due to some hero business.

“Did you convince Garrick that you are not up to something?” Eddy asks sarcastically as soon as Barry has lowered the phone.

“Eddy,” Mary warns him. “Stop being a jerk.”

“I’m not,” Eddy protests and pushes another handful of popcorn into his mouth, talking around it as he goes on, much to Mary’s annoyance. “Just curious what the old fart wants.”

“Mr. Garrick is a very nice man,” Mary reminds him tersely. “You only don’t like him because he doesn’t take any of your nonsense.”

“Like hell.” Eddy snorts and rolls his eyes. “The old geezer is a jackass, even if Barry, a forgiving and kind soul he is, prefers to ignore that.”

“E-Eddy.” Barry sighs, tired of this conversation already, and gets up. He looks over at the table taking in the current state of the puzzle and is impressed to see what progress Mary has made so far.

“Fine, I’m shutting up,” Eddy grumbles. “Don’t wanna be Jonny Raincloud again.” His frown is replaced by a grin as he meets Barry’s eyes and arches his eyebrow. “Whatcha thinking of some Black Jack?”

“What are you thinking of finally helping with the puzzle,” Mary asks him pointedly. “You’ve said you would, Eddy.”

Eddy makes a face at that and shoots Mary an unhappy look. “But that’s boring, Mary. Puzzles are for old people, not for the ones like us who are in the middle of their life.” He shoots Barry a considering look at that, and corrects himself, “Well, at least you and I are. Barry’s already in his forties, so he’s already old too.”

“I-Hardy h-har,” Barry says drily but can’t stop the amused and fond smile from settling over his lips as he makes his way over to them. He takes the hot-water bag with him, though it is only warm by now, and takes his former seat next to Mary.

“Is your abdomen still bothering you?” Mary asks concerned, not missing how he flinched slightly as he sat down.

“I-It’s b-better,” Barry assures her, though she doesn’t seem to buy it since she gets up and takes the bag from his hands. “Y-You d-don’t n-need t-to-”

“It’s fine, Bear,” Mary tells him as she goes over to heat up some water with the electric kettle Eddy brought along today, his gift for Barry after learning of his new job.

“Seriously, Bar,” Eddy interjects, shooting him an exasperated look. “When a cute little lady is trying to attend to your needs, you let her. Especially if she has the aid of one kickass electric kettle so that
she doesn’t have to heat up water on the stove like cavemen once did.”

“C-Cavemen d-didn’t h-have s-stoves,” Barry points out, amused, and turns his attention to the puzzle to finally offer Mary some help with it.

“They had fireplaces.” Eddy shrugs. “Same thing.”

“N-Not r-really.” Barry goes on with picking out the pieces that belong to the edge of the picture. It’s his usual way to start with puzzles, while Mary prefers to start at some random point and work from there.

“Don’t be a know-it-all, Bar, nobody likes them,” Eddy tells him earnestly and joins Barry in his endeavor.

“People don’t like smart-asses either,” Mary points out from her spot at the kitchen counter as she refills the hot-water bag. Noticing this, Barry thinks that he really has to give it to Eddy, his friend certainly knows his electric kettles, this one hardly needs more than a minute to get the water to boil, even if it’s filled up to the maximum mark.

“People adore smart asses,” Eddy disagrees. “We’re funny and honest, the best combination of desirable character traits if you ask me.”

“And so humble on top of that,” Mary adds as she returns to her seat, handing Barry the hot-water bag he accepts gratefully.

“Your sarcasm rebounds off me like bullets do off the man of steel,” Eddy tells her sweetly, causing her to huff a laugh.

“So.” Eddy turns back to Barry, then. “What was the phone call really about? You mentioned something about celebrating? Like your birthday?”

Barry hums in agreement while pushing the puzzle pieces around in search of the ones he is looking for.

“He worries that you’ve planned to do something naughty?”

“N-No, h-he i-inv-vited m-me o-over t-to c-celeb-brate a-at h-his h-home i-in t-two w-weeks,” Barry informs Eddy and intends to ignore his friend’s rather annoying sense of humor. “H-His w-wife i-is f-finally d-done w-with h-her th-therapy a-and th-they a-are m-moving b-back th-this w-week, s-so h-he th-thought it w-would b-be n-nice t-to c-celeb-brate t-togeth-ther.”

“That’s wonderful, Barry,” Marry exclaims, and Barry gives her a fond look for how truly happy she sounds about Joan’s recovery, even though she hasn’t met the woman in person so far.

“Yeah, that’s great,” Eddy agrees, without any bite this time around. “The old lady seems to be pretty tough.”

“S-She i-is.” Barry smiles warmly at the thought of Joan and how much support she offered him and his family in the past.

“Don’t get it how people like Garrick always end up getting awesome women,” Eddy remarks while munching away on another handful of popcorn.

“Maybe by not eating like a pig?” Mary gives her friend a telling look, though Eddy only returns it by showing his tongue that is covered by the half-eaten snack, causing her to frown in disgust.
“You’re such a child.” Mary huffs while Eddy laughs and shoots Barry a pleased look.

“Sh-She h-has y-you th-there,” Barry remarks and takes a handful of popcorn when his friend offers him the bowl.

“I know,” Eddy agrees easily, not in the least bothered. “But what can I say? It’s part of my charm.” Mary snorts rather unladylike in response but leaves it at that.

They proceed to work on the puzzle in silence for a few minutes, the mood relaxed and pleasant, so much so that Barry nearly forgets about the stinging sensation in his lower abdomen.

“I talked to my mother yesterday,” Mary mentions out of the blue so that both Barry and Eddy look at her in surprise. “Aleks, my younger brother, is getting married in two months.” She is smiling, her tone is light and happy, and Barry feels his own mouth split into a grin in return.

“Th-That’s g-great,” Barry says.

“It is,” Mary agrees readily. “His fiancée, Albina, is a good friend of mine, and I’m certain that they will be happy together.”

“Well, seems Garrick is not the only lucky one when it comes to great wives,” Eddy remarks, also visibly pleased by how happy their friend seems.

“Aleks certainly is lucky.” Mary sits back into the chair, laughing softly. “You can’t believe how relieved my mother is. She thought Aleks would never end up settling down because he liked to date a lot when he was younger.”

“Nothing wrong with dating around,” Eddy points out.

“Well, no, but our village is rather small, and him breaking hearts caused quite some tensions between my parents and some of our neighbors,” Mary explains, a mirthful glint in her eyes as she seems to reminiscence so that Barry takes it that the tensions couldn’t have been too bad.

“I’m going to visit them for the wedding,” Mary goes on. “I’ve saved up enough money for the flight there and back, and I was planning to go for a while now.” Her smile morphs into a grin, and she seems to shine with utter excitement as she proceeds, “I haven’t seen my family for nearly six years now, and now I’ll finally be able to hold them in my arms again.”

“Th-That’s g-great, M-Mary,” Barry tells her and reaches out to grab her hand as tears start to well up in her eyes. “Th-They w-will b-be s-so h-happy t-to h-have y-you b-back.”

“Yes,” Mary agrees and sniffles, brushing across her eyes.

“Come on, baby-girl, no reason to cry, we’ll still be here when you come back,” Eddy jokes though Barry doesn’t miss the affection in his friend’s eyes as he watches Mary.

Mary laughs at that, sounding slightly overwhelmed by her own strong reaction, and Barry squeezes her hand, feeling for her since he can imagine how difficult it is to live so far away from your loved ones. She turns to him in response, and Barry does his best to stay relaxed as she hugs him, probably to both seek comfort and just share the love she is currently experiencing.

It isn’t as hard with her being the one hugging him, and Barry can return it after only a second, sling his arms around her back and holding her close.
When she eventually pulls back, she seems a little embarrassed and gives him an apologetic but grateful look. “Sorry, Bear.”

“It’s f-fine,” Barry assures her and rubs her back as she dries her face with a paper tissue Eddy handed her. “I-I th-think y-you are al-low-owed t-to g-get e-emotional o-over s-seeing y-your f-family ag-gain af-ter s-such a l-long t-time.”

“Definitively.” Eddy nods in agreement and smirks. “And you’re a woman on top of that, so it’s kinda expected of you to get all teary-eyed over it.”

“Macho,” Mary replies fondly and is clearly taking it as the joke it was meant to be.

“When will you leave?” Eddy asks curiously. “And for how long do you plan to stay in Romania?”

“I’m not exactly sure about the date I leave, I’ve to book a flight first, but I’d like to go within the next three weeks so that I can be part of all the wedding celebrations,” Mary explains, her face brightening up even more at that. “And I’ll probably stay for a month or maybe a little longer because my father’s birthday is at the end of April.”

“For more than a month?” Eddy gasped theatrically. “Mary, what are we supposed to do without you that long? Especially Barry!” He winks at him, and Barry rolls his eyes, already knowing where his friend is going with that.

“With you gone, he will probably go all mopey on me again, and I’ll be forced to make him cacao and stuff, and you know how horrible I’m in the kitchen. I’ll probably end up burning down the building!” Eddy scowls at her playfully. “You know, if that happens, you’ll have to live with the knowledge of being responsible for the destruction of our homes just so you could idle around oversea.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mary chides him, laughing. “Barry would never let you do such a thing, Eddy. He is too responsible to leave you alone in a kitchen.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, missy?” The indignation in Eddy’s voice is thick enough that it causes Mary to laugh once more and Barry to chuckle.

While his two friends proceed to bicker amiably, Barry thinks that he will truly miss this while Mary is gone, but he is also happy for her to finally be able to see her family and loved ones again.

They proceed with working on the puzzle and make quite some progress. When the afternoon turns late, they decide to order a pizza for dinner to celebrate Mary’s upcoming holiday, ending the nice day in front of Eddy’s TV, where they all eventually nod off while watching a marathon of the Harry Potter movies.

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The air is buzzing with the energy of the crowd around them, all of them excited about the upcoming game between the KC Combines and the Philadelphia Flyers, and even Barry feels a little infected by their thrill, despite his nerves, as he watches the people mingling around him. It is an ocean made up of mostly yellow and blue, the respective colors of the two teams their fans proudly wear. He thinks that he is probably sticking out like a sore thumb, wearing only his usual clothes without any kind of merchandise, not even a scarf with the Combines’ logo printed on it.

At least, he isn’t the only one.

Roscoe, who is standing next to him, looking bored and like he would much rather be back at the
hideout and read one of his scientific papers, clearly doesn’t fit in here any better. Unlike Barry, he doesn’t seem to be uncomfortable in this crowded environment. Instead, he watches the other visitors with the same haughty, slightly annoyed dismissiveness he watches anybody he considers beneath him, which are most people.

It is only when someone looks at them for more than a fleeting moment, that Roscoe’s eyes narrow and the following intimidating glare causes whoever noticed them to quickly avert their gaze.

Barry guesses that it is probably due to that and the general standoffishness that surrounds Roscoe that causes the other visitors to keep a distance from them. He is more than fine with that and sticks close to his friend, both of them standing near one of the entrances to the stadium, waiting for both Len and Lisa to return with their snacks.

Today is his second Tuesday off, which is also the day before his 43rd birthday, and Len finally told him about the surprise he had planned for him when he came over earlier this afternoon.

Barry still is unsure about whether it was an outright idiotic thing of him to agree to any of this, considering that attending an ice hockey game in the CC Hall is certainly not what he imagines when he thinks about staying out of trouble. Len has been looking forward to this, though, even though he let Barry in on it only a couple of hours earlier.

His friend’s love for that sport is well-known, and Len’s local favorite team, the KC Combines, attended this game, something he has been excited enough that he even brought it up to Barry a couple of times over the last month.

Barry never was and probably never will be really interested in that sport, and the idea of putting himself in the limelight where anybody could notice him in the company of some of the Gem’s most notorious didn’t do much to make the whole affair any more alluring. He didn’t miss how much Len wanted him to be there as well, though, and how disappointed he seemed despite his understanding when he initially declined the invitation.

“You’ll catch people’s attention with how nervous you look,” Roscoe remarks next to Barry, voice low and bored.

“S-Sorry,” Barry murmurs as he ducks his head and can feel his cheeks heat up. He knows that his friend has a point since he is probably not helping their act to blend in with how guilty and worried he must appear.

“This is not the first time we left the hideout to visit some well-visited place, Allen,” Roscoe proceeds and shifts his gaze from the scrimmaging crowd in front of them to Barry, a slightly annoyed glint in his eyes as he studies him. “The trick is to make them believe that you’ve every right to be here, as long as you make them think that you are supposed to be here with them, they won’t pick up on anything being fishy.” He snorts and turns his eyes back to the other visitors, a small contemptuous smirk curling up the edges of his lips. “People are stupid like that, they believe whatever you sell them as long as you have the act down.”

Barry hums in agreement and fights the urge to cross his arms in front of his chest in what would most likely come over as defensive and even more suspicious to any present onlooker.

Unlike Roscoe, who seems utterly at ease with being here, despite him wearing hardly any disguise other than a pair of thinly rimmed, fake glasses as well as a baseball cap, Barry feels like he has a glowing arrow above his head that is pointing at him.

He wishes Len and Lisa were already back with them.
“Nobody will notice us,” Roscoe reminds him, sounding not so much annoyed by Barry’s ongoing failure to relax as amused. “We’re a bunch of nobodies to them, and we will stay that way if you don’t cause them to question their simple-minded perception of us.”

Barry shoots his friend a frown and mutters exasperatedly, “I-I kn-know, a-and I-I’m t-t-tryi-ing.”

“You’re a horrible actor,” Roscoe simply states with a half-shrug. “If we end up in troubles it will be most likely because of you.”

Face heating up in a mixture of embarrassment and annoyance, Barry shoots the other man a glare, though Roscoe is already watching the people in front of them bustling about which is even more irking.

The urge to call his friend some childish name quickly subsides, thankfully and Barry turns his own attention back to the line of people waiting in front of one of the food vendors, where he can spot Len’s gray hoodie after only a second. They are close to the head of the line and would have to wait for just a few more minutes. That is good because Barry thinks he would otherwise succumb to his nerves and go looking for the out of order toilets in the basement with the mirror via which Sam let them enter just about twenty minutes ago.

It is really crowded here, and the sea of people surrounding them causes a familiar unease to stir in Barry’s guts.

He hates places like this, they make him feel cornered, and the mere notion causes his skin to itch.

There are security cameras around, Barry can just now make one out from the corner of his eyes, glaring down at him like a dark, menacing eye.

Len assured him that he doesn’t have to worry about them, that he asked Gael for a favor, and that someone is deleting the video feeds of whatever camera they are turning up on, replacing it with loops so that it wouldn’t appear suspicious if someone took it upon them to watch them later.

Barry isn’t sure how to feel about the fact that he is the reason for a crime like that to occur only so that he can watch an ice-hockey game. It is an unsettling thought in any case.

Someone steps up to them, causing Barry to tense up in response and quickly focus back on the crowd in front of him. To his relief, it is only Len and Lisa, both of their arms full of drinks and snacks.

“You look like you’re about to be lead to the gallows,” Lisa muses as she takes Barry in while handing Roscoe his snacks. Her tone is warm and only a little exasperated.

“I-I’m f-f-fine,” Barry assures her, though his eyes are on Len, and he is pretty sure that he looks just as guilty as he feels.

“I-I’m f-f-fine,” Barry assures her, though his eyes are on Len, and he is pretty sure that he looks just as guilty as he feels.

“You should be,” Lisa agrees, her smile light and happy, and, as Barry glances over to her, he notices once more how relaxed she appears, which in turn does help to ease some of his anxiety. “You’re here to have a good time, Bear, and there is no reason for you to worry your pretty head off. We made sure that things will go smoothly, you can relax and enjoy tonight.”

“I-I kn-know.” Barry returns her smile, and while it probably looks way too tense, he does mean the words.

His friends are looking out for him, they are professionals when it comes to blending in and staying out of trouble, and things have calmed down significantly over the last months. Being reminded of
that helps to take off some of the edges of the fear he is feeling.

Len steps closer, and Barry looks back at him.

“Here.” Len hands him one of the two cokes he is holding, and Barry doesn’t miss how his friend is searching his face for a moment, probably trying to gauge whether this is too much for him or not. It occurs to Barry then that Len will likely take him back to the mirror himself and leave this game without any complaint should it be necessary.

The thought is comforting and helps Barry to give him a small but honest smile. “Th-Thanks.” He leans a little closer to Len as he accepts the drink, feeling like a sunflower that seeks the light of the sun.

“We can leave,” Len reminds him quietly, earnestly. He wouldn’t hold it against Barry if he missed the game, even though he is really looking forward to it.

“N-No, w-we’re alr-ready h-here,” Barry points out, unable to resist the need to touch Len’s arm briefly, both for his own and the other man’s reassurance. These days, he dares to initiate contact between them again. It is never something really bold, and it never lasts for more than a few seconds, but Barry is still proud of the progress.

“A-And y-you’ve b-been l-looking f-forw-ward t-to th-this,” Barry reminds him.

“There will be other games.” Len shrugs, still looking unconvinced.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Barry assures him once more and adds in a much softer tone with his cheeks growing warm, “I-It’s ok-kay a-as l-long a-as I-I’m h-here w-with y-you.”

Roscoe makes a noise that is a cross between incredulous and disgusted, and Barry decidedly doesn’t look his way but keeps his eyes on Len, hoping that he wasn’t too daring with what he said. They are still not really out to the other Rogues, even though both of them know that their relationship is no secret at all anymore. Probably hasn’t been for a long time.

Len doesn’t seem bothered that he touched upon something they usually keep quiet about in front of Roscoe and Lisa. The concern in his expression eases at his words, instead, and the affection that flickers across his eyes causes something in Barry’s stomach to flutter.

“You’re safe,” Len reminds him, and for a brief moment, as their eyes stay locked, their surroundings seem to quiet down, making it easier for Barry to breath and believe that this can turn into a nice evening out with his friends with no bad repercussions following closely behind.

It is stupid being here, and this recklessness will probably end with him having to pay for it, but even despite his discomfort and apprehension, it is nice to do something as mundane as going to watch a game with friends again.

Barry has never been into sports, it just never particularly interested him, at least nothing like baseball or football. It is his luck that he finds rather unmanly sports like swimming competitions and gymnastics much more interesting than watching people hunt after a leather ball, and he generally prefers not to bring that up to others.

He mentioned it to Hal and Ralph once, when they were out for drinks in some bar, and a baseball game was on that caught his friends’ interest. They found his taste in sports funny, and while Ralph quickly let it go, Hal kept ribbing him about it for a while afterward.

It wasn’t meant in a mean way, Hal was just that kind of guy, especially if he was already having his
third beer, and while he probably really didn’t care one way or another, it was embarrassing enough to Barry that he kept silent about it in future.

As Barry follows Len to their seats and his eyes wander around, taking in his surroundings, he remembers the times he was here with Wally in the past, to watch basketball games since his nephew was quite an avid fan of that sport. Sometimes, even Iris joined them, even though she was about as interested in basketball as Barry, but she too enjoyed being there with them and seeing Wally smile and cheer.

The memories are bittersweet, and he doesn’t linger too much on them, but they still make him realize that he is glad being here once more. He may never have particularly enjoyed the games themselves, but he still connects good things with them, like spending time with his loved ones.

Barry is surprised when he notices that Len leads them to the club level seats, and when Lisa notices his expression, she grins and winks. “You’re supposed to be comfy today,” she tells him, amused.

“We would have probably picked a private box if you weren’t tagging along,” Roscoe remarks, his voice low, just loud enough for them to pick up on it, as he takes the seat next to Barry, while Len sits on his other side. “It’s too risky with you around, since the likelihood of someone recognizing us increases in smaller crowds, especially with catering around.”

“Len and I did that a few years back,” Lisa interjects, smirking as she reminisces. “I got us tickets for his birthday, and it was an absolute hoot, though we ended up catching the attention of one of the waiters and ended up nearly being caught.” When she notices that Barry paled at her words, she quickly adds reassuringly. “Don’t worry, that won’t happen tonight, we weren’t exactly putting a lot of effort into not getting noticed back then.”

“We’ve been here a couple of times since then without any trouble,” Len tells Barry while he shoots both his sister and Roscoe an annoyed frown. He returns his attention to Barry and states firmly, reassuringly, “Nothing will happen tonight, either.”

Barry nods, but the worry from earlier latches onto him once more, and he is glad when Lisa changes the topic by telling him about how she always wished to get the possibility to ice-skate on this ring, and how she trained at a ring not too far away from here.

It is still odd to imagine that Roscoe helped her with her training after he learned of her hobby, much to Len’s annoyance of course, especially due to how Roscoe usually seems above such things.

“Y-You i-ice-s-skate y-yours-self, R-Roscoe?” Barry asks, curiously.

“No, but the physics behind the sport is easy enough,” Roscoe explains, and Barry watches him pull his mobile phone out and start reading through what is probably a scientific e-book or paper.

“My modest prince charming,” Lisa snarks, rolling her eyes with fond exasperation, as she seems to have expected her partner’s dismissive haughtiness.

“Never saw the use in modesty,” Roscoe remarks, not taking his eyes off the small screen. “It only makes stupid people feel better about themselves and their lacks, and I neither have the time nor the patience to deal with other people's inferiority issues.”

“Of course, my dear,” Lisa agrees easily, exchanging an unimpressed but also slightly amused look with Barry since they both know that Roscoe is putting it on extra thick today because Len is around.

It has the desired effect on Len since he shoots the other Rogues an irritated look for it. He doesn’t seem to be in the mood to start something, probably because of Barry being around, and instead turns
his attention back to the crowd around them, surveying their surroundings.

The next twenty minutes till the game is going to start go by rather quickly, and before long, Barry is surrounded by a cheering, booing, and generally animated crowd who seems to enjoy themselves to their fullest.

It is infectious, and Barry soon starts to get pulled into the excitement over the game, cheering along with Len and Lisa, who are both very vocal when the opposing team scores a goal. Enough so, that they start to fling popcorn and empty cups towards the front, though thankfully they aren’t the only ones.

Len’s love of the sport is no surprise to him, neither is his reaction, but he didn’t expect Lisa to get that worked up over the progress of the game, and later, during the break, as the siblings go to fetch them more beer and snacks, Barry mentions that to Roscoe.

The other man, who seems to be the only person around who didn’t get infatuated by the game, explains as he gazes around, looking still just as bored as when they arrived, “Lisa’s just as much of an ice-hockey fan as her brother, they bonded over it as kids and probably connect it with something positive since their grandfather liked to watch it with them.”

Barry doesn’t know much about Len’s childhood since he is rather tight-lipped when it comes to it, but he knows that his friend is very fond of his grandfather and that the man was probably the only real family Lisa and he had in their childhood. It explains why they like ice-hockey so much, it probably reminds them of the only good and caring person in their youth.

Len and Lisa return shortly before the break ends, and Barry accepts the cup of beer and the hot dog gratefully since his nerves that have kept his appetite away for the most part of today have calmed down enough that he has started to notice the lack of lunch or dinner.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Len asks him after he retook his seat next to him, watching Barry who wolves down nearly half of the hotdog with two bites with an amused glint in his eyes.

Barry nods since his mouth is occupied chewing, enjoying the taste of the unhealthy but still delicious fast food.

“Good.” Len smiles and briefly cups his knee, a fleeting touch that is too quick for anybody to notice who isn’t watching them but still reassuring.

Barry feels his cheeks grow warm and can’t stop himself from leaning a little closer to Len, glad that he decided to come along despite his numerous concerns.

“You two will end up giving me caries,” Roscoe remarks drily, but there is humor in his eyes as Barry turns to him, embarrassed about how he briefly forgot about his or anybody else’s presence.

“Oh, shut it, Roscoe,” Lisa tells her partner, though there is a clearly satisfied smile pulling at the corner of her lips. “If you aren’t careful tooth decay is all you’re going to get tonight.”

“Lisa,” Len warns, a look of disgust and irritation on his face, while Roscoe frowns as well, but is smart enough to stay quiet.

“Grow up, Lenny, you know we’ve sex, so stop being so squeamish about it,” Lisa smirks, looking quite pleased with herself for getting a reaction like that from her brother.

Len’s expression of disgust intensifies for a second, but he too seems to decide that it is no good idea to start a discussion about this now seeing that Lisa doesn’t seem to be nearly as uncomfortable with
Their attention is soon directed back to the game when it starts again, and Barry keeps finding himself interested in its progress despite himself, cheering along with Len and Lisa, feeling much more alive than he has in a long time.

Eventually, the game comes to an end, and Len’s team wins which turns out to be a way less peaceful affair than Barry expected it to be since two players on the opposing sides start a fight and soon most of the members of their respective teams join in.

Barry’s fear that this aggression could jump over to the audience thankfully turns out unfounded as the crowd keeps cheering their teams on quite animatedly but sticks to that and nothing more.

“I think now’s a good time to leave,” Lisa tells Len, who agrees, and they get up, using the chaotic atmosphere to make their way back to the basement without anybody taking notice.

There are several securities around because of what is going on in the rink, probably a precaution in case fights break out among the onlookers as well, but they ignore Barry and the rest as they leave the hall since their attention is on the people staying behind.

The staircase down is just as empty as earlier, and Sam is already waiting when they enter the restroom, a sandwich in hand.

“Good game,” Sam remarks, indicating that he watched it too.

“Yeah,” Lisa agrees, cheeks still a little flushed due to her excitement over her team winning. “The Combines kicked their asses.”

“Of course, they did.” Len grunts, looking ridiculously pleased as well, and Barry is overcome by a sudden fondness for his friend, who hardly ever lets himself get that excited over anything.

“They lost their last three games this season,” Roscoe points out, which gets him a glare from both siblings in return.

“They aren’t that bad,” Sam decides surprisingly diplomatically as he helps Barry enter. “And they know how to do a brawl. I can respect that.” He then turns to Barry, asking, “How did you like the game? It was your first hockey game, right?”

Barry nods and answers, “It was fun.”

A little bit overwhelming at times would probably also fit Barry’s perception of his first ice-hockey game, but all in all, he certainly doesn’t regret coming along.

To Barry’s surprise, Sam doesn’t lead them back to the hideout they left some hours ago, but to an unfamiliar, empty corridor with a deep burgundy parquet and light crème colored walls with wooden panels.

“That’s the second part of your surprise,” Len explains and gives Barry a reassuring smile as he meets his confused, slightly worried expression. “I thought some dinner would be nice.”

“This place is great,” Lisa tells him encouragingly. “Their food is delicious, I’ve been here a couple of times before, and they mainly have people like us as their clientele, so you don’t need to worry about getting any unwanted attention.”

“They’re also ridiculously overpriced,” Roscoe adds, looking way less impressed or fond of this
place than Lisa.

“That’s because you can be a stingy ass, my dear,” Lisa points out with a smirk. “Locations like this one may cost good money, but you get your privacy in return.”

“They also have awesome food,” Sam remarks and turns to Len, arching an eyebrow and giving him a hopeful look. “You think you could grab me some takeout on your way out?”

Len’s annoyed frown is response enough, causing Sam to heave a sigh, though he doesn’t seem in the least surprised.

“Let’s get inside,” Len tells Barry, nodding to the portal that still shows the empty corridor as he steps closer to him, laying a hand to the small of his back, a surprisingly intimate and telling gesture considering that the others are there with them.

Barry’s cheeks warm up, and he searches Len with a worried, uncertain look.

“You’ll like it, Barry,” Len assures him, voice low and soft. “You enjoyed the game despite your concerns, didn’t you?”

He did, Barry can’t argue there, and this fact helps to ease some of the worries he feels.

“O-Ok-kay,” Barry agrees quietly and allows Len to lead him out of the mirror verse dimension.

The moment Barry enters the restaurant, soft piano music reaches him, and he notices the faint smell of Italian cuisine in the air. It causes his appetite to stir awake despite having eaten a hot dog not even two hours ago.

Len follows close behind him, but Barry notices that neither Lisa nor Roscoe do so too.

“Y-You a-aren’t c-c-coming?” Barry asks, and while he doesn’t mind the idea of spending a nice dinner alone with Len, the thought of only the two of them sticking around worries him a little since this establishment seems to be well-frequented by criminals.

“No, we’ve our own entertainment planned for tonight,” Lisa tells him with a saucy smile that causes her brother next to Barry to grunt in annoyance, which is probably just the reaction she hoped for. She adds in a warmer, softer tone when she picks up on Barry’s persisting unease, “Bear, you two are going to enjoy each other’s company while having some delicious food without anybody bothering you. You’ll like it, don’t worry.”

Barry nods, though the doubt about whether this is really a good idea persists. It doesn’t settle his nerves either that he has no idea where they currently are, though he guesses that it still has to be inside the Gems’ borders.

The sound of footfalls joins them as someone enters the corridor to their left, which causes Barry to tense up as he turns to see who is approaching them.

It is a smartly dressed young man, probably a waiter judging by his attire, and if he is in the least surprised to find them standing there, he doesn’t show it. Instead, a polite smile settles over his lips, and he greets them with a faint bow.

“Good evening, Mr. Snart,” the man greets Len. “I’m glad to see that you were able to make your appointment on time. I’m Antoni, your waiter for the evening. Your table is ready if you would follow me, please.”
Roscoe grumbles something under his breath, and Barry briefly glances towards the other man, immediately picking up on his obvious distaste for the stranger, which probably has less to do with him personally but with the establishment he is working for considering his friend’s view of this place.

Lisa sighs and shoots her partner a look of affectionate irritation as she tells him quietly. “Oh, be quiet. We don’t have to stick around.”

“Well, that’s our cue to leave,” Sam says, still munching away on his sandwich, looking very unimpressed by the waiter who just appeared.

They leave, with Lisa wishing them a nice evening once more, and then Barry and Len are alone with the young man still politely waiting in the corridor that must be leading to the actual restaurant.

“I hope you have had a pleasant evening so far, Mr. Snart. Our establishment is quite pleased that you have decided to pass by once again. It has been quite a while since any of the famous Rogues graced us with their presence,” the waiter says as he starts to lead them in the direction he appeared from earlier. It’s obviously an attempt of polite small-talk, and he doesn’t seem in the least bit put off or even surprised when Len only grunts wordlessly in return, making it clear that he isn’t interested in exchanging any pleasantries.

Undeterred, Antoni glances at Barry, the polite smile still present. “Is it your first visit here, Mr. …”

“A-Al-len,” Barry answers and tries not to blush since his stammer makes situations like this one always especially awkward. “A-And i-it’s m-m-my f-first v-vis-sit.”

To the man’s credit, he doesn’t even seem surprised or put off by his speech impediment, and instead, gives him another polite smile in return. “Mr. Allen, then. I’m very pleased to welcome you to the **Verano Di Julio**, I hope you’ll have a pleasant evening.”

Barry murmurs his thanks and fights the urge to step closer to Len when they enter the actual restaurant, that is surprisingly well visited for this late hour. He glances around briefly, somewhat worried that he could make out familiar faces, but he doesn’t notice anybody he can remember meeting in the Heights. The guests seem made up by what has to be the upper class of the criminal underworld, judging by their appearances, and while some watch him curiously for a moment, it does not seem like anybody is really interested in him or wonders about the reason for his presence. At least, they are not obvious about it if they were.

The part of the restaurant they have just entered is lit in soft, dimmed down light, and kept in the same dark red and crème colored scheme as the corridor they entered from. The chairs are made of expensive looking cherry wood, so are the tables that are covered by fine white and red linen, with the soft light of candles flickering on every one of them, giving the atmosphere of the place something tastefully romantic but also soothing.

Part of the walls and the ceiling are covered by wooden panels and elements, also made of cherry wood, but not excessively so which allows the whole location to have a comfortable, nearly homely look while not taking away any of this classiness or tastefulness.

As Barry looks around, he decides that it is undoubtedly a very expensive place but it still manages to feel oddly welcoming, and despite how his nerves are still acting up, he can appreciate it.

Their waiter leads them further back, past the numerous dining guests, into another smaller corridor, and Barry realizes with relief that it has to be the section of the restaurant with the private rooms.
His assumption is quickly proven right when they are lead into a smaller but still spacious room with only a single table in front of a window that takes up the whole wall opposite to the entrance, allowing a beautiful view of the glittering ocean of lights Central City becomes at night.

Barry, who stopped a few feet away from the table and is watching the view in amazement, notices that Antoni steps closer to him. Tensing up, he turns to him and relaxes again when the man only asks for his coat. Len hands him his afterward, looking way less impressed by their current location in general, probably because he has been here in the past or maybe because he generally doesn’t care that much about these things.

“I’ll take care of your coats and be back with the menus in a moment,” Antoni informs them before leaving the room.

Feeling somewhat out of place, Barry shifts nervously and turns back to their table, noticing that it also holds a candle that has to be lit yet.

Len steps closer to him, causing Barry to turn back to him.

The expression of the other man is a searching one, a little grim and a little worried, and it isn’t hard for Barry to guess what is bothering him.

“I-It’s a n-nice p-place,” Barry tells him with a small smile he hopes is less tense and more reassuring.

“We can leave if it’s too much.” Len reaches for him, cups the small of his back and pulls him a little closer so that he can brush a kiss above his right eyebrow. “I want you to enjoy tonight, not feel awkward or like you’ve to do this.”

“N-No,” Barry murmurs, leaning towards Len so that he can rest his forehead against his shoulder. “I-I l-like i-it, I-I’m j-just n-not g-g-good w-with s-surp-prises a-anym-more.”

Len brushes another kiss against his temple and starts to rub his back soothingly. “I should have told you about it beforehand.” He sighs softly, the puff of warm air tickling softly against Barry’s skin. “It was really Lisa’s idea, I would have stuck to ordering pizza.”

“I-It’s ok-kay,” Barry assures him, smiling tenderly, and loops his arms around him. “A-As f-far a-as s-surp-prises g-go, I r-real-ly d-do l-like th-this one.”

He can feel Len smile against his temple, and he wishes this moment could last, just the two of them, high above Central City, far away from any troubles or expectations.

The door opens again, causing Barry to flinch and Len to pull back, leaving them both tensed up and uneasy, though Len hides it much better.

Antoni returned with the formerly mentioned menus, and to the man’s credit, he doesn’t even bat an eye at stepping in on them hugging.

Barry and Len take their seats and accept their menus while Antoni lights the candle and tells them about the current specialties the kitchen has to offer.

Barry only half-listens as his eyes skim over the menu, noticing immediately that there are no prices attached to the various meals, which causes him to frown unhappily, even though he expected such a thing. This restaurant is clearly out of the price range he could cover with his usual budget, everything he has seen so far made this glaringly obvious.
“Is there something amiss, sir?” Antoni asks, noticing his expression, and Barry quickly assures him that everything is fine.

“Very good,” Antoni agrees, though he keeps watching him curiously as he excuses himself to give them time to choose their meals.

“Dillon didn’t joke when he said that they’re ridiculously expensive,” Len informs him the moment the door closes behind their waiter. He studies Barry, his expression not giving away what he is thinking, and offers, “We can still leave.”

A big part of Barry wants to take him up on that offer since he doesn’t like the thought of costing Len that much money nor the fact that all of this is going to be paid by what his friend gained via his heists.

“I-I…” Barry averts his eyes, looking down at the menu in his hands, and frowns.

“Maybe you should try to see this as nothing but a gift for your birthday,” Len suggests. “It isn’t on you where the money came from.”

“I-It’s s-still m-money th-that d-does b-belong t-to oth-thers,” Barry murmurs, hunching over a little as the fear rises in him that an argument similar to the ones they had in the past about this very topic will start once again.

Silence follows as Len keeps watching him, and Barry feels his gaze like a hand pressing down on him. He doesn’t dare to look up and see that he upset his friend who clearly wanted to make him happy with this whole evening.

“I know that you don’t like it when I spent money on things for you,” Len tells him calmly. “It’s stolen money, and I understand that this is something that goes against your moral code.”

Barry hears the but coming and can’t help but wonder whether Len would point out to him all the money he already has spent on him over the last couple of years, the food he got him, the doctor’s bills…

The ring.

“Spending it on you is probably the only decent thing I’ve ever done with it.” Len meets his eyes calmly, earnestly as he looks up in surprise. “I get that me being who I am will always be a problem, and I can accept that, Barry, but let’s not think about it tonight.” He reaches across the table and takes hold of Barry’s hand, his warm skin a stark contrast to Barry’s much cooler one. “If you wanna stay here and eat, let me give this to you.”

The words don’t make it okay, nothing will ever change the fact that Barry is accepting money that does not belong to him nor his friends. Even so, they slightly ease the guilt in Barry’s guts for now, and they make it possible for him to finally agree with a small smile he hopes doesn’t show any of the sadness he feels over the still persisting guilt inside him, “O-Ok-kay.”

Len frowns slightly, probably picking up on his emotions, and Barry turns his hand to grasp his in return and squeezes it lightly. “Th-Thanks, L-Lenny. I-It’s b-been a-a r-really n-nice e-even-ning s-so f-far, I-I h-haven’t b-been t-t-o a-a s-sport’s g-game o-ora n-nice r-resta-ru-ant l-like th-this o-one i-in a v-very l-long t-time.” He chuckles shyly, feeling a little nervous all of a sudden, and ducks his head so that he is looking up at Len through his eyelashes, cheeks warm. “B-But h-having y-you w-with m-me i-is r-really a-a ll th-that m-matters t-to m-me.”

Len’s expression softens, and his eyes brighten with the warmth with which he keeps studying
“You’ll always have me,” Len assures him quietly, and Barry believes him at that moment, despite how irrational such a promise is, especially considering who Len and the others are, and how dangerous life can be for people like them. Barry can’t but allow himself this little indulgence tonight, for his birthday.

This time, they break their touch before their waiter returns, even if it is only with reluctance. Barry has a crème of garlic soup as a starter, while Len skips it, and both share a plate of Risotto alla Milanese since they both snacked at the ice-hockey game earlier and aren’t that hungry.

If Antoni finds it odd that they share a meal, he doesn’t comment and instead assures them that they made a very good choice and suggests a fitting wine to it.

They talk about the ice-hockey game while they wait for their food, or Len is as Barry still knows next to nothing about that sport, but it is still nice to listen to him since he has a palpable love for it.

Barry’s soup arrives and turns out to not only look delicious but also taste so. Len agrees to try a spoonful, but while he says that it’s good, he clearly prefers to nurture his glass of wine till their main dish arrives.

The atmosphere in their private room is relaxing and comfortable, and Barry finds himself enjoying their stay as he tells Len about how he tried out a couple different sports while in college but never really found anything that stuck to him other than running. Judging by Len’s smirk, he seems to think that is quite fitting, causing Barry to chuckle in return.

“You ran for your college’s team?” Len inquiries, curiously, sipping at his glass. The wine seems to his liking, even though he generally prefers beer over any other kind of alcohol.

“N-no.” Barry smiles, both amused and a little sheepish. “I-didn’t l-like c-compet-titions. I p-preferred t-to j-just r-run f-for m-mys-self. I-It h-helped m-me r-rel-lax.”

Running is something that followed him through his life since he was little. Back then, it was running away from bigger kids, or foster siblings that wanted to use him as a punching bag, later it got a much nicer meaning, something he only did for himself, to get his head free and just feel his body. He probably never felt as connected to himself outside from running his lapses, feeling the wind in his hair, tugging at his shirt and pants, the firm ground below his feet while the world flew past him.

Then, he became the Flash, and the meaning of running changed once again.

“You ever thought of trying it again?” Len asks, and Barry turns to him with a confused expression that quickly turns to one of discomfort.

“N-No…” Barry shrugs, looking down to his now empty bowl of soup. “I-d-don’t th-think… I-I…” He frowns and shrugs once more, shivering lightly.

Len hums in understanding, though Barry can’t read the look with which he is watching him. Thankfully, Len decides to steer the topic to a different direction and asks him whether he ever went ice-skating in the past.

Antoni returns soon afterward, fetching Barry’s empty bowl and asking whether the soup was to his liking. Their main dish arrives only a few minutes later.

The Risotto is delicious, and even Len, who moved to sit next to Barry so that it is easier for both of
them to eat from the plate, agrees that it is probably one of the best dishes he has ever tried. Barry can’t help but feel a little smug about it, since he was the one who picked it, and Len, who doesn’t miss it, leans closer and steals a kiss from the corner of Barry’s lips.

It is much more intimate gesture than what they’ve dared to do so far, and Barry freezes briefly, his breath caught in his throat, but just as worry starts to darken Len’s face, he shakes the stupor off and gives him a small, somewhat uncertain, but still warm smile.

They go back to eating, spending the rest of the meal in a comfortable silence other than for the soft violin music playing over some hidden speaks in the background, and Barry uses the opportunity to enjoy the view of the city below them.

He nearly forgot how beautiful it is.

As the Flash, he often ran up on the top of the higher building during quieter moments, only to enjoy the sight of it. These days, he mostly gets to see the dirty streets of the Keys, so similar to the sight he grew up with as a child. It is disconcerting at times, and he is glad that he is reminded of why the Gems are called just that.

Barry feels his cheeks heat up when he glances back to Len and notices his friend watching him, eyes dark pools of what is undoubtedly lust but also another, much deeper emotion.

“It’s a b-beautif-ful v-view,” Barry tells him, awkwardly, because he feels nervous under the intensity of Len’s look, even though he knows that he has nothing to fear from him.

“It is,” Len agrees, and it isn’t hard to get that he isn’t talking about the city, causing Barry to chuckle nervously and duck his head.

He has never been called beautiful, at least not in a way that wasn’t twisted, and it is still hard to for him to believe that Len could really mean it.

When Barry sees his own reflection in the mirror, a lot of words pass his mind, but not a single one is of that kind. It makes it hard to understand how Len could see him like that, despite how thin and pale he is, with a constant dark shadow under his eyes or fallen in cheeks, and those are probably still the most appealing parts about him.

During his time as the Flash, people called him attractive, sexy, and Iris told him so as well, but while he found his looks more appealing, he never got how anybody could be attracted to him. How Iris could be attracted to him.

Barry shakes that thought off and turns his gaze back to Len, once again noticing the desire in the other man’s eyes but also the affection.

It is like a soothing balm to him, even if a somewhat scary one.

Len’s gaze drops to his lips, and Barry only realizes then that he is biting his lower one nervously.

They haven’t really kissed since Cameron-

A shudder runs through Barry’s body, and he squashes the memory of that nasty man, not wanting him to ruin this moment.

Does he want them to kiss, though? Does he feel ready?

Barry isn’t sure. A part of him wants to welcome it, the intimacy, allow Len further in once more, but
another one skids away from the mere notion.

Len’s gaze seeks Barry’s out, and for a moment their eyes lock.

They watch each other silently, and even so, Barry understands the unspoken question. He hesitates before he gives a small, curt nod, his heart beating like crazy in his chest because he really can’t say whether he is ready for this or not.

“It’s okay,” Len assures him, quietly, and cups Barry’s neck, urging him lightly closer but stops the second he resists. He makes a soothing, shushing noise, and promises him, “It’s okay, baby, you’re safe.”

Barry wants it to be true, badly enough that his eyes mist up and another shiver runs through him as he allows Len to pull him a little closer so that they can meet halfway-

The door opens, and they both jump apart as their waiter enters.

Antoni halts, arching an eyebrow slightly, though he doesn’t comment on what had to be a very obvious giveaway of the actual nature of their relationship. Instead, he asks whether the food was to their liking and whether they would be interested in some dessert – their Panna Cotta is a dream come true, apparently.

Barry, who is pretty sure that his face is as red as a tomato, doesn’t feel hungry anymore but utters an agreement before he even realizes it.

“Another very good choice, sir,” Antoni agrees and turns to Len, who doesn’t want a dessert but agrees to more wine.

They are left alone again shortly after.

“Fucking Italian cockblock,” Len grumbles, and Barry can’t but huff a laugh, both amused and embarrassed by the whole situation.

“H-He’s onl-ly d-doing h-his j-job,” Barry points out and rubs his eyes, chuckling softly. “A-And w-we p-probab-bly sh-should n-not b-be m-making o-out i-in a-a h-high c-class r-rest-taurant l-like th-this one.”

“We were hardly making out,” Len protests, though his annoyance has diminished somewhat as he is watching Barry. There is still some hunger lingering behind, though his expression holds mostly warmth and fondness by now.

“W-We sh-shouldn’t b-be,” Barry reminds him and reaches for Len’s hand, grasping it lightly. He hesitates but eventually proceeds, uncertain and a little afraid of how the other man would react, “I-I’m n-not s-sure I-I’m r-r-read-dy y-yet, a-anyw-way.”

This catches Len off-guard, and for a second something grim flickers across his face, causing Barry to tense up in worry.

“I’m sorry,” Len apologizes, catching Barry off-guard, since it is still unusual for his friend to do so, even to him. “I didn’t mean to pressure you.”

“Y-You d-didn’t,” Barry assures him and squeezes his hand. “I-I th-think w-we b-both g-got c-caught u-up i-in th-the m-moment.” His cheeks grow warmer again, and he chuckles a little awkwardly, looking anywhere but at Len. “I-I m-miss i-it t-too.”
Kissing Len has always been something incredibly rewarding and reassuring, despite how intimidating it was at the same time. He may not feel ready for it just yet, but he still longs for the feeling of belonging, of being wanted and wanting someone else in return like that.

Len cups his cheeks, causing him to still and glance back at him.

“We’re in no hurry,” Len tells him earnestly and starts to stroke his thumb lightly across Barry’s cheekbone.

It is reassuring to hear him say so, as Barry has been worried about this for a while now, much more so than he realized until now.

“Th-Thank y-you.” Barry cups his hand with his own and wishes there was a way to let Len know how much this really means to him.

“I won’t leave,” Len reminds him simply, the light of the candle reflecting itself in his dark eyes, and Barry feels tears well up in response to that promise he has been clinging to for a long while now, like a drowning man who desperately clutches at straws.

“Th-Thank y-you,” Barry repeats, unsure what else to say as he feels overwhelmed by Len’s decision to stay with him like he usually is when he realizes what this actually means.

Len gives him a small, somewhat sad smile and moves his hand so that he is cupping Barry’s neck again. He pulls him closer until he can press his lips against his forehead and murmurs, “Happy 43rd Birthday, baby.”

Barry closes his eyes and smiles, realizing that it probably really is already his birthday since it has to be past midnight by now.

He hopes tonight is a sign that his 43rd year is going to be a good one.

Chapter End Notes

I really enjoy Barry’s little outing with Len and the others. I think it is such a Len thing to buy him an ice-hockey ticket for his birthday. The man loves that sport, and I can’t say for sure whether it is comic canon, but in my mind the reason for that is that he spent a lot of time watching games together with his grandpa and Lisa when he was still a kid. Ice-hockey is one of the few pleasant things of his childhood, so to say.

Barry, despite his initial anxiety, did eventually enjoy the game and being there with his friends. It was especially fun to have him interact with Roscoe, who is a character I love to write since he is the kind of person who doesn’t give two damns about someone else’s opinion, he knows he is most certainly smarter than them, anyway. He is an arrogant jackass, the kind that knows how to get under Len’s skin, but I like him even so, or maybe because of his attitude. I imagine it must be quite refreshing to not care about another people’s opinion and to be so sure of oneself.

The restaurant Len took Barry to is one of a long chain that has seats all over the Midwest of the US. I like to imagine that there is a whole secret underworld the high society of crime built, existing right under the heroes’ noses they are not aware of, not even Batman. I think that’s why I enjoyed the idea of Blacksmith’s black market in the
comics so much since it had been part of the Gems for over a decade before Wally finally stumbled over it. Kudos to her since it has to be ridiculously difficult to pull something like that off in a world with superheroes like the Flash.

It was probably a good thing that Len and Barry got interrupted when they were about to kiss toward the end. Barry is recovering rather nicely from his ordeal with Cameron, but he still is not entirely over it and won’t be for a while longer, but he is comfortable with having Len close again and them touching. A kiss would probably have been too much, though, and it is good that he acknowledges that.

I got a rather angry comment a while ago about how Barry, despite what he went through, should have gotten over it by now and be able to have sex with Len. Maybe some people in Barry’s position are able to move on like that, but I find that doubtful. Sexual abuse is something that never really lets go of a person, and Barry went through a number of horrible ordeals in his life, which can’t simply be shaken off within a year or so. It is hard to put down a time limit for a victim of abuse when it comes to their recovery. Some recover never, some do, but it really is a case to case thing. I know that there are a lot of fanfics out there where a person gets abused and recovers in no time, especially when the trope of healing sex is involved, which says that the right partner can just fuck the trauma out of them (sorry about the language, but it really fits here in my opinion). I often find such a portrayal tasteless, since it takes away from how horrifying rape really is, how destructive it is to a person, and how a victim of sexual abuse will have to fight an uphill battle for a long time until they can live a somewhat normal life again.

That may sound harsh, but my intent is not to criticize the writers, since their stories can still be a great and very enjoyable read, and there is never any ill intent involved. I guess often it simply is a lack of understanding, maybe due to the author’s age, ignorance, or whatever, that leads to them portraying rape in such a shallow light. To me it is very important to show the repercussions of what happened to Barry in a way that is closer to how it would go down in reality, to show how harmful sexual abuse or abuse in general is. I know that my writing is also certainly lacking in that regard, but I try my best.

Anyway, that’s the reason why Barry’s and Len’s relationship is progressing at the pace it is. I intend for them to get more intimate over time, but for Barry, it is an uphill battle to overcome his inner demons, something that takes time and endurance on his part and a lot of patience and understanding on the part of the people around him. It is a good thing that Len seems willing to wait and be supportive, that alone will probably make the progress of their relationship possible.

As usual, I want to thank all of my readers for leaving me feedback. Your comments boost my drive to write and finish this story like nothing else. :)

Next chapter, the Rogues visit the bar during Barry’s shift, and hijinks ensue, James will finally return, and Barry and Len are going to have a talk! :)

Thank you all for reading and see you again in two weeks!
The Slow Growth of Normalcy

Chapter Summary

The Rogues are at the Saloon, James shares a controversial theory about Friends, and Barry tells Len about his nightmares.

Chapter Notes

I’m posting this one a little later than usual since my editor Quintessennza started a new job this week, and he couldn't start editing till yesterday. Because of the extraordinary person he is, he was still able to go over this chapter for me despite how busy his new job is keeping him or the fact that he is currently having guests over whom he has to spend time with too. You’re a fantastic help, my friend, thank you so much for your diligent work and contribution to make this story a more enjoyable read. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You know, since you’re around, the beer has started to taste much better,” Lisa tells Barry with a flirting little smirk after taking a sip of her drink.

Barry, who stands behind the bar, tapping another beer, shoots her an amused look and arches an eyebrow. “Th-That’s g-good t-t-to kn-know.”

It has been a relatively calm night in the Saloon so far, which isn’t unusual for a Thursday according to Charlie, and Barry welcomes the slower pace of yesterday and today. It is a nice change from his first two days working at the bar since he isn’t sure whether he will be able to handle so much stress every single night.

Tonight’s crowd is much less loud and aggressive than the one from last weekend, and hardly anybody has remarked on his stammer or nervous demeanor so far since they seem much more interested in their drinks rather than him. It eases Barry’s anxiousness to think that the first impression he got from working here doesn’t necessarily portray a complete picture and that there can also be nights like this one.

Having the Rogues around probably aids in having nobody being extensively rude towards him, and he really hopes that it stays like that since the thought of them witnessing people threatening him like last Saturday doesn’t sit well with him.

The night is still young, though, not even half past ten, and a lot can still change, which is why Barry can’t shake off the slightly apprehensive feeling as he tries not to throw too many worried glances at the entrance.

Thankfully, the mood in the bar seems to get more relaxed as the minutes tick by, with their customers getting drunk in relative quiet and the only real source of any ruckus being his friends.
Laughter stirs up the air, as if on cue, and Barry glances over to the table the Rogues are currently occupying, playing poker, drinking beer, and eating salted peanuts Charlie sells in bags.

Contrary to the rest of their visitors, they seem as lively as ever.

It is James’ birthday, and they decided to celebrate it here by getting wasted, which is really their go to way of celebrating any of their birthdays as Barry has learned by now.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell them to turn it down a little,” Lisa assures him, watching their friends as well, an affectionate glint in her eyes. When she notices the dark scowl on Charlie’s face, she turns to him, smirking. “They won’t cause you any problems, Charlie.” She nods to Barry. “Barry is now working for you, and we can’t have him get in trouble because of us.”

Charlie snorts, giving her a very unimpressed look as he keeps drying one of the mugs he got from the dishwasher in the back. “You really think that will stop those prats from stirring shit up when they’re shitfaced?”

“Barry’s having a good influence on them,” Lisa promises the barman and takes a sip of her beer. She has slowed down considerably compared to how quickly she went through her first two mugs, which is likely because she wants to keep an eye on the others just in case.

“I’m sure he does, but your friends are people of habit, and I doubt that they will suddenly grow brains because of my new help.” Charlie grunts, putting the dried mug away and picking up the next one.

“You’ll be surprised. Barry’s quite impressive in that regard,” Lisa assures him again and starts to draw slow, lazy circles with her index- and middle fingers around the rim of her glass. “And he’s a really nice, smart guy to boot, you can be lucky he decided to work in this sinkhole.”

Barry shoots her a warning look, but she ignores him skillfully, her eyes still on Charlie. She isn’t drunk, but a little tipsy, and she clearly tries to irritate the barman.

“You could take a page from his book, Charles,” Lisa goes on, leaning back as she crosses her legs, her skirt moving up her tights as her fingers still keep tracing the rim of her mug.

“Right, because being nice is going to keep those idiots in check,” Charlie remarks drily and shoots one of the guys who just came up to get another beer a dark look, making the thug and his friend noticeably nervous.

Barry watches that curiously, noticing not for the first time the respect his new boss gets from their customers, which in turn makes him worry about messing up and somehow angering the man even more.

“Don’t worry, Bear,” Lisa says, amused, since she seems to have picked up on what is going through his head. “Charlie is all bark and no bite most of the time.” A lazy grin splits her red, full lips, and she puts her elbow on the counter, so she can rest her cheek on her hand, her eyes seeking out the thug whom Barry just handed his beer, and who has been checking out her cleavage so far. “At least to people like you, who aren’t scum.”

The man frowns, narrowing his eyes, but he knows who Lisa is and instead of starting something, which he clearly would prefer, he follows his friend, who already got his beer, back to their table closer to the entrance.

“I’m all bite and no bark,” Charlie corrects her with a snort as he puts the last mug away.
“You aren’t,” Lisa argues, sounding much too certain for the barman’s liking, who glares at her in response.

“Careful, missy, or I’ll boot your pretty little ass out just to prove a point,” Charlie warns her, but Lisa only huffs a laugh, not intimidated in the slightest. “You’re such a charmer, Charlie, aren’t you?”

Charlie ignores her and wordlessly vanishes into the back, leaving Barry briefly alone behind the bar.

“He likes you,” Lisa decides and takes another sip of her beer.

Barry doubts that but stays quiet and instead focuses on cleaning the working surface behind the bar during the brief break of having anybody asking for another drink.

“He does,” Lisa insists. “He doesn’t call you a dumbass or a slacker. Usually he is really big on those for his employees.” She smirks. “Or a jackass for the ones he really doesn’t like.”

Barry glances at her in surprise and isn’t sure how to feel about that. It’s nice to learn that Charlie seems to like him enough not to call him names, but the thought that the man could start to do so doesn’t sit well with him.

“He knows that he got really lucky with you,” Lisa points out before her gaze moves past Barry, where Charlie just reentered the bar, another tray of freshly washed mugs in hands. “You should keep an eye on this one, Charlie, you’ll probably end up learning a couple of tricks from him.”

Barry grimaces slightly, uncomfortable over Lisa saying something like this to his employer since he doesn’t want to get on the man’s bad side by accident, at least not as early as on his fourth day. It is a joke, Charlie certainly knows so, but Barry also knows how easy it is for some to take something like that the wrong way.

“Oh, lighten up, Bear,” Lisa tells him, chuckling. “I’m only messing around, and our favorite grumpy barman knows that. He won’t kick you out over me talking shit about him.” She turns back to Charlie, asking loudly, “Isn’t that right, Charlie?”

“If I kicked Allen out over you being annoying prats, he wouldn’t have lasted past his first day,” Charlie answers unimpressed as he passes Barry once more, telling him. “I’m taking a break, dry the mugs and get me if it gets busy or trouble stirs up.” Saying the last part, he shoots a glare towards the table the Rogues are currently occupying, being the loudest guests by far, which is hardly surprising considering how much alcohol they have drunk by now.

“I told you already that we won’t cause you any trouble, Charlie,” Lisa assures him sweetly and makes a cross over her heart. “Cross my heart.”

“Because I’m dumb enough to believe that I can take the word of a criminal?” Charlie scoffs and proceeds to make his way towards the back of the bar.

“Ouch.” Lisa grins amused and looks at Barry. “You would think he would show his customers a little more respect.”

“C-Cons-idering o-of w-hat k-kind o-of p-people h-his c-custom-ers a-are m-mostly m-made o-of, n-not r-really,” Barry points out, tapping another beer for a man who just turned up next to Lisa. He doesn’t miss how the guy keeps shooting rather uneasy looks at the blond woman while he waits for his drink.

It’s curious, and Barry wonders whether the man worries that he would point out to Lisa what a
jackass he was to him earlier this evening, before the Rogues’ arrival.

Even though this is only his second week, the amount of harassment he has to endure decreased palpably since last Sunday, and Barry is pretty sure that this has something to do with Len and the others.

When Barry asked Len about it earlier today, he denied it, but that hardly diminishes his suspicions.

“You do know that I also belong to that kind of people, right?” Lisa asks him with a fake scowl.

“Y-You d-do,” Barry agrees easily, handing the thug his beer, who quickly returns to the table with the rest of his companions. “B-But y-you a-are m-much m-more l-likeable a-and r-resp-pectable th-than m-most o-of th-the rest.”

“And that’s the reason why you are my favorite.” Lisa grins.

“So, does that mean Dillon has a reason to get his panties in a bunch,” Sam asks as he joins Lisa at the bar, taking the unoccupied seat next to her while pushing his empty mug towards Barry.

“Have you already cleaned them out,” Lisa returns, arching an eyebrow.

“Not yet,” Sam explains, looking quite pleased with himself. “Give it another twenty minutes.”

“One of these days Len is going to throw you off the CCS Tower for not only being a fucking cheat but being so obnoxious about it,” Lisa warns him, but seems only slightly pissed, probably because she is currently not taking part in the game.

“Still don’t know what you guys keep going on about, I’m not cheating, I’m just a natural,” Sam remarks, wrinkling up his nose in fake annoyance. “It really starts to get insulting.”

Lisa chuckles and shakes her head. “You’ll eventually see what you get for being such a little shithead, Scudder.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam agrees, unconcerned as he starts to look around, curiously. “Off the CCS Tower or some bull… Say, Barry, where’s your grumpy ass of a boss?”

“T-Taking a a b-break,” Barry informs him and adds just as Sam opens his mouth once more, “a-and n-no, y-your r-ref-fill i-is n-not f-for f-free.”

“Good friend you are,” Sam grumbles as he accepts his once again full mug back.

“A cheat and a freeloader,” Lisa proclaims, snorting rather unladylike. “You really bring the best qualities to the table.”

Sam ignores her, his focus still on Barry as he asks, “So, you’re not even a week here, and Charlie lets you run the show on your own. Impressive.”

“I-He’s o-only o-on a b-break,” Barry reminds him but can’t help but feel a little pleased by Sam’s observation. If he was honest, he didn’t think that Charlie would allow him to handle the bar on his own so soon or even at all. It is nice to be trusted in such a way.

“Pish-posh, don’t always sell yourself so short.” Sam waves him off and takes a big gulp of his beer before grinning broadly. “You’re trustworthy, ‘s not something all too common around here, and Charlie can see that.”

Barry gives his friend a grateful smile for his kind words. “Th-Thanks, S-Sam.”
“Don’t get all sappy on me, Allen, we’re in public, after all.” Sam winks and gets back up to return to the others, where Len, Mick, and Marco just got up to make their way over to the unoccupied pool table.

“You know, I meant it earlier when I said that you’re a good influence on them.” Lisa meets Barry’s surprised look fondly, chuckling. “Your decency is rubbing off.”

“Y-You th-think s-so?” Barry asks, turning back to his friends to watch them enjoy the late evening.

It is strange to imagine that he could have changed the Rogues in any way. They are all so strong, self-assured, even intimidating, and he… He is none of these things.

“Definitely,” Lisa insists as she is also watching her brother and friends with unusual warmth in her eyes. “You’re a good influence on them.” She looks back at him. “On all of us.”

Barry doubts that he is a good influence on anybody. Maybe he was once, before letting himself be broken again, but these days he can’t see himself inspiring anybody to try and do or be better.

Especially the Rogues, who know what happened to him and how weak and helpless he really is when it comes down to it.

Who also know who he once was.

They still haven’t acknowledged it to each other. They teeter along the border of that topic, at times coming dangerously close to finally touching upon it, only to pull back and steer their conversation to safer grounds. It’s frustrating, but Barry is glad for it all the same because he knows that he isn’t the only one who is afraid of how things would change should they finally address the elephant in the room.

Swallowing, his mouth suddenly dry, he shoots Lisa an uncertain smile and starts to dry the mugs as Charlie told him. He can feel Lisa’s eyes on him for a long moment, but she noticed that something put him at unease and leaves him be. She stays with him at the bar for a while longer, a silent companion, till Charlie returns and Roscoe chooses the same moment to check up on her and get another beer for himself.

“What do you want to join in for the next game?” Roscoe asks her, winding an arm securely around her lower back, hand resting on her hips, and Barry doesn’t miss how Lisa leans into him, clearly welcoming his closeness.

“You’re bored without me around?” Lisa quips, turning her head, so her cheek rests on his shoulder.

“I would choose your company over theirs anytime,” Roscoe replies easily and presses his lips against the top of her head.

“Sweet-talked.” Lisa chuckles and agrees to join them.

Barry takes his break soon afterward, joining Len, Mick, and Marco at the pool table, where he eats his ham sandwich with cut carrots, smiling amused as he listens to Mick and Marco badmouthing each other’s pool playing skills while Len sits with him, drinking his beer mostly in silence.

Len isn’t very talk-active tonight, but he is in a relaxed mood, and that’s fine since it helps Barry to feel more relaxed as well.

Things are still calm when Barry eventually returns behind the bar, and Charlie takes another brief break to have a smoke. A small crowd of late night visitors passes by shortly after half past eleven,
and he has to make do with a couple of stupid comments about his stammer, but, to his relief, nobody of the others seems to pick up on it.

Or so he thinks, because, about ten minutes later, one of the men who made a snide remark to him, starts choking on his drink. It causes James to cackle loudly and gleefully, easily identifying him as the culprit of whatever happened to that poor sod, and for a horrifying moment, Barry thinks the guy is going to choke to death.

He doesn’t but is able to regain his breath eventually, wheezing and gasping. His friends, in the meantime, started an outright fist fight with the Rogues, who immediately jumped to James’ aid when one of the suffocating guy’s companions punched him hard enough to cause an audible crack as he broke his nose.

Barry freezes, it is as if someone pressed pause on his body, and he can’t move as he watches one of the thugs getting two of his teeth knocked out by Digger, while another one breaks a chair on Mick’s back. The man hardly flinches.

The fight doesn’t last too long, since Charlie, who was lured back from his office by all the noise comes back. The bar owner starts to curse up a storm and threatens to drive his fist so far up their asses that he will knock out their teeth the other way around if they don’t stop messing up his bar.

Barry is glad for his sudden arrival and how quickly it dismisses the fight, but while the Rogues seem to be in as much of a merry mood as before their little clash with the other thugs, he still feels unsettled, shaken, and doesn’t even know why the whole affair caught him so off-guard.

He knew from the beginning that bar fights belong to this job, that they are just part of the business like handing out beer, this shouldn’t leave him so troubled.

Charlie shoots him an annoyed look when he returns to the bar, and Barry quickly forces himself to school his features and shake off the unease, or tries to at least.

“Next time you get me before they start smashing my fucking inventory, Allen,” Charlie tells him sharply, and Barry nods quickly, feeling even worse over how he froze up.

His boss’ frown deepens, though he looks more exasperated than angry, and then he huffs. “Don’t look so crestfallen, they only broke a chair.” He throws a scowl to the Rogues and the other group of thugs who also returned to their table. “That’s a good quota for us.”

Barry takes his word for it.

When Barry gets to pick up the sad leftovers of said chair, Len helps him and accompanies him back to the bar, where Charlie is welcoming him by glaring daggers his way.

“You’ll pay for that damn chair, Snart,” Charlie orders him.

“Why not the other chump?” Len grouses but is already pulling out his wallet.

“Because you shitheads started it.”

“You know so how?”

“In nine out of ten fights my bar has to endure, you idiots are involved.” Charlie snorts. “Let’s call it intuition.”

Len puts a fifty-dollar bill on the bar, looking pissed but not about to argue with the other man.
Charlie takes it and returns to his back office, telling Barry to keep an eye on the bar.

The brief aggression that filled the air before is gone, and the same calm as earlier has started to settle over the place, catching Barry nearly off-guard by how swiftly the mood has changed once more.

“You’re doing okay?”

Len’s question snaps Barry out of his thoughts, and he focuses back on him, smiling unsurely in response.

“Y-Yes… y-you… th-the f-fight j-just s-surprised m-me,” Barry explains and nearly cringes because he knows how lame and dumb that sounds.

Len doesn’t look at him like his reaction was dumb, though. There is a visible concern in his dark hazel eyes, even if the rest of his face looks passive, maybe a little grim.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Barry assures him and squares his shoulders, trying to appear less unsettled than he feels since he doesn’t want to cause his friend any unnecessary worries.

He really is fine or will be in a few minutes. He just needed to shake off the dread that has latched onto him.

Violence has never been something he is good at handling, too many bad memories make it hard to get a grip on his emotions. Even as the Flash it could be ridiculously difficult at times not to just give into his flight instinct, to just run and hide from what his mind tried to convince him would only end in pain and misery.

These days, it is even worse, the scars too deep and partly too fresh, and he is reminded once again that he is going to have to get used to these kinds of confrontations between the patrons of the Saloon.

“Barry,” Len says his name in a grave tone as he locks eyes with him, once again pulling him out of the molasses that are currently his thoughts. “Don’t ever get involved in any fights here, okay? Just get Charlie, and if he isn’t around, just wait till it’s over.”

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees and tries not to feel the slight pang at the notion that Len doesn’t believe him fit to deal with such a situation on his own.

Which is ridiculous, really, because who is he kidding? He gets accidentally mixed up in a bar fight and the best outcome is him nursing a broken nose. People like the one visiting the Saloon respect someone like Charlie, like Len, or Mick, men who can physically intimidate them.

Barry on the other hand… He probably can’t even intimidate a fly.

Sighing softly, Barry rubs his eyes, feeling heaviness in his bones due to the late hour. He didn’t sleep too well last night. His abdomen troubled him again, and he dreamed of Michael of all people.

“You’re closing in two hours,” Len points out as he watches him, helping Barry to push thoughts of that awful man away. “Do you want to stay over at the hideout tonight?”

Initially, Barry planned on returning to his apartment, he promised Eddy that they will meet up tomorrow noon to plan out a surprise goodbye party for Mary. It won’t be anything big, really just the three of them, but they still agreed upon brainstorming to come up with a nice little surprise.

Barry will be able to get home before that even if he spends tonight at the Rogues’ current hideout,
though, and the thought of having Len close-by is comforting, calming his still somewhat riled up emotions.

He gives him a small, tender smile and nods. “I-I’d l-like t-to.”

Len returns his smile, and Barry wishes they were alone so that he could get closer to him, seek out his arms, and the reassurance and security, which come with that.

They are at the Saloon, though, and here, among all the other lowlife patrons, that would never happen.

It’s only a little longer, though, and having Len there, sitting at the bar, is enough for now.

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“Did you know that Phoebe’s babies weren’t really her brother’s?”

Barry, who has been following Chandler’s antics on the screen, arches an eyebrow and turns to James. “Wh-What?”

“It doesn’t add up,” James explains with a shrug, looking over to him. “Timewise. She must have been pregnant already when she agreed to be the host mother of his child.”

“Wh-Wha… R-Really?” Barry turns back to the TV, frowning, and cocks his head to the side, trying to remember the timeline of that particular event of the show.

“Yeah, her pregnancy only lasted about four months if she really got pregnant from the in vitro,” James points out and sips at his coke.

“Sh-She g-got p-pregnant in F-Feb-bruary, right?” Barry asks as he recalls the episode when Phoebe announces her intent to help her brother with getting kids. “B-But w-we d-don’t kn-know wh-when sh-sh she g-gave b-bith…” His eyes widen a bit as he recalls the basketball tickets from Monika. “Oh…”

“Exactly.” James nods, looking quite satisfied with himself. “She supposedly got pregnant around February and gave birth sometime in May. Four months tops, which is too short, even if you consider that multiple births usually happen earlier during pregnancy.”

“Huh…” Barry picks up a piece of buttery popcorn and pushes it into his mouth, chewing on it thoughtfully for a moment before frowning. “Th-That’s awf-ful. Th-That g-gives th-the wh-whole s-story a-a t-totally d-different s-spin, a-and wh-why Ph-Phoebe r-really d-d-didn’t w-want t-to p-part f-from th-th the b-babies.”

“Yup.” James turns back to the screen. “Pretty messed up.”

“Sh-Sheesh, th-thanks,” Barry mutters darkly, causing his friend to laugh.

“Come on, Bear.” James who is sitting next to him on the big and very comfortable couch his apartment has to offer, shoots him a fond grin. “It’s only a show, timelines don’t have to match up, I’m sure if you look into that kind of stuff, most series don’t make sense.” He pauses and adds with an ominous voice. “And many more dark and twisted secrets would probably be unveiled.”

Barry snorts and shoots him an amused look. “N-No th-thanks, i-in th-that c-case, I l-l-like m-my sh-shows s-sweet a-and i-innoc-cent.”
“Pfff.” James waves him off. “Everything gets better with a dark twist, it makes things more interesting.”

“I-I s-stick t-to th-the b-boring s-stuff th-then.” Barry takes another popcorn piece and lets himself sink a little deeper into the soft cushion. “I-I l-like h-happy a-and b-boring.”

“Yeah,” James agrees, and Barry can nearly feel the affectionate glance his friend is shooting his way then. “I think I really prefer happy and boring too.” After a second, he adds in a much wearier sounding tone, “Life can be pretty dark on its own as it is.”

Barry glances over to his friend, with a slight frown, feeling sympathy settle in his guts.

James has been gone for the majority of the last two months, only returning a couple of times in between business trips overseas and meeting up with family in China, and even then, he usually didn’t stay long enough for them to be able to meet.

They did stay in contact via phone, though, with James calling Barry at least once a week and a text message every other day, even though Barry couldn’t reply all that often due to the costs. It is nice, though, to hear the notification sound of his phone and see that James sent him another photo or just a couple of words, informing him where he is and what he is doing.

Even so, Barry did miss his friend, more so than he would have initially thought. James was a lot like Mary, a calm, sweet person who made it easy to be around them.

The episode comes to an end, and James gets up, stretching himself a little like a cat before yawning. It is only half past three in the afternoon, but James is still feeling the jet lag from arriving in the States just yesterday, and Barry probably should get going, anyway. His shift starts in another two hours, and while James offered to drive him to his new workplace, he should let his friend get some rest.

Not to mention, that it doesn’t sit too well with him that James sees where he is working. He expressed quite an interest to eventually pass by at the Saloon to see him in action, as he calls it, but Barry really doesn’t think that is a good idea.

“You want to watch another episode?” James asks him, still standing, and yawns again. He huffs in frustration and grumbles. “Damn time zones, I swear it’s getting more difficult to get used to the change every time I travel somewhere.” He shakes his head, slumping his shoulders in defeat. “I’m really starting to get old.”

“Y-You are,” Barry agrees earnestly and grins when he gets a glare in return.

“Hey, you’re not supposed to agree with me,” James protests, the amusement plain on his face despite his attempt of a scowl. “And I’m over a decade younger than you, so you really shouldn’t want to call me old.”

“Y-You’re a-as o-old a-as y-you f-feel,” Barry informs him wisely.

“Well, in that case, I’m as old as dirt right now.” James grins and nods to the TV. “So, another episode?”

“I-I’m f-fine f-for n-now, i-if th-that’s ok-kay w-with y-you.”

“Did I scare you off Friends with my observation about Phoebe’s pregnancy?”

Barry snorts and shakes his head. “N-No, I-I th-think I c-can s-stomach th-that, b-but y-you sh-
should g-get s-some m-more s-sleep, a-and I-I sh-should g-get g-going.”

It will take him a little over an hour to get to the Saloon from here, and while this leaves him still with enough time to spare, he feels a little guilty about keeping his friend from getting some obviously needed rest.

“Nonsense, I told you I would drive you there,” James protests.

“Y-You d-don’t h-have t-to.”

“But I want to.” James sighs and gives him a look of exasperated fondness as he sits back down next to him. “Barry, it’s really not a bother, and I’m happy if I can spend some more time with you. I have to leave tomorrow again anyway, and I won’t be back for another two weeks.”

Barry feels his face fall at being reminded that James will be leaving so soon again.

“I’ll stay for a couple of months once this trip is over,” James assures him, not missing his reaction.

“I-know,” Barry agrees, trying to smile.

He doesn’t want James to feel bad for not being around more often, it’s due to his job and because of family business he has to take care of now that his grandmother is no longer around. James has to deal with a lot, and it clearly helped him with his grief to see his extended family in China, Barry is not holding this against him, he is glad his friend has them as support.

That doesn’t change the fact that Barry missed him over the last few weeks, and a part of him worries whether James could have decided to keep his distance due to his odd behavior after New Year, after Cameron…

“When I’m back, we’re going to celebrate my return at your new workplace, okay?” James asks, and Barry can’t help but chuckle since this is probably his sixth attempt to get him to agree that he can pass by.

“J-James, th-the S-Saloon i-i isn’t th-th-the s-safest p-place,” Barry reminds him once more. Since James knows about his friendship to the Rogues, Barry decided to tell him about the true nature of the bar, and initially, he thought that would discourage him from wanting to pass by, but that is obviously not the case.

“You tell me that I can’t blend in with the Twins’ notorious underworld?” James frowns which makes Barry roll his eyes.

“P-Probab-b-ly n-not.”

“Ouch, so little fate in your friends. That hurts, Barry.”

“L-Less th-than b-being g-ganged u-up on a-and b-beaten up b-because o-one of m-my c-custom-ers w-wants y-your w-wallet.”

“I will let you know what I’m pretty decent when it comes to defending myself.” James huffs, crossing his arms, nearly looking petulant for a second.

“I-I d-don’t d-doubt th-that,” Barry says, fondly. “B-But th-th-the p-people th-there a-are d-danger-rous.”

His friend’s fake annoyed expression changes to one of honest concern and Barry immediately
regrets having said the last part.

“I-It’s f-fine f-for m-me,” Barry swiftly assures him. “I-I’m n-not e-exactly l-looking l-like s-someone w-worth t-to g-go a-after, and Ch-Charlie is p-pretty s-strict a-about n-not m-mugging o-or o-otherwise d-damag-ging h-his e-emp-ployees.”

“That does not sound very reassuring,” James points out, warily.

“Y-You d-don’t n-need t-to w-worry, r-really.”

His words don’t seem to do much to settle James’ concern as he stays quiet, studying him with a bothered expression, that tells Barry that he doesn’t seem to have realizes what working at a place like the Saloon really means until now.

“Barry,” James eventually starts, his gaze troubled and uncertain, “you know that you can ask me for financial help if you are about to run out of your savings. You don’t have to work there just so you can keep yourself above water.”

“I’m d-doing f-fine.” Barry tries not to show the annoyance he feels just then.

“I’m not offering that because I think that you can’t take care of yourself.” James gives him an understanding, sympathetic look, and Barry feels himself relax and the anger pass. “I know you can, but sometimes people go through rough patches, and it is completely okay to accept help from your friends in those situations.” He chuckles. “What else do you have friends for?”

It is easy to say so if you aren’t in the position of someone who has to live at the mercy of others, a very cynic part of Barry thinks.

James means well, as do Jay, and all the others and Barry knows that he shouldn’t be so averse towards the idea of accepting financial help, since he certainly would offer James the same if their roles were reversed, after all.

“I-It’s n-not r-really th-that I-I w-worry wh-what p-people th-think ab-about m-me…” Barry explains, frowning down at the hands in his lap. “It’s j-just th-that kn-knowing th-that I-I’m a-able t-to s-surv-vive o-on m-my o-oown… th-that I-I’m i-ind-i-depend-ent is… c-calming.” He shrugs helplessly and turns to meet James’ eyes. “I-I l-like w-work-k-ing, d-doing s-someth-thing w-with m-my t-time a-and h-having a p-purp-pose ag-again… a-and th-the S-Saloon r-really isn’t a-as b-bad as i-it m-may s-sound.”

Which is not entirely true, but not an outright lie either.

Barry is still getting used to his new working environment. While he doesn’t exactly look forward to interacting with the majority of their customers, or how taxing currently everything still is, he does like having a job, doing something useful with his time, even if it is just serving drinks and cleaning after others.

James studies him silently, but there is understanding in his eyes, which tells Barry that he gets it. It doesn’t surprise him, James is a very empathic person and thus it must be easier for him to grasp why Barry has such troubles to accept others’ help than it is for most others.

“Okay.” James nods and smiles slightly, still a little worried, but he clearly tries not to show it. “I’m glad to hear that you got a new job, and I’ll take your word for it that it has been working out fine for you so far.” He hesitates, before adding. “But if you, for whatever case, decide not to stay there, you can always come to me for help, alright?”
“R-Right,” Barry agrees, returning the smile warmly, once again very glad that James decided to spontaneously call him this morning to ask him over so they could spend some time together, even if it did cost him some additional hours of sleep. “Th-thank y-you.”

“No thanks needed.” James waves him off before he pauses briefly. A sly smirk crosses his lips, and he adds, “Though you could show me your gratitude about having an amazing person like me as your friend by getting me a drink at this infamous bar you’re working at.”

Barry groans, annoyed, though his friend’s persistence is also quite amusing. “L-let's m-make a d-deal,” he suggests. “I-I’f I r-really end u-up g-getting th-the j-job, y-you c-can c-come a-and v-visit m-me, ok-kay?”

“It’s a deal,” James agrees easily, which is only a little unexpected since Barry didn’t think that he was willing to back off just like that.

“Don’t look so surprised.” James laughs, eyeing him fondly. “You will get the job, Barry, and I can wait for another month, I’m a patient person.”

James’ belief in him is touching, and Barry gives him a grateful smile. His friends believe in him, much more so than he does most of the time, and it helps to quiet the doubt that is nagging away at him as he is now about to face another Friday shift at the Saloon, one that will undoubtedly be as taxing as the last one.

“But, since I’m going to drive you to work anyway, how about another Friends episode?” James asks, and Barry doesn’t find it in himself to reject his offer this time.

“Th-That s-sounds g-good.”

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Barry is startled awake with a silent scream on his lips, and the feelings of terror and hopelessness still tangible enough that he scrambles away from where he is, from where he vaguely remembers the threat to be.

The ground suddenly vanishes under his hands, and his body tilts back, causing another surge of adrenalin to rush through his body, as he feels utterly disorientated for a second. He falls, only for what feels like a split-second, and smashes his head, hard enough that white stars start dancing in front of his eyes.

He is paralyzed for a second; believing that he is back there, back in… in… The Heights…

The abandoned newspaper factory…

In one of the many rooms, he was given as a child…

The confusion and disorientation are nearly nauseating, and Barry has no idea what is going on, just that he is in pain and doesn’t want to be hurt anymore.

Someone touches his shoulder, and he cries out, pushing himself away from the contact while waving his arms about to dissuade his attacker.

Barry pushes himself back, until he hits something again, a wall, and the realization that he is trapped is like a punch in his guts. He still can hardly make anything out, they have taken him somewhere
dark, and he knows that they won’t let him go until they don’t get what they want.

It’s always like that, they always take what they want, and he can only let them-

Barry coils up on himself, even though he is very much aware that this would anger them and only lead to more pain. He can’t help himself, though, he is scared, and he doesn’t want to be used again, they hardly gave him any time to heal from… from…

Growing utterly still, it is briefly as if his mind is hovering in empty space, surrounded by the sound of static, and he feels oddly detached from everything.

He isn’t…

Barry sucks in a breath, swallowing around the lump in his throat, and blinks, tears slipping down his cheeks as he notices that it is no longer dark. He can see a room but his mind hasn’t caught up yet, and it makes no sense to him.

“-Barry?”

Someone is saying his name.

He shivers, coiling up a little more again, and squeezes his eyes shut.

“Shhh, it’s alright, you’re fine,” the voice tells him, soothingly. It is low, warm, a little craggy, like its owner just woke up. “You’re safe, Barry.”

Safe?

No, he isn’t, someone just hurt him, he can still feel their hands on him, the pain throbbing in his head…

But he hit his head when he fell…

“Barry?” the voice asks again, still calm, but Barry can make out the worry that lies underneath it. “Are you with me?”

He knows that voice.

Shivering, Barry lifts his head slightly, so that he isn’t hiding his face behind his knees anymore, and squints at whoever is with him.

Again, he can make out his surroundings, see what and who is there, but it takes his mind a painfully long moment to really register where he is.

“Barry?”

Barry blinks, slowly, and feels his muscles relax as he recognizes who is with him.

Len is crouching next to him, watching him with a worried, uncertain expression, and repeats when their eyes finally meet. “Are you with me again?”

Is he?

Barry blinks again, returning Len’s look while the last tendrils of fear let go of him and instead are replaced by an exhausted calm.
He has had a nightmare. A pretty bad one, judging by how he is lying coiled up on his bedroom floor.

“S-S-Sor-ry…” Barry mumbles and closes his eyes for a moment.

“Barry?” Len still sounds unsure, concerned, and Barry swallows or tries to since his mouth feels as dry as a desert all of sudden.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Barry murmurs and takes another deep breath before looking back at him. He smiles tiredly. “S-Sor-ry f-for w-wak-ing y-you…”

Len snorts, some of the tensions leaving his shoulders, though the frown stays on his face, and it isn’t lost on Barry that the whole episode probably must have been quite unsettling to him.

“I-I h-had a-a n-nightm-mare,” Barry explains, probably unnecessarily, but he still feels a little out of it.

Len shifts his position so that he ends up kneeling in front of him. “Must have been a pretty bad one, hm?”

Barry hums in agreement, and he rests his head back onto the floor while his tight grip around his knees loosens.

He exhales a soft, weary sigh, and notices how his heart starts to slow down, no longer drumming against his chest as if it was trying to break out.

“Can I help you back onto the bed?” Len asks after a long moment passed by in silence between them.

“T-Touch-ching i-isn’t a-a g-good i-idea r-right n-now.” Barry shoots him an apologetic look, his eyes half-lidded.

The detachment that starts to settle over Barry is welcome. It helps him to not feel the emotions he knows are flickering anxiously just beneath the surface of his mind, and he would much rather not freak out again, especially not with Len around, who hasn’t had the doubtful honor of seeing him like this before.

“Is it alright if I stay here?” Len is still watching him like he doesn’t believe him when he says that he is fine. Barry can hardly hold that against him, he is pretty sure he made quite an impression and probably looks worse than he feels.

Barry nods, and finally Len shifts into a cross-legged seat, about an arm’s length away from him.

Silence settles back over them, and Barry is glad that Len doesn’t try to talk with him right now. He still doesn’t feel like he is completely there yet.

It has been a while since he was woken up by one of his nightmares, even after his last kidnapping, which was one of the most traumatizing experiences he had to endure in a long while, he didn’t react this strongly.

Usually, he is pretty good at distinguishing reality from what his mind comes up with to haunt him, even if the nightmare had a strong grip on him.

His new job at the Saloon seems to be much more taxing on his psyche than he thought, and last night’s shift didn’t help.
He has a feeling that he isn’t going to get used to Saturdays at the bar for quite a while, due to how nasty some of their customers can be.

It is overwhelming in a horrible way that makes him feel utterly helpless, and that is probably the actual reason for where his mind took him tonight.

The dream started with him being locked somewhere dark, voices of past abusers just outside the door, and then he was surrounded by the wards again, them kicking and punching him till Michael told them to stop and just hold him down.

Tears slip down Barry’s cheeks as he recalls the emotions he experienced that moment, the hate, the desperation, the fear, the humiliation…

Usually, Michael or Puckett end up raping him in those scenarios, but tonight it wasn’t one of them but Cameron, who called him his doll and promised to take good care of him.

It is odd, Cameron has been haunting him a lot lately, even though he is the only man he can be sure won’t come back to cause him any troubles in future. That twisted man never really lost his grip on his sub consciousness and is still able to terrorize him during the hours he can’t control his thoughts.

“L-Len?”

“Hm?” Len meets his eyes with a once again much calmer if still concerned expression and Barry brushes his thumb across the smooth metal band on his ring finger as he wonders why he just spoke.

“C-Can I-I…” He breaks off, unsure how to go on since he only has an inkling of what he is trying to say. His mind feels scrambled, disconnected, and a part of him knows that now is a good time as any to tell Len about what happened when he was Cameron’s hostage. It possibly could even help him to get the memory of that damn man to finally leave him be seeing that he has grown really tired of having to be scared of him.

He can simply go on like he has so far, ignore it, not telling anybody about it. He has done so many times in the past and eventually, the nightmares will change their focus again, shift to other memories to terrorize him, he just needs to be patient.

It’s different now, though. Back then, Barry didn’t have someone who knew what happened to him and whom he could open up to about it.

Now he has Len and maybe…

“What is it, baby?” Len encourages him, and Barry shifts his attention back to him, meeting his eyes with uncertainty and hesitation, but there is also hope that is persisting in his chest, where his heart is beating in a much slower, calmer rhythm again.

“C-Can I-I t-tell y-you a-ab-bout wh-when I-I w-was w-with C-Camer-ron?” Barry asks quietly and waits with baited breath as Len appears truly caught off-guard for a long moment.

The surprise quickly gives way to calm, and Len’s expression seems to soften a little as he eventually nods. “Of course.”

Barry is both relieved and not that his friend agrees to this, and for a long moment he doesn’t do anything, just keeps lying there quietly, staring past Len’s head, as the gravity of what is about to happen starts to sink in.

Len stays quiet, waits patiently, and eventually, Barry pushes himself up into a sitting position so that
his back can rest against the cool wall.

The numbness is still there, and Barry is grateful for it because he knows that without the detachment he likely wouldn’t be able to open up so easily.

As it is, he starts to talk, voice low, a little craggy, and before he knows it, the words are tumbling out his mouth, as he describes everything, from the moment he woke up bound to the chair, to when Eddy turned up to save him from Thaddeus.

He stumbles through Cameron’s assault, his eyes firmly on the ground between them, and he digs his fingers painfully hard into his shins, unable to stop, even as he starts to cry.

In the end, when everything is said, he is left feeling exhausted to such a degree that he doubts he could get up and move even just a few feet over to his bed. He doesn’t feel lighter, not really, more like he has been emptied, and now there is an odd, nearly disconcerting silence left behind.

Len has listened to all of it quietly, and Barry doesn’t dare to lift his gaze to meet his, half afraid of what he would see there.

The sensible part of him knows that Len won’t find him disgusting, or think that he is responsible for what happened. The fear of his reaction persists, though, draining Barry even more.

Barry tenses up when he hears Len move, but he keeps his eyes firmly down on the floor.

A hand appears in his field of vision, not reaching all the way to touch him but only hovering there, and he hesitantly glances up to the other man.

Len looks tired too, Barry notices, that and angry, even though he tries to mask it below a façade of cool.

“Can I take your hand?”

The question surprised him, it is not what he expected Len would ask.

He nods and lets go of his shins, lifting his right hand. Len takes it, holds it in a light but comforting grasp, his skin warm and callous against Barry’s.

“Thank you for telling me this.” Len gives him a faint smile, while the anger and sadness are hardly hidden in his hazel eyes. Barry understands that these emotions aren’t meant for him, though.

“I know that this wasn’t easy for you,” Len proceeds, squeezing his hand lightly, reassuringly.

Barry wants to return his smile, to somehow acknowledge his words, but his eyelids start to grow heavy, it starts to get difficult to even just keep his head up.

“Can I help you to bed?” Len repeats his earlier question, and Barry hears himself mumble something in response, but isn’t sure what he says.

Len seems to take it as an agreement since he gets up, and Barry finds himself in bed just a moment later, humming pleased as his back touches his mattress.

“Sleep,” Len tells him and cups his left cheek. “I’m here.”

“L-Lenny…” Barry reaches up to touch the hand that grounds him with his own, and there is more he wants to say, he just doesn’t know what, and before long, he drifts off to sleep, feeling safe and his mind quiet for the first time in a long, long while.
I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! :) 

I'm keeping myself a little short here since I have a big exam coming up tomorrow for which I still have to go over my notes once more. Even though I'm currently on holiday, I've way less time on my hands that I thought I would with visiting friends and family, and studying for upcoming exams.

Still, I was able to finish chapter 107 yesterday, which is awesome, because now I've finally reached the part of Singularity that is mostly already written. Though, going over it again, it's clear that I've still my work cut out for myself because of how my English skills and writing have evolved even just over the last two years.

It is still great and will certainly make the whole writing process for further chapters much easier. This is especially convenient right now with how the next couple of months until the end of the year will be super busy for me because of the project I work for, and I probably won't have that much time to write (which saddens me already).

Anyway, I'm done rambling. ;)

I want to thank Quintessennza at this point once again for his excellent help; he was able to go over this chapter despite everything else that keeps him busy right now, and I'm seriously lucky that I found such an amazing editor like him. So please bear in mind that he puts a lot of effort into this story and the chapters you are reading as well. :) 

Also, a big thank you to everyone who left me a comment for the last chapter; I'm always happy to hear from you. :) 

Next chapter will have Barry join the Garricks, Max, and Bart for dinner, which may turn out to be a belated birthday dinner for him.

Have a wonderful two weeks till then!
Barry hurries the ten feet from the exit of his apartment complex through the cold rain and ducks in
the waiting car, glad that Max is on time since the weather hasn’t improved at all since last night.

Much to his grief, the cold, wet air has started to make his joints tingle again these days when he was
outside for too long.

He just pulled the door closed behind him, returning the other man’s greeting, when he looks to the
backseat, and freezes.

It’s empty.

“Jay told me you found a new job.”

Barry glances over to Max, who is watching him with a relaxed expression and doesn’t seem to have
picked up on his unease yet.

Or maybe he has gotten so used to Barry being strung up all the time that he doesn’t notice it
anymore.

“Y-Yes.” Barry shifts nervously, shaking off the brief stupor, and fastens his seatbelt with clumsy
hands. He tries not to show how uneasy it makes him feel to be alone with the other man in such a
small, closed-off space. “I-It’s i-in a-a b-bar.”

He expected Bart to be here as well, the boy usually is there with Max when the older man picks him
up, and he thought that would be the case today too.

“Congratulations.” Max pulls the car back out into the traffic. “I’m happy your search finally paid
off.”

“Th-Thanks,” Barry murmurs and forces himself to still when he notices that he is edging away from
the other man. Max doesn’t seem to have noticed, or is polite enough to ignore it since he keeps his eyes on the street and the relaxed aura that is surrounding him doesn’t change.

It’s Monday afternoon, and for that the traffic isn’t too bad as they join the other cars at Rood Street, meaning that it will probably take them no more than twenty minutes to get to Jay’s home.

“How do you like the job so far?” Max inquires further, glancing to him, an easy smile on his lips.

Barry shifts again, feeling a familiar nervous energy settle over his limbs and shrugs. “I-It’s d-different, v-very b-busy a-at t-times, a-and I-I’m s-s-still g-get-ting u-used t-to i-it…” He coughs awkwardly when his voice briefly wavers and licks his lips, shooting Max another anxious look out of the corner of his eyes. “I-It’s a-a g-good j-job, th-though.”

Max hums in agreement as he watches the traffic, using the turn signal as he changes to the second lane to speed up a little, and the unwelcome question occurs to Barry, what he must be thinking about him finding a job at a place like a bar.

Max knows who he was in the past and that he worked as a CSI, and him getting a job as a barman must probably appear as quite a demotion to him.

It is a stupid thing to worry about, Barry knows he shouldn’t feel self-conscious over what he is working, it really doesn’t matter to him as long as he has a job and earns money to be able to keep a roof over his head. At least, usually it doesn’t…

Barry turns to face the window, behind which other cars and the city are passing by, and tries to let go of the self-doubt that is riding the back of the exhaustion he is currently experiencing.

Getting used to his new sleeping schedule is difficult, and even though he felt bone-tired after coming home from work last night, he wasn’t able to fall asleep till shortly after eight and even then, his sleep was restless.

“I can imagine that it must be quite taxing to get used to working in a bar after you worked in a much quieter establishment,” Max comments, and, as expected, his words hold no reproach or scorn. “Are you working on the weekends as well?”

Barry nods, looking back to Max, and allows himself to relax a little. “Y-Yes… th-they a-are p-pretty… b-busy.”

Busy is an understatement if there has ever been one, but he thinks Max gets the gist of it judging by the sympathetic look the other man shoots him in return.

“You’re doing alright with that?” Max changes the lane again, passing a truck, and Barry briefly watches the much bigger vehicle, feeling uneasy about the question, even though it is a legit one and doesn’t mean that Max knows any of the little, ugly secrets he is keeping from most of the world.

“I-I’m g-get-ting u-used t-to i-it.” Barry shrugs, not sure what else to say.

Last Saturday was as awful as his first one, and Sunday was hardly any better, but he pushed through it, didn’t have a panic attack or breakdown, and he counts that as a win.

Eventually, it will get easier, he just has to press on, move forward and not let himself be dragged down by fear. It’s all only a question of time and him getting used to the new situation.

Charlie, bless the man, somehow seems to know exactly when Barry needs a break when he is close to buckling under the stress, and that helps too.
It is still a bit of a mystery to Barry why the man keeps him around, since his dealing with the crowd at times is hard to miss, and the mistakes he makes when he gets too anxious or scared do cause a lot of additional work. Charlie, despite his usual demeanor, tends to take it all with a surprising calm, hardly ever raising his voice at him, and while Barry doesn’t understand it, he is still grateful for the unexpected kindness.

“You’re not one to give up easily, are you?” Max’ question shakes Barry out of his thoughts, and he turns to him, unsure how to reply.

“It’s an admirable trait,” Max goes on and meets his eyes briefly.

“I-it’s n-not ab-bout n-not g-giv-v-ing u-up,” Barry disagrees and looks back to the cars passing next to him. “I-I’ve t-t-to e-earn m-money s-someh-how, wh-what e-else a-am I-I s-s-sup-posed t-to d-do?”

Absentmindedly, he notices that the rain that started last night is finally ceasing a little, though the column of clouds covering the sky is still as thick and dark as it has been for the majority of the month so far. Hopefully, the arrival of April will finally bring some nicer weather; Barry is missing the sun and a blue sky.

A brief silence follows, and guilt joins the unease as Barry realizes that his words were unnecessarily harsh, even petulant. Max is only trying to be nice; it is not his fault how difficult the last couple of months have been for him.

“People often lose sight of things that are important when they have to deal with a lot,” Max eventually says, voice calm, nearly comforting, and Barry can feel his eyes on him but keeps his own on the world flickering by next to him. “Even something like keeping a roof over their head, and nobody can fault them for it because everybody can only deal with so much.”

Barry grits his molars hard enough that a sharp pain spikes through his jaw joints, frustrated and somewhat unsettled about the other man’s words and not liking at all where this is heading.

“What I’m trying to say,” Max retracts, probably picking up on his unease, “is that I find it admirable how well you deal with everything. Many people would not have been able to do so on their own.”

“I-I’m n-not o-on m-my o-own,” Barry points out wearily, already tired of this conversation. “I-I’ve p-people wh-who h-helped m-me… wh-who a-are s-still h-help-ping m-me.”

“Eddy and Mary,” Max states knowingly.

“Y-Yes…” Barry agrees, and it is a little upsetting that he can’t mention Len and the others as well. They deserve to have their role acknowledged, they have done so much for him over the years, after all. He could never tell anybody like Max or Jay about that, though. They would probably think that he was mad or a liar, and he would be back in the Heights within hours.

“I’m happy you have someone like them, Barry,” Max says, sincerely, and Barry feels the last traces of anger leave him.

“M-Me t-too.” Barry glances back to Max and tries to change the topic. “I-Is B-Bart alr-ready a-at J-Jay’s?”

“Yes, he stayed over there last night,” Max explains. “He wanted to assist Joan with the food.”

“H-How i-is J-Joan?” Barry asks.
“She’s doing great.” Max smiles fondly. “You can’t even tell what she’s been through over the last couple of months. Jay still looks more worn down after everything than she does.”

“Sh-She’s a-a f-fighter.” Barry warmly chuckles as he remembers Joan and how strong and full of life and energy she’s always been.

“She is,” Max agrees and glances over to him. “She is also very much looking forward to seeing you again.”

“M-Me t-too.” Barry’s smile softens, and he lowers his gaze to his lap, a little surprised by how very much he means it.

Joan has always been kind to him, even when he met her the last time, despite what the superhero community thinks of him these days.

His smile dims when he recalls that she never came to see him in prison, though, to be honest, he is glad she didn’t. He wouldn’t have wanted to see him like that. He still questions whether she ever believed these awful things he was accused of.

Out of all the people from his past, he thinks she is probably the only one other than Hal who would not have done so, not really, at least.

The rest of their drive goes by with little chat; Max notices that he is apprehensive and doesn’t feel much like talking, and he respects it, much to Barry’s gratitude.

The traffic stays mostly light, and they pull up at the Garricks’ house around the time Barry expected they would.

He is hardly out of the car, stepping into the light drizzle, when the front door of the one family home is pushed open, and Bart appears, grinning broadly, radiating joy. It is infectious, and Barry can’t help but chuckle softly when the boy runs up to him, hardly flinching this time when he is pulled into a tight hug.

“Grandpa, you came!” Bart exclaims happily and moves back to meet his eyes, still grinning from ear to ear.

“O-Of c-course, I-I s-said I-I w-would,” Barry points out, chuckling softly, and squeezes Bart’s arms lightly, happy to see the boy whose joy over his arrival quickly pushes away the clouds of unease that hung over him.

“We have a surprise for you,” Bart tells him excitedly, but quickly schools his features in a serious mask, or tries to, as he goes on, “but I’m not going to tell.”

“W-Well, n-now y-you’ve m-me a-all c-curious.” Barry smiles, even though the prospect of a surprise doesn’t sit too well with him. He did expect something of that kind, though, since Jay told him that they want to celebrate his birthday as well. He still thinks they shouldn’t put the focus away from Joan’s recovery, but he knows that his protest will only fall on deaf ears.

They make their way inside, leaving the cold late winter weather behind, and Barry is greeted by both Jay and Joan, the later one pulling him into an embrace as soon as he steps into the house. To Barry’s surprise and relief, he hardly tenses up in response.

“It’s so good to see you again, Barry,” Joan tells him, sounding heartfelt, which causes Barry to relax into her arms as he returns the hug.
“Y-You too, J-Joan.” The worry that stayed with Barry over her health eases as he can see for himself how well she is doing, how healthy and strong she is looking once more.

“Happy belated birthday, my boy.” Joan pulls back but doesn’t let go of him yet, smiling fondly. “And congratulations on your new job.”

“Th-thank y-you.” As Barry looks back into her warm, welcoming eyes, he decides that he made the right decision to come. It is nice to see her again, not only to make sure that she is doing alright but to experience how someone he thought lost still is happy to have him around.

She is not the only one, not anymore, but contrary to Jay and Max, she has never looked at him with suspicion or grave disappointment, which makes it still hard for him today not to feel angry at the other two men at times.

Having her back in his life is like a soothing balm, and he wishes he could tell her so, let her actually know what it means to him that she treats him with this kindness.

They move on to the living room after Barry took his coat and shoes off, and Bart insists on sitting next to him once again. He is fine with that, and while Joan and Jay return to the kitchen to get dinner ready, Max stays with them, listening quietly to Bart telling him all about his last month.

It turns out that Bart had quite an interesting couple of weeks in school, with their play doing well which lead to him joining their school’s theatre club.

“The other kids there are okay for the most part,” Bart informs him when Barry asks about how he liked it so far, though his excitement dims a little as he proceeds, “There’s that one boy, John, and his friends who are...” He hesitates and glances to Max before going on with a frown, “annoying, but I still like it.” His smile returns as he adds, “Mrs. Brown, our acting teacher, is nice, and she says that I have the energy needed to be a great actor.” He grins at that, very much pleased with himself.

“I-I’m s-sure y-you d-do,” Barry agrees amused, but can’t help wondering at the same time about who that John kid is, and whether he is picking on Bart. Bullies in school are something most children and teenagers have to deal with, but Bart seems to share his luck when it comes to being picked on. As far as Barry has learned by now, the boy seems to have real trouble fitting in, which is why he feels especially proud of him for joining the acting group, even though it must lie outside his comfort zone.

“I’ve also picked up drawing,” Bart goes on, excitedly, and much to Barry’s surprise, he learns that the kid has been putting a lot of focus on art since their visit to the museum. Max even got him a book with tips for beginning artists, that covers the basics of sketching.

“You want me to show you some of the sketches I did?” Bart asks hopefully, and when Barry agrees, the boy quickly runs upstairs to pick up the drawing pad, which he got along with the book. He doesn’t use his speed, but he is still back in no time, much to Barry’s amusement.

“I’m not good just yet.” Bart points out as he hands him the pad, and it isn’t lost on Barry how nervous and uncertain he suddenly appears, biting his lower lip as he expectedly watches him to pass judgment on his first couple of creations.

Barry briefly can see himself in the young teen's place, the insecurity shining through, and the desire for assurance and praise. It is painful in a way, but also endearing, and Barry wants to assure him that it doesn’t matter how well he draws, that it is only important that he does it because he enjoys it. He knows that this would diminish any praise he gives him then for his art, though, so that he instead turns to the art pad and opens it.
The first picture is that of an apple, it’s good, the lines are a bit clumsy, but the shading is subtle, giving it a three-dimensional look.

“Th-That’s r-really g-good,” Barry comments, causing Bart to sit up a little straighter as the grin from earlier returns to his lips. “Y-You u-used a-a r-real a-apple a-as a-a m-model?”

“Yeah,” Bart agrees, nodding. “The book said to do so, but I did use the drawn picture in it as a reference too…” He frowns. “The lighting changed all the time because I started the sketch in the afternoon.”

“Y-You d-did a-a r-really g-good j-job o-on th-this o-one,” Barry tells him once more and smiles fondly when Bart preens a little at that. He goes on to the next one when the boy urges him to.

It’s a sketch of two hands, looking quite clumsier than the one of the apple prior to it, though drawing a hand is much more challenging than an apple, and for drawing them for the first time, they still turned out very well.

“I used a picture from a magazine for these,” Bart explains. “I tried to draw mine, but they turned out stupid looking.”

“D-Does th-the b-book y-you h-have e-exp-plain t-to y-you h-how t-to b-build u-up a-a b-body b-by th-the u-use o-of s-simple g-geom-metric f-figures?” Barry inquires curiously because he too had trouble drawing hands for the longest time before he started to use that method.

“Yeah…” Bart doesn’t look exactly thrilled about that question and crosses his arms. “But it never worked out how it should. They ended up looking even worse when I tried to draw them that way.”

“I c-can sh-show y-you h-how I-I d-do i-it l-later o-on i-if y-you w-want t-to,” Barry offers and isn’t in the least surprised when Bart immediately jumps at the offer, excited by the prospect.

The next couple sketches are similar to the first one; they are mostly of items you find around your house. There is also an attempt of drawing a face, and while Barry assures Bart that it turned out well for the first time, the boy doesn’t look convinced, so that he decides to show him how to set the proportions of a face later as well.

It is the sketch or rather drawing on the page after that that causes him to still for a second, a heaviness settles into the pit of his stomach as he studies the little comic version of the Flash looking back at him.

“I did that one just last night,” Bart informs him, cheerfully, though the slight apprehension he is watching him with isn’t lost on Barry. “I copied it from a Flash comic Jay had lying around.” He fidgets a little, nervously, and points out, “It’s you.”

Barry swallows, fights the stupor off that tries to settle over him, and forces himself to smile. “I-It’s r-really g-good.”

It is, an excellent copy, and Barry even thinks he recognizes the style, from an artist who stuck to the ongoing Flash series for the majority of his time as the scarlet speedster. Briefly, he wonders how the Flash looks in the comics these days, but the thought is only fleeting. He doesn’t want to know in the end.

“Y-You d-did a-a r-r-real-ly g-good j-job w-with th-this o-one,” Barry assures Bart after noticing how his face has started to fall. “M-Maybe y-you c-can b-bec-come a c-c-comic b-book a-artist y-yours-self o-one d-day.”
“You like it?” Bart asks again, sounding small and uncertain, which causes a pang in Barry’s chest, who shakes off the lingering touch of misery the unexpected memory of his past life brought along.

“Y-Yes.” It’s not even a lie. This little piece means a lot to Bart, and because of that, it also does to Barry.

Bart believes in him, no matter what, and he wants Barry to do the same. He is still just a kid, but he is still smart enough to pick up that Barry is pained by his past as the Flash, and he tries to get him to reconcile with it in his way.

“I-It’s r-really g-good,” Barry tells Bart once more and gives him a smile he hopes looks more real this time.

Jay chooses that moment to return to them with drinks, and Barry uses that opportunity to close the drawing pad, handing it back to Bart, who still seems uncertain over his reaction and accepts it quietly.

“Did you show Barry your drawings?” Jay asks, fondly, as he notices Bart’s pad.

“Yes,” Bart agrees somewhat subdued, and Barry regrets the way he reacted, it put a damper on the kid’s good mood.

“H-He h-has t-talent,” Barry points out in an attempt to cheer his grandson up a little. “I-I’m r-really i-imp-pressed.”

“Your art teacher said so too, didn’t he, Bart?” Max, who has stayed quiet so far, asks Bart encouragingly.

“Yeah…” Bart nods but keeps frowning down at his drawing pad.

“I-I’m g-going t-to g-give h-him s-some t-tips a-after d-dinner, i-if th-that’s a-alr-right.” Barry turns to Jay, who picked up on the shift in the mood and is now also studying Bart with slight concern.

“Of course,” Jay agrees, and this seems to do the trick as Bart’s downcast demeanor immediately improves again, though some of the gloom seems to stick.

Any further conversation regarding Bart’s new hobby is put on hold when Joan calls for her husband from the kitchen, asking him to help her get the food on the table.

The meal Joan prepared looks as delicious as Barry expected it would. It is simple, meatloaf with mashed potatoes and roasted parmesan green beans as sides, but it is one of Barry’s favorites from her, a food he connects with comfort, coming close to tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches.

“I-It l-looks a-amaz-zing, J-Joan,” Barry tells her, and he is truly looking forward to tasting the meal.

“Thank you, my dear.” Joan accepts the compliment with a pleased smile. “I remember how much you always liked this one.”

Warmth blooms in Barry’s chest, the thought that she could have made this dinner with him in mind is touching, and he nods in agreement, not trusting his voice.

“I helped her,” Bart points out. “I mashed the potatoes and helped with the beans.”

“He did an excellent job,” Joan agrees fondly.

“Maybe, next to becoming an artist, you could also work as a chef on the side, what do you think,
“Bart?” Max asks his charge.

“Nope,” Bart declines, popping the p, and glances briefly to Barry. “I’m still going to become a CSI.”

Barry tenses up at that, worried how the others would react, even though he knows that Bart’s plans for his future can hardly be a secret to them.

“You have to keep your grades up if you’re serious about that,” Jay reminds Bart, and he sounds so calm about it, that Barry shoots him a nonplussed look.

“I am.” Bart huffs exasperated. “I’m now the best in my math and chemistry classes, and second in biology.” He looks at Barry, expectantly, clearly proud of his achievements.

“Th-That’s r-really am-mazing,” Barry praises him, surprised to learn that. He knew that Bart improved quite dramatically in chemistry, but he didn’t know that he did so in other subjects as well.

It seems that Bart still is serious about his intent to become a CSI, at least for now, and while Barry keeps hoping that the kid would change his mind, it is nice to know that it at least causes his marks to improve.

“It is,” Max agrees, though he eyes Bart with a rather displeased frown as he goes on. “It would be even more amazing if he put the effort in all his subjects and not neglected the rest of them.”

“I don’t need English or History to become a CSI,” Bart grumbles but looks somewhat embarrassed.

“You need it to pass your classes,” Max reminds him drily.

“I’m going to pass, don’t worry about it.”

“You got an F on your last History exam.”

“Because the teacher hates me!”

“Bart, your teacher certainly doesn’t,” Max argues, making a long-suffering face at that, and it is evident that this isn’t the first time they have this discussion.

“He does,” Bart insists, glaring down at his plate, and Barry is a little surprised his meatloaf doesn’t go up in flames by the intensity of it.

“Mr. Roberts does not; he even gave you the opportunity to improve your marks by making a presentation. Not every teacher would have done that.” Max’ words fall on deaf ears as Bart doesn’t budge from his point that his History teacher dislikes him and won’t let him pass because of that.

“He will let you fail because you’ve put hardly any effort into researching the topic of your presentation in the last week,” Max reminds him, exasperatedly.

“Why should I bother if he doesn’t let me pass anyway?” Bart’s logic certainly is a little faulty there, and Barry, who can see that this is the type of argument that could go in circles for hours, decides to interject.

“Wh-What’s y-your p-present-tation s-sup-posed t-to b-be ab-bout?”

“About Ancient Rome,” Bart explains with a heavy sigh, looking quite morose, “I’m supposed to tell him about Roman Entertainment…” He scowls down at his plate, pushing his food around listlessly. “… in front of the class.”
Seeing how uneasy he seems about that part of his presentation, Barry gets the slight suspicion that Bart’s unwillingness to do this task is not only due to a lack of interest in the subject or his teacher’s dislike of him but rather connected to how he doesn’t want to speak in front of his peers.

He can very much relate to that; he hated to talk in front of his class as a child; it was always an awful experience.

“M- Maybe I-I c-can h-help y-you w-with i-it?” Barry offers. “W-When a-are y-you s-supposed t-to h-hold i-it?”

“Really?!” Bart’s head snaps back up at that, giving him a hopeful look. “N-Next w-week on W-Wednesday, a-and I’m sure y-you can h-help m-e!” He sounds so excited by the prospect of them working together on that project that Barry knows he can hardly say no now.

He shoots Max an apologetic look, seeing that he didn’t ask him about it beforehand. “I-I w-would l-like t-to i-if th-tha-t’s a-a-lright w-with y-you, M-Max.”

“Of course,” Max agrees, but studies him with a slight frown. “A- Are y-you sure you have the time for it, t-though? Y-you’ve j-just s-started a n-new j-job, a-and I k-know how t-taxing t-that c-can b-e.”

“-I-It’s f-fine-” Barry stops when he remembers the fact that he is working on the weekend, and realizes guiltily that this probably won’t work out after all. As he points that out to Max and Bart, the later quickly assures him that it won’t be a problem.

“I can come over to your place after I’m done w-with s-school,” Bart explains and g-gives M-Max a p-pleading l-look. “P-Please?”

“As l-long a-as y-you d-don’t s-skip a-ny o-f y-your c-classes a-and s-still g-get y-your h-homework d-done o-n t-time, I-d-don’t s-ee w-why n-not,” Max allows and t-turns t-to B-Barry. “If t-tha-t’s r-really a-alright w-with y-you.”


“S-Sure!” Bart agrees and is q-quick t-to p-point o-out t-to M-Max, “[I] o-only h-have t-till o-one o-n M-Mon-da-ys a-an-yw-ay.”

“I’m s-sure B-Barry w-will h-help y-you p-put an e-excellent p-presenta-tion t-together,” Joan r-results, w-warmly. “H-H-He i-is g-good w-with t-those.”

S-She d-doesn’t m-men-tion th-that s-she k-knows s-so b-because I-Iris a-and B-Barry h-helped W-Wally a-lot w-with t-them d-during h-his t-time i-in s-school, s-something l-likely n-nobody p-present a-at t-the t-table w-would w-want t-to b-be r-reminded o-of. B-Barry s-still a-appreciates h-her k-kind w-words.

T-The t-topic c-changes t-to h-how J-Jay’s a-and J-Joan’s m-move b-back t-to t-the T-Twinn’s w-went, a-and w-what s-she i-is p-planning t-to d-do n-now t-that s-she d-defeated c-cancer a-and d-doesn’t h-have t-to s-stay i-in h-hospitals m-most o-of h-her t-time a-an-yw-ay.

C-Con-trary t-to t-the l-ast t-time B-Barry j-joined t-them f-for d-dinner, h-he f-feels m-much m-more r-relaxed, e-enough s-so t-to b-be a-able t-to t-take p-part i-in t-the c-conversation, b-but h-he s-still p-prefers t-to l-listen f-for t-the m-most p-part.

S-Something i-is j-just s-soothing a-and n-nice a-bout b-being h-here, a-about t-the m-mundan-i-ity o-of t-talking a-bout J-Jay’s a-and J-Joan’s p-plans t-o r-renovate t-h-the k-kitchen, m-make a-trip t-to H-H-Hawai-i t-this S-Summer, a-and s-start a-yoga c-class i-in s-spring.

T-The l-last i-idea i-is o-one J-Joan c-came u-up w-with a-and J-Jay t-tries t-to a-appear l-like h-he i-is l-looking f-forward t-to i-it j-just a-a-as m-much a-as h-his w-wife i-is, b-but h-he r-really c-an’t p-pull i-t o-off. B-Barry g-gives h-him a s-sympathetic l-ook, r-remembering a-all t-too w-well w-when I-Iris d-dragged h-him t-to o-one o-f h-her P-Pilates c-classes, w-where t-the m-men t-to w-women r-ration w-were o-one t-to t-ten, a-and t-the o-o-nly o-o-her g-uy a-attending l-looked a-about a-as u-uncomfortable t-to b-be t-there a-as h-he f-felt.
It was one of many things they did together in the first couple of years of their marriage, and while he never took a liking to accompanying her to one of her fitness classes, it was still something she liked and wanted to share with him. He did the same with the comic and phantasy conventions he took her and Wally to. She indulged his hobbies, liked the small trips because they made him happy and not because she was interested in Lord of the Rings, Racoon Man, or any other hero.

Later, when the distance between them started to grow, he would dearly miss those days.

“Grandpa?” Bart steers Barry’s mind back to the present, and he notices how the boy eyes his left hand curiously-

No…

He is such an idiot!

“That’s a cool ring,” Bart remarks, eyeing the piece of jewelry curiously. “Is it new? I don’t think I’ve seen it before.”

How could he be so stupid to forget to take it off?!

Barry feels like smacking his forehead in frustration, but instead pulls his hand back as if he was burned, lowers it to his lap, and shoots a worried look at the other adults at the table, who have stopped talking and are now watching him.

He nodded off on his couch about an hour before Max picked him up, exhausted from the lack of sleep of the night prior, and when the other man called him, his mind was still so muddled, that he just didn’t remember the ring.

“I-It w-was a-a p-pres-sent,” Barry stammers, fighting down a shiver. He has to look ridiculously suspicious right now.

“Uh…” Bart has picked up by now that he accidentally touched upon something he shouldn’t have, and tries to diffuse the tension by adding, sounding unsure, “It’s a really neat looking ring.”

“Is it from James?” Jay’s question catches Barry off-guard, and when he looks up to the other man, he notices the thoughtful way he is being studied with.

Barry stares at him and tries to protest, not even sure what excuse to come up with since his thoughts are nothing but a jumbled, anxious mess right now. His voice takes care of that for him once more, though, and he flushes in embarrassment when he isn’t able to produce anything but a croak.

“I don’t think it matters who gave Barry that ring,” Joan interjects, throwing her husband a slightly disapproving look, which causes him to lift his hands with a sheepish smile. “I’m just curious, my dear.” He turns to Barry and assures him too, “I didn’t mean anything by that question, Barry.”

Barry nods, averting his eyes back to his plate, and takes another bite of his meatloaf, which suddenly tastes rather stale.

Their conversation returns to safer topics after that, and Barry can relax again, though he stays more withdrawn as the unease over having Len’s gift with him perseveres.

He doesn’t miss the guilty looks Bart keeps sending him, and smiles at the kid, hoping that he can convey that way that he isn’t angry with him for pointing the ring out. Bart seems to get it, as the worried expression mostly lifts from his face, though he still stays unusually subdued for the rest of the meal.
They eventually touch upon Barry’s new job, as he has expected and somewhat dreaded, since he would rather not give away the name of the bar, since Jay knows of it, and it would undoubtedly lead to uneasy and dangerous questions.

To his relief, the others seem to pick up on his unease, and against his worry, they quickly let the topic drop again. It is mostly due to Joan, who decides that it is time for some coffee, prompting Jay to start collecting the dishes and firmly declining Barry’s offer to help.

While Joan seems alright with not knowing any specifics about his new occupancy, both Jay and Max seem less satisfied, and Barry is confident that his nervousness probably tipped them off that he is hiding something.

Even so, neither tries to make him talk about his job again.

When Jay returns with a stack of dessert plates, Barry wonders whether there would be cake, and then he notices the thrilled looks Bart shoots in his direction, and he remembers the boy’s words from earlier about the surprise.

It isn’t unexpected to him thus when Joan and Jay return a couple of minutes later with coffee and delicious looking cake that is adorned by a rather garish 43 candle, which Bart promptly points out, he picked.

“I initially wanted to get forty-three candles,” Bart informs him and shoots Max a rather dour look, “but Max said that I couldn’t.”

“I think the candle you decided to get still looks lovely, Bart,” Joan assures him, amused fondness glinting in her eyes. She turns to all of them and declares, “We can’t have any cake before we don’t sing Barry Happy Birthday.”

“N-No… th-that’s n-not n-nec-cessar-ry,” Barry stammers as his cheeks grow warm in response.

“But it’s part of having your birthday celebrated,” Bart points out, a little disappointed. “We sung it also to Jay’s and Max’s birthday parties.” He frowns as he adds, “and Wally’s.”

“They also sang Happy Birthday to my last birthday,” Joan informs him, smiling, “and I’m nearly double your age, my dear.”

Shifting uneasily, Barry feels a little like he is being pushed into a corner, even though he knows that they only mean well, and them singing Happy Birthday to him is hardly something that should unsettle him.

He is being silly again, he decides, and finally nods his agreement, unsure where to look when they start to sing.

It’s a kind gesture, and it reminds him of past birthdays he celebrated together with the Garricks and the rest of his family. Back, when they still were whole, when Iris was around, and Wally, and while they didn’t only have good times, they still were happy together…

He swallows around the lump in his throat as he realizes with a painful clarity once more how he would never be able to share another birthday with Iris or Wally, both gone from his life, one dead, one hating him with a frightening intensity.

This shouldn’t hurt so much; this is nothing he didn’t know before. Things are different now, he will never regain what he once lost, and he has to deal with it.
His family is gone.

Barry stumbles to his feet, and he is too upset, his thoughts too jumbled, so that he finds himself outside the house, in front of the entrance door, unable to even just recall how he got here.

His breath is going quick, and he is gulping down the cold air that smells of rain, feeling like someone is pressing done on his chest, making it difficult to breathe, while his heart races like crazy in his chest.

“Barry?” Jay appears behind him a second later, sounding very concerned.

“S-S-Sor-ry…” Barry grits out, rubbing his face and hating to feel the warm wetness there that mingles with the one of the still falling rain. “I-I’m s-s-sor-ry… I-I j-just…” He huffs in frustration over his reaction, how he seems unable just to accept where he is in his life and let go of the past, and how this would certainly have spoiled the mood for the others as well. Especially for Bart, who just wanted him to have a nice dinner with them.

“It’s okay,” Jay assures him as he steps out, so he stands next to him, pulling the door close behind him. “There is nothing you have to apologize for.” The concern is evident on his face as he proceeds, “I’m sorry that we upset you.”

“N-No.” Barry shakes his head and takes a shuddered breath. “I-I’m j-just t-tired… I-I’ve t-troub-ble s-sleep-ping b-bec-cause o-of m-my n-new w-w-work-king sch-schedule…” It is a stupid excuse, and he grimaces unhappily.

“You don’t need to explain yourself, Barry,” Jay’s expression stays grim and worried as he studies Barry. “I can understand that this just now probably shook up some painful memories.” He exhales a long, weary-sounding sigh and rubs his eyes. He turns to look towards the streets with a deep frown.

“I know that this is hard for you, we all do.” The regret is thick in Jay’s voice as he speaks, and the painful knot in Barry’s chest is tightening as he listens.

“You didn’t get the same chance to make your peace with what happened as we did.” Jay huffs a humorless laugh and turns back to him, a sad smile on his lips. “We wanted for you to have a pleasant afternoon among family, but we forgot that we aren’t that anymore.”

Barry is silent, caught off-guard by Jay’s words, and doesn’t know how he should respond to this, or how even just to feel about what he has just heard.

Over the last couple of months, it has become apparent that Jay changed his opinion of him and the alleged crimes he supposedly committed, and it was also clear that he felt bad about believing any of it in the first place.

The amount of sorrow Jay displays just then is unexpected, though, and Barry feels thrown for a loop.

“I’m sorry,” Jay says again, shaking his head, looking tired, as if some invisible force is leeching the energy right off him. “I’m making this about us, and that’s not fair.”

“I-It’s f-fine,” Barry disagrees weakly.

For a long while after his powers were taken from him, and he was put into prison, he wanted the people he once considered family and friends to know that he is innocent, that he didn’t commit any of those horrible crimes they say he did. He wanted them to express remorse over it, to feel just as bad for what they did to him as he was forced to feel for so many years.
During the darkest days, a part of him hated them for how they could allow any of this to happen to him.

Being confronted by Jay expressing the regret Barry was hoping for just then and getting a glimpse of how the whole sad affair truly affects him, pains him, doesn’t provide any relief or satisfaction, though.

It makes Barry feel uneasy, frustrated even, because he wanted to get something from this, any compensation for what he has been put through, but nothing is rewarding about watching Jay, for once, looking truly his age under the weight of the guilt he is carrying around with him.

“It’s not fine, Barry.” Jay gives him a sharp look, not angry but intense.

Barry pauses for a moment and nods. “N-No, it isn’t,” he agrees quietly, “b-but w-we c-can’t ch-changed wh-what h-hap-pened.” He averts his eyes, directs them towards the street where a car passes by in the rain, as he adds curtly, “a-and I-I d-don’t w-wan-na talk a-ab-bout i-it…”

Jay is watching him, his gaze a faint pressure against the side of his face, but Barry keeps his own on the falling rain.

It is palpable that Jay wants to say more, but he seems to sense how on edge this makes Barry feel and that any further discussion of this topic won’t get them anywhere.

Not that now is the time or place to talk about it anyway, not with Joan, Max, and Bart waiting inside for their return to continue the birthday celebration Barry so masterfully botched.

As if on cue, the entrance behind them is opened once more, and Joan appears. “Is everything alright?” she asks, her eyes immediately falling on Barry.

The way she is watching him nearly causes him to choke up, it reminds him too much of how things were prior him losing Iris, Wally, and his powers, back when she and Jay used to be family. Back when he thought they loved him just as much as he loved them.

“Barry,” Joan speaks his name in a soft, comforting tone as she steps closer to him, and he tenses up in response. She catches it and stops, a sad, pained emotion flickering across her eyes that causes Barry to look away, feeling awful.

A brief, uncomfortable silence follows, which is eventually broken by Joan once more. “Would you like me to make you some tea, my dear? Chamomile, maybe? I think it would probably do us all good to drink something soothing instead of coffee right now.”

He thinks about declining, about choosing to leave instead, because he feels truly exhausted, much more so emotionally than physically, despite the lack of sleep from last night or the ones before, and once again he has to marvel how quickly an experience like this one can suck all energy right out of him.

Despite that, Barry doesn’t want to hurt Joan or Jay by doing so. He isn’t sure how he feels about them or their change of mind regarding him, but even at his angriest he never wanted them any ill, not really, as he realizes now.

Even though things changed for the worst and could never go back to where they once were, they still were the closest thing to parents he ever had.

“C-C-Chamomile s-sounds g-good,” Barry tells Joan with a faint smile, and a pang flashes...
through his chest when he sees how relieved she seems in response to his words.

They return inside, where Max is currently talking quietly to Bart who, as Barry noticed guiltily, looks quite upset.

That is, till he spots Barry and the sad expression is promptly replaced by a much brighter, relieved one.

“Grandpa!” Bart suddenly stands next to him, looking up at him with conflicted but hopeful eyes. “You’re not already leaving, are you?”

Again, Barry feels himself close to choking up, and his regret over storming out as he did intensifies even more.

“N-No,” Barry assures him with a faint smile, touching his shoulder lightly. “Th-There’s s-still c-cake w-we’ve y-yet t-to t-try.” He glances up to Joan, meeting her eyes. “Th-Though I-I’m s-sure i-it w-will t-taste j-just a-amaz-zing.”

“I’m sure it will too!” Bart agrees quickly. “Joan and I both made it together, I helped her with the cake and the icing, and you can have as many helpings as you want.”

Barry chuckles as a deep fondness blooms in his chest. He squeezes the boy’s shoulder affectionately. “N-Now I-I kn-kn-know th-that i-it w-will b-be g-great.”

Bart brightens at that and grins widely, clearly pleased by the compliment.

While Joan prepares some tea, Barry follows Bart and the others back to the table and asks for the boy’s drawing pad, which he is only hesitantly handed this time. The worried expression on Bart’s face vanishes quickly, though, when Barry starts to show him how to sketch out a body with the help of basic geometric figures.

It is as much to cheer up his grandson as to prevent Jay and Max from trying to get him involved in any small-talk. It is a little mean, but he doesn’t feel up to it with the unease persisting between him and the other two men.

Joan returns with the tea, and the candle on the cake is relit so that Barry, at Bart’s insistence, can blow it out and make a wish.

They skip the birthday song this time.

The cake turns out to be peanut butter, which Barry expected since Joan knows that it is his favorite, and while she never uses the same recipe, it still tastes as delicious as any of her previous creations. It is tasty enough that he even goes for a second slice, despite how his earlier upset mood temporarily ruined his appetite.

Things relax, and a conversation picks up once more as Barry asks Joan about the recipe for the cake. They somehow end up talking about Romanian pastries he was introduced to so far by Mary, who possesses an impressive sweet tooth.

Joan is quite interested in the friends he made and rolls her eyes when it comes up that Jay isn’t particularly fond of Eddy.

“Jay can be very overprotective over the people close to him.” Joan lets Barry know, but gives her husband a warm look despite that, apparently not holding that trait against him.
“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Joan,” Jay protests, but looks a little guilty, as he turns to Barry.

“I don’t dislike Eddy,” Jay tells him and amends when Barry gives him an incredulous look, “He is somewhat annoying at times, but you have to agree that it is mostly due to him trying to get on my bad side.”

Barry can’t disagree there, Eddy is certainly not trying to play nice when it comes to Jay, and both men are glad when Joan moves the conversation away from Eddy and on to James, who is currently overseas again, this time in Russia.

“H-He t-travels a-a l-lot f-for w-work,” Barry explains. “H-He’s a-a l-lawyer f-for a-a b-big i-insurance c-comp-pany.”

“He sounds like a smart man,” Joan remarks, and Barry has to agree.

“H-He i-is, a-and r-real-ly k-kind t-too.” Barry briefly lowers his gaze to the warm teacup in his hands and can’t help but think how much he misses his friend, who has been nearly constantly out of the country since after his grandmother’s funeral.

“He seems like a very good man,” Jay agrees, and when Barry looks up at him, he notices the thoughtful way he is being studied once more. It reminds him of the ring he is wearing, which in turn causes him to involuntarily move the hand in question below the desk and out of sight.

Unsurprisingly, Jay’s gaze follows the movement, and Barry isn’t sure what to make of the look he is given then. He gets the disheartening feeling that the other man is on to him.

“When will he be back from his trip?” Joan inquires, curiously, and Barry explains that it will probably be another two weeks.

James promised him that he would be back for longer after this one, and Barry is looking forward to it. He understands that his friend needed some distance to work through his grief over Bo’s death, but he misses him, and now that Mary will be gone for about two months, having James back again will certainly make her absence easier.

Barry notices over the next ten minutes as their conversation continues how Bart starts to grow steadily restless next to him, and he is just about to ask whether he wants to get up and stretch his legs, since sitting still for so long is rather taxing on a young speedster, when Max addresses the others.

“I think if we wait any longer, Bart will probably start to wear down the chair,” Max observes, giving his charge an amused look.

“Right,” Joan agrees, smiling, and turns to Bart. “Why don’t you pick up the presen-”

A stack of nicely wrapped gifts suddenly appeared in front of Barry, startling a gasp out of him.

“Bart.” Max sighs in exasperation and reminds him, “No speed.”

“Sorry.” Bart doesn’t sound sorry, though, and instead watches Barry excitedly, another wide grin plastered on his face. “This is the best part of your surprise! Presents!”

Barry wants to protest, but he stops himself since it isn’t hard to see that this means a lot to Bart judging by his hopeful expression.

“Th-That w-w-wasn’t n-nec-cessar-ry,” Barry still point out, eyeing the small stack of four neatly
packed presents apprehensively. He can’t help but worry about how much money they spent on him once more since both Jay’s and Max’ gifts to him for Christmas were much too expensive for his liking.

There is no way that he could ever repay them, and while he knows that this isn’t about that, a part of him still feels like he is indebting himself to them, which puts his teeth on edge.

Bart’s excited expression starts to fall so that Barry forces a smile on his lips and puts effort into trying to look somewhat nervous at least.

He reaches for the first gift on the top, which is a thin, crème colored envelope, and again, the apprehension about it containing money or something else expensive settles over him.

It isn’t money, much to his relief, though still an expensive gift, since the birthday card he pulls out holds another annual pass, this time for the public traffic system of the Gem’s. It is from both Jay and Joan, and Barry has to bite his tongue not to protest and point out how much one of these costs since he can see Bart watching him eagerly out of his corner.

“I know it is an expensive gift, Barry.” Joan seems to sense his unease and meets his troubled gaze reassuringly. “But it will mean a lot to Jay and me if you accept it. Your new job lies in one of the more dangerous areas of Keystone City, and it would make us feel much better to know that you have at least the means to get there and back safely.”

It is kind and thoughtful, and Barry has to lower his eyes briefly because they tear up. A part of him wants to protest that he isn’t even sure yet whether he will really be able to keep the job. He still has two more weeks of probation period ahead of him, not to mention that he would finally earn enough money to not worry about public traffic expenses too much should Charlie decide to keep him.

Still, having this pass will save him a ridiculous amount of money, and Sam would certainly be more than happy that he wouldn’t have to play his chauffeur all the time anymore because Len wanted to prevent him walking part of the way home so he could save some money.

“Th-Thank y-you.” Barry coughs lightly, his voice unsteady from the emotions he feels, and gives both Jay and Joan a grateful, if somewhat shaky smile. “Th-This i-is a-a r-r-really g-generous g-gift.”

“We’re glad you like it,” Jay tells him, looking more at ease again.

“The next one is from Joan,” Bart informs Barry, and points at the white paper box with a pale purple ribbon wrapped around it. He sounds quite excited about it, and Barry shoots him an amused look, wondering what kind of gift it could be this time. By the boy’s reaction, he guesses food, and he turns out to be right.

The paper box holds a dozen of Joan’s rather famous custard tarts, which Barry has always loved even though he usually prefers salty snacks. He can feel his mouth water the moment the pleasant aroma reaches his nose despite how his stomach would
likely start to ache from it.

The pastry looks fluffy, the custard a delicious looking yellow, and there is a dozen of them, too many for him to eat by himself, as Eddy would be delighted to find out when Barry got home-

Well, there are eleven now, and Barry doesn’t have to look to know where one of them just vanished to.

“Bart!” Max sounds stern, annoyed, causing Bart, who just swallowed the last bite, to send Barry a sheepish look.

“Sorry.” Bart mumbles, flushing in embarrassment, but sends another yearning look to the still mostly full box.

“That’s not okay, Bart, they were meant for Barry, not you. How would you feel if someone stole a part of your present?” Joan admonishes the boy, appearing unusually frustrated, and when she notices Barry’s watching her in surprise, she explains that she made an additional dozen just for Bart along with his. “He likes them too, and I wanted to prevent any accidents like this one.” She sighs and turns back to Bart with a stern frown as she points out, “To no avail, as you can see.”

“I’m sorry, grandpa.” Bart apologizes again, sounding much more earnest about it this time, and looking embarrassed and guilty enough that Barry can only take pity on him, seeing that he remembers all too well how easy it was for a young speedster to let their stomach cloud their judgment. Wally certainly sneaked off with food that wasn’t meant for him more than once in his younger years.

“I-It’s ok-kay.” Barry assures, but adds before either of the other adults present can protest, “b-but n-next t-time a-ask i-if y-you w-want o-one, y-you c-can’t j-just t-take s-someth-th-ing th-that i-isn’t y-yours j-just b-bec-cause y-you l-like i-it, B-Bart. I-I w-would h-have sh-shared th-them w-with y-you, a-anyw-way, b-but y-you s-still h-hav-ve t-to m-make s-sure th-that’s th-th th-the c-case a-and r-resp-pect th-that n-not e-everyb-body w-will w-wants t-to d-do s-so.”

“I know,” Bart agrees, shifting in his chair, looking quite miserable now. “I won’t do so again, I promise.”

“G-Good.” Barry smiles, hoping that the boy will understand that he isn’t angry with him. “I-I kn-know th-that y-you w-will k-keep y-your w-word th-then.”

Bart glances up at him, relieved, and they return to the gifts.

Barry picks the next one up, which is quite bigger than the rest and, as he notices when he picks it up, heavier. It is from both Bart and Max, and by the feel of it, it seems to be a book. He turns out to be right again as he unwraps it.

It is a thick book on the history of art, one Barry hasn’t heard of prior, probably because it was published just this year, and as he skims through it, he marvels over the quality of the beautiful photos printed on the thick paper.

“Bart picked it,” Max points out, sounding pleased over how obviously well the gift is received. “He found it in a bookstore close to his school.”

“I knew you’d like it,” Bart interjects, sounding once more excited, the slight damper to his mood from earlier forgotten. “The owner of the bookstore helped me pick it, and he told me that it is just the right thing for someone who likes art as much as you do.”
“I-It l-looks l-like a-a g-great ch-choice,” Barry agrees and looks up from the photo of the painting he studied briefly to give Bart and Max a grateful smile. “Th-Thank y-you, i-it’s a l-likely p-present.”

“I’m happy you like it!” Bart beams brightly, happy about picking the right thing.

There is only one present left, and Barry can’t help but smile as it becomes apparent by the clumsy way it is wrapped and because of the very bright red and yellow of the paper that it must be from Bart.

When he turns to the boy in question, his amusement dwindles a little as he notices Bart’s suddenly rather anxious, uneasy expression.

“I don’t know whether you want that,” Bart tells him reluctantly, sounding oddly guilty.

Barry frowns, unsure what caused the sudden change in the boy’s demeanor, but when he glances to the others, he is surprised to see rather concerned expressions on their faces as well.

“Bart put a lot of effort into this gift,” Joan informs him, hesitantly, and adds to Bart as if to comfort him, “and he did a wonderful job.” When she turns back to Barry, an uncertainty clings to her voice. “It may be a bit much for you right now, though.”

Barry is honestly confused, glancing from the gift he is now holding in his hands, which again feels like a book but has a square shape, back up to Joan, and then to Bart, who looks quite crestfallen.

The odd reactions of the others cause a familiar unease to stir in his guts, and he briefly thinks about not opening it, somewhat unsettled by everyone’s behavior.

Bart made it, though, by himself and for him, and he put effort into it, so it would be cruel just to put it aside. His grandson undoubtedly looked forward to giving it to him till something must have happened during his visit that caused him to change his mind.

Likely how badly Barry reacted to them singing Happy Birthday to him earlier, which makes it feasible that this present could contain something they think could set him off once again. Maybe it would be wiser just to set it aside so he could look at it later when he is back in the safety of his apartment.

He doesn’t want to ruin this for Bart, though, who probably started out thinking that whatever he made for him would be received with joy.

“I-I th-think i-if B-Bart p-put e-effe-effort i-i-into m-mak-king th-thhis,” Barry decides firmly, “th-then th-there i-is n-no w-way I-I w-won’t l-like i-it.”

He gives Bart an encouraging smile, which the boy returns with a somewhat subdued version of his own, though he also looks hopeful again.

Barry turns back to the gift and unwraps it, which reveals a brightly red photo-album of all things.

For a second, he wonders which pictures the boy could have used since there are none of them both together as far as he knows.

A sudden, intense feeling of apprehension overcomes him, as he studies the album, but he pushes on, not allowing himself to falter. He can feel Bart watching him expectantly, after all, so he opens it.

His stomach drops a little as the bright lightning-shaped Flash insignia greets him.
Of course …

Barry studies it for a moment, and feels cold numbness overtake him.

This won’t do, not at all, he can already feel the first tingles of panic touching his mind.

“C-Can y-you l-look th-though i-it w-with m-me?” Barry asks Bart, voice faint and sounding a little breathless as he puts the album on the table so that his grandson can see the pages as well.

“Uh… sure,” Bart agrees after hesitating for a moment, probably surprised by both his reaction and the request.

“We will take care of the dishes in the meantime,” Joan informs them and gets up, sending pointed looks both Jay’s and Max’ ways, who don’t need any explanation about the sudden decision to departure and leave those two alone.

Barry is immensely grateful for her insight, just then, since having the three other adults around would have made the whole affair only harder for him and much more awkward.

He doesn’t want to be faced with what will undoubtedly be memorials of his past as the Flash while Jay and Max are around, it would be humiliating and depressing, and they thankfully understand that.

Taking a deep breath, Barry turns to the next page, and a pang flashes through his chest as it shows a printout of the first news article that was ever published about him.

“A friend helped me find this one,” Bart tells him, breaking the long, tense pause that settled over them after Barry opened the page, and he is watching him with nearly palpable uncertainty.

Barry swallows and forces his eyes away from the photo that shows him talking to an officer. He huffs a laugh when he notices the small doodle below the printed article, a very crude, rather awkward looking cartoonish version of the Flash, striking a triumph pose with a speech bubble, reading “Don’t commit crimes or I’ll kick your butt in a flash!” That is undoubtedly made by Bart’s hand, and somehow seeing that small thing, which is drawn by someone just picking up art but has obviously also a lot of care put into it, eases the ache in his chest a little.

“I made that one,” Bart points out, still sounding uncertain, “it doesn’t look so good, though, it was one of my first ones.”

Barry shoots him a fond smile. “I-It l-looks g-great.”

Bart’s face brightens significantly at that.

The following page shows another article and again a small cartoon doodle of the Flash along with some funnier if a rather corny scribbling. This time, the little drawn Flash is standing next to a cartoon version of a bound and very pissed off looking Turtle, so Barry is not surprised when the article is about just his first fight against an actually masked supervillain.

“That was one of Jay’s rogues, right?” Bart asks, and Barry glances at him, surprised that he is aware of that little fact. These days, hardly anybody seems to remember the Turtle anymore, he was already pretty much forgotten by the time when the Rogues started to turn up, still working solo back then.


“He looks…” Bart hesitates, shooting him a careful look.
“L-Lame?” Barry offers, and Bart immediately relaxes, grinning. “Yeah, totally! How did someone like him even become a supervillain?”

“Y-You c-can’t o-only j-judge b-by l-looks,” Barry reminds him. “A-And th-the T-Turtle w-was qu-quite a-a d-dif-ficult p-person t-to d-deal w-with wh-when J-Jay s-started o-out.”

“Yeah… I still don’t get it, I doubt I’d have problems taking him on.” Bart studies the picture of the Turtle glaring out from the back of the police car skeptically.

“H-He w-was v-very s-smart, a-a g-great s-strat-tegist,” Barry tells him. “Th-That c-can b-be m-more d-dang-gerous th-then b-brute f-force.”

Bart hums but still seems doubtful about the idea that the Turtle could have ever been a serious opponent to anybody. Barry doesn’t try to correct him again; he knows that Bart will undoubtedly learn firsthand that you can’t judge by looks alone when it comes to people, and the kid has Max and Jay looking out for him, so he tries not to worry too much about when that day will come.

In all actuality, Barry himself always considered the Turtle as one of Jay’s lamest villain when he grew up and before he became a speedster himself. That was likely the reason why he nearly let the man get away during their first confrontation since he didn’t take him seriously enough, allowing him to catch him off-guard. His powers took care of his broken elbow in about two hours, but the lesson stuck with him.

Those are experiences any person wearing a mask will make sooner or later, and if you are lucky, you will get away and be able to learn from it, if you aren’t…

Barry focuses back on the album and moves on. There are many more newspaper clips, some printouts, some originating from actual papers, and he answers Bart’s questions about them patiently. It is endearing and a little flattering how interested Bart is in the differing circumstances, the different villains, and whether he defeated them as the various articles stated.

He takes the time to answer all of them. It is surprising how much less of a difficult experience it is to face his past self, the version of him that hadn’t yet utterly failed. With Bart at his side, who doesn’t look at him with reproach or anger, or disappointment, even though he must have seen that there is nothing of him left but a shadow of his former self.

Maybe Bart’s utter lack of concern about that helps Barry look through his past for the first time in over a decade without being smothered in grief and regret. The album itself also makes it easier, as it causes the stories the articles are about to feel a little distant like Barry isn’t connected to any of it like he is just looking for a story.

It would make things easier if it only were like that, if all of the things that happened to him were just made up or happened to someone else.

Joan brings them some more tea after a while, assuring Barry that Jay, Max, and she are doing just fine sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, chatting and that Bart and he should take their time.

Bart enjoys this little trip down Barry’s memory lane greatly, and Barry himself finds it oddly relieving to talk about it too, so he doesn’t protest.

He hasn’t touched upon any of this for so long, hasn’t even allowed himself to think about it, that it is a nearly cathartic experience for him as if weight is lifted off him, making it easier to sit upright and breathe.

Thinking back to when he was still a hero is an odd experience, painful for sure, but also oddly
saddening in a nostalgic way he wouldn’t have thought. He never really missed his powers after the first couple of months in prison, when the guilt had eaten away enough of him that it reached his core, uncovered the self-doubt and belief that nothing of this would have happened if he hadn’t become the Flash.

He was and still is confident that what happened to him and his family is connected to his powers and who he became by getting them, and that knowledge alone makes the notion of becoming the Flash daunting, upsetting even.

In the end, he was able to help so many people, just not the two that meant the world to him, and the possibility that he could be the cause for what happened to them is too painful to even think about.

“Grandpa?” Bart sounds worried, causing Barry to let go of those depressing thoughts and focus back on him.

“S-Sorry, I-I j-just r-remember s-something,” Barry reassures him and goes on looking through the album.

There are pictures of him, back when he was still so unbelievable young, crowded by reporters and people he saved, always authorities close-by as well, and it occurs to him that he will likely never miss that particular part of being the Flash. He never liked the attention he got from everybody when he put the costume on and slowed down enough to be seen, especially after saving someone or averting a crisis. It made him feel unbalanced, uneasy like they all could see what he had been hiding for years by that point, what had tainted him in his early childhood.

That didn’t change his desire to help people, and he knew that as a hero he was supposed to be a symbol for them, giving them hope and the feeling of security, maybe even inspire them to try and be better. Unlike Jay, who was such a symbol to him when he grew up, Barry never learned to be at ease with being the center of the public’s attention.

Most of the time, Barry would much rather prefer to have a second power next to his speed, one that allowed him to go invisible.

It was selfish, and he never let Jay know about it, though he is sure that the older man always could feel his uneasiness around the crowds of people cheering for them, asking them for photos and autographs, no matter how much he tried to hide it behind his mask and forced smiles.

Maybe that was one of the reasons Jay eventually was swayed so easily into believing that the Barry Allen he thought to know didn’t exist.

Barry cuts that train of thought off, unwilling to let himself be pulled down again by his mind, and changes the page. Another wave of bitter-sweet nostalgia overcomes him when his eyes fall upon a furious looking Captain Cold being led away by two policemen, shooting daggers at the red figure in the front, damning him to hell and back. He can’t help but marvel at how young Len looks.

They’ve seen more articles about the Rogues before this one, some even with pictures, but this is the first one where you can see his face since he seems to have lost his glasses and parka during the earlier fight.

“He looks pissed,” Bart notes, sounding quite gleeful.

“H-He w-was,” Barry agrees, but his smile slips off his lips when his gaze drifts to the farther back of the photo, noticing another figure between the number of bystanders and reporters, and his stomach drops.
Barry closes his eyes along with the album and focuses on his breathing, ignoring Bart’s protest. He feels sick, so much so that his stomach briefly rolls, and he wishes he hadn’t eaten so much.

“Are you okay, grandpa?” Bart’s concern is audible, and it helps Barry to shake the nearly overwhelming feeling of guilt and self-loathing off.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Barry says, voice low, a little rough, and he forces himself to look at Bart and give him what he hopes is at least a somewhat convincing smile. “W-We c-can l-look s-some m-more th-through th-the a-album a-another t-time, o-ok-kay?”

“Okay,” Bart agrees, disappointed, and it is hard to miss that he isn’t sure what to make of his reaction.

“Th-Thank y-you f-for th-this.” Barry doesn’t want Bart to think that he doesn’t like the present. He does, especially after looking through parts of it together with him. “I-It’s a-a w-wonderful g-gift, a-and y-you m-must h-have p-put s-so m-much t-time a-and e-effort i-into i-it.” He reaches for Bart, who immediately welcomes the hug and returns it, relieved that he liked the album.

“I-I l-love y-you, B-Bart.” Barry rests his cheek on Bart’s head, ignoring the awkward angle he is currently sitting in so that he could embrace his grandson and is once again profoundly grateful that the kid appeared in his life.

“I love you too, grandpa,” Bart replies against his shoulder, voice slightly muffled. He firms his embrace, enough so that Barry grimaces slightly but doesn’t ask him to stop. “And I’m glad you like it, I didn’t want to make you feel bad, I thought making an album to show you how awesome you’ve always been would make it easier for you to remember it again.”

Barry chuckles, wetly, eyes tearing up, and he brushes a kiss against Bart’s hair. “Y-You’re a-a g-great k-kid, y-you kn-know th-that?” He huffs a laugh and squeezes his eyes shut, not letting go of his grandchild. “Th-Thank y-you f-for b-being th-there a-and b-bel-living i-in m-me wh-when I-I c-can’t.”

“Always,” Bart says firmly, and Barry doesn’t doubt that he means it.

Here is a little bonus for you! An amazing picture I got at the Connichi in Kassel when I visited it about a week ago! :)
Chapter End Notes

It’s a good thing Bart was there. At times, I wish he was real, so I could cuddle him for what a sweetheart he is. ;)

It seems that dinner turned out quite well despite Barry’s initial apprehension going into it. I’m glad for him, though he probably should have remembered to take the ring off. Well, at least Jay and Max didn’t ask him too many uncomfortable questions since Joan knows when you should shut up because you make your guest visible nervous.

About Barry’s new job, he apparently didn’t say anything about where exactly he is working now, and the matter is far from over. Jay and Max didn’t probe because they
could see how uneasy it made Barry, but I doubt they aren’t curious/concerned.

Even with the hiccups, it seems that the things between Barry and Jay seem to start to mend slowly, so let’s hope that won’t get messed up one way or another.

My editor called Bart a ball of sunshine, and I think that fits perfectly. Bart is a very positive person in general, maybe a little more gullible than most kids of his age due to his upbringing, though he is quickly catching up, and his belief in Barry is unwavering, despite how it causes him the most trouble in the hero community among his peers and their mentors. He is a strong person, already at such a young age, and it helps Barry a lot to know that he has someone like him.

The idea of the photo album was one I had really early on, it’s nothing major, but I like it. It’s a really nice present, and Barry going through it together with Bart makes it easier for him to face his past, something he probably isn’t able to do on his own just yet.

Also, Bart is going to end up as a comic book artist in this universe, like Kyle, and he will eventually create a Flash series called Rebirth that’s all about his grandpa. ;)

I love the idea of Jay having to visit yoga classes because of Joan, and how he tries to not let on how little he is looking forward to it. I think he probably would be pretty good doing the different yoga exercises, a runner usually does a lot of stretching, after all.

Like always, I want to thank my readers who are following this story and leave me comments. They always brighten my day. :)

Next chapter will have another of Barry’s former rogues return, one we’ve met before, and he will say his temporary goodbye to Mary, who is going on a trip to visit her family.

See you in two weeks! <3
“Hey, Allen.”

Barry looks up from where he is currently whipping down the surface of the workspace behind the bar, surprised by the pleasant tone of the greeting.

Usually, their customers are either indifferent towards him or outright hostile, and it is only when his eyes fall upon the man, who has just taken the seat in front of him, giving him an amiable smile, that Barry’s initial wariness subsides.

“H-Hey, R-Roy.” Barry returns the other man’s smiles and relaxes. “Y-You w-want a b-beer?”

“Sure,” Roy agrees, drumming his fingers on the bar, which seems to be a quirk of his since Barry has noticed it a few times before.

Other than the Rogues, Roy is probably his only customer around whom he doesn’t feel uneasy. It still surprises him a little, since the other man isn’t exactly fond of Len and the Rogues, other than Hartley and James that is. Thus, Barry assumed that it would cause the criminal to dislike him as well.

It didn’t.

“Has it been a busy night, so far?” Roy asks.

“N-No, n-not r-really.” Barry hands him his beer and lets his gaze briefly swipe through the bar. It has been calm, for the most part. There was a brief spike of visitors around ten, but now, two hours
later, there are only about a handful of people left.

It has turned out that Wednesdays are not as busy, allowing Barry to settle a little more into his new job as a barman, something that is harder to do when he hardly has enough time to do anything else but trying to keep up with orders.

“Well, you do deserve some downtime every once in a while,” Roy remarks as he picks up his beer and takes a sip. Barry notices the slight flush on the other man’s cheeks and frowns, wondering whether he visited another bar before coming here and is already on his way to getting drunk. He hasn’t experienced Roy in an intoxicated state, yet, and he doesn’t like the notion of doing so tonight, especially now that Charlie went upstairs to rest because of a migraine.

“The Rogues aren’t around tonight?” Roy inquires after a brief, somewhat awkward silence passed.

He doesn’t sound drunk, Barry decides, somewhat relieved, and relaxes.

“N-No.” Barry shakes his head as he goes back to scrubbing the working area. “Th-They’re w-work-king.”

Len would probably not like him sharing that with Roy, and he regrets it the moment he realizes so, but having another friendly face around eases his nerves. While he doesn’t exactly enjoy talking to anybody other than his friends, it isn’t as awful of an experience with Roy as it is with others.

“Finally decided to pull something within the Twins’ borders again?” Roy doesn’t sound particularly excited about that prospect, and a slight sneer pulls at his lips, but at Barry’s disapproving look, he schools his features in a more pleasant expression. “Well, who can fault them? They’ve been gone for a long time.”

Barry stays quiet and turns his attention back to the spot he is currently scrubbing down. He doesn’t feel like talking about the Rogues’ business, not in general and especially not here with someone he isn’t entirely sure he can trust just yet.

Roy G. Bivolo, like Len and the others, turned out to be a lot different to what Barry always assumed he was like. Even so, he is still a criminal, and their confrontations as the Flash and the Rainbow Raider are still very livid in Barry’s mind. Thus he is not going to underestimate him despite his gaudy outfit and mostly cheerful attitude.

Not that he needs to worry about Roy wanting to get into a fight with him, it’s more than evident that the man seems to like him.

Silence returns to them, and there is something awkward about it but thankfully nothing outright uneasy. Barry, who moves on from cleaning the working space behind the bar to the shelves where they store the stronger alcohol, has the feeling that Ray wants to say something else but isn’t sure
how to approach him. This is odd but acceptable compared to being made fun of or asked
uncomfortable questions about himself by already pretty sloshed customers who, of course, pick up
on his stammer and nervous demeanor.

The next half an hour ticks by, people get more beer, and Barry nearly forgets about Roy even being
there as he starts to keep stock of the different kinds of hard liquor they have currently stashed in the
front. Not that it’s a necessary task or something he was told to do, seeing that about ninety-nine
percent of their orders are made up of beer, but he is running out of things to do. He wants to keep
himself busy since a familiar anxiety has started to eat away at him due to Charlie having still not
returned from his apartment above the bar.

So far, everything is going smoothly, no reason to go upstairs and get his boss who told him to do
just that if necessary. Barry is still not used to his new job, though, and despite the fact that there
currently aren’t more than seven people around, it still unsettles him that he has to deal with them on
his own. His apprehension is only made worse by his mind that keeps trying to harass him with
possible scenarios of how things can go south for him if he isn’t careful enough.

“You’re thinking of making cocktails?”

Barry jumps slightly, caught off-guard by the question, and turns to face Roy, while his cheeks heat
up in embarrassment. He shouldn’t have gotten that startled by the other man, but he just forgot about
him still being there with how quiet he had been.

“Wh-What?” Barry croaks and coughs lightly. He doesn't like how breathless he sounds and tries not
to notice how his face grows even warmer.

“Sorry,” Roy apologizes, apparently surprised about having caused such a reaction, which in turn
causes Barry’s embarrassment to worsen.

At least Charlie wasn’t around; the man would undoubtedly have something to say about how he
didn’t pay attention to their customers, and that with his back to their register.
“I didn’t mean to startle you,” Roy tells him with a slight frown as he studies him curiously.

“I-It’s f-fine.” Barry waves him off and nervously shifts as he glances around. Nobody else seems to
have noticed, which is good because he wouldn’t put it past most of the guys frequenting this place
to get stupid ideas should they think he was daydreaming at his job.

He eventually turns his focus back to Roy. “Wh-What w-was y-your qu-quest-tion a-again?”

“Whether you’re thinking about making some cocktails.” Roy nods to the glass shelves behind Barry
on which the variety of hard liquor is illuminated. “You took count of them, so I figured you’re
planning on using them for something.” He chuckles a little self-consciously and shrugs, looking
somewhat embarrassed. “Charlie doesn’t think cocktails fit his establishment, you know because they
are too feminine.” Roy grimaces and shoots Barry an uncertain look as if he was trying to gauge his
thoughts. Whatever he sees on his face seems to relax him as he snorts and rolls his eyes, smirking. “Charlie’s probably worried anybody could think he secretly likes to wear lingerie or something as stupid. Heterosexual men can be so ridiculously insecure about their masculinity.”

Roy watches Barry then, waiting for him to add something, maybe to agree or disagree, and when he fails to do either, he eventually goes on, “Well, anyway, I like cocktails, and I think it would do your business some good if you offered them too. Like, you know, widen your menu.”

Again, the other man gives him an expectant, this time also somewhat hopeful look.

“Y-You w-want m-me t-t-to m-make y-you a c-cockt-tail?” Barry clarifies, feeling a little dumbfounded over that request.

He has no experience with mixing drinks whatsoever, and he doesn’t like the idea of trying it. He is honestly glad that he is doing as good with tapping beers as he is, even though the task in itself is not difficult.

“It could be fun,” Roy points out instead of agreeing. “And I would give you a nice tip as well, of course.” He winks at him then, and Barry can’t help but frown.

“I-I d-don’t kn-know…”

If Charlie doesn’t want his bar to sell cocktails, who is Barry to go against his decision? Not to mention, usually you need more ingredients for those mixed drinks than just the alcohol, and while they do have some non-alcoholic beverages in the back, Barry isn’t sure what kinds and whether any would fit.

“You could try a simple one, like nothing too fancy,” Roy tries to persuade him. “Like a Sherry Martini. It’s made up of just one ounce Sherry and two ounces Gin, but it tastes great.” They have both Cherry and Martini among the alcohol adorning the wall behind the bar, Barry just took note of them, and both bottles are already open too, so Charlie would probably not mind if he tried to mix a drink.

Barry glances over his shoulders at said bottles, unsure whether he should go for it or not. The idea to make this simple cocktail sounds harmless, even a little exciting, since he doesn’t think he could do much wrong with it, and it would be a change to handing out beer all the time, no matter how comfortable he has grown with that task.

He has no idea how much he would have to charge for it, though. He had never ventured outside ordering a beer when he went out in the past, other than for the few times Iris shared her cocktails with him when they went on a date during the earlier phase of their relationship. Inflation probably changed the prices of those drinks a lot by now, and it occurs to him that he should have bothered to look something like that up now that he is working in an actual bar.
Looking back at Roy, he hesitates for a moment, before he asks, quietly, “H-How m-much d-do y-you u-usual-ly p-pay f-for th-those?”

To his relief, Roy doesn’t give him a look like he is an idiot for not knowing that, but considers the question, tapping his chin. “It depends on the drink,” Roy says. ”Usually they are around 12 to 17 bucks but are a little cheaper during the happy hour.”

Barry gawks at the man, dumbfoundedly, and briefly wonders whether he is pulling his leg before he recalls Eddy complaining to Mary about how unfair it is that pretty women get all their drinks paid for them and how ridiculously pricey those are for the rest of humankind who have to pay for themselves.

“Just go for the golden middle,” Roy suggests amused, picking up on his incredulity. “15 bucks sounds fair to me.”

Fifteen dollars for a drink? For three ounces of alcohol?

“I’ll tip you,” Roy reminds him, probably misunderstanding his hesitation.

Barry has to catch himself from disagreeing since he is pretty sure that Charlie will have his head should he refuse the money and his boss found out about it later on. “Ok-kay,” Barry finally agrees, and can’t help but smile when the other man’s face brightens noticeably at that.

There are two bottles of Gin among other hard liquor on the shelves, one open and one still closed. Barry picks the former one while searching for the Sherry he knows he has seen earlier. “A-Are th-these th-the r-right t-types?” Barry asks as he steps back to the bar, showing Roy the two bigger bottles.

The criminal makes a pleased sound at spotting the label of the Sherry, grinning. “They’re just fine.” He points at the dark glass bottle. “Manzanilla is my favorite kind of Sherry; it’s an excellent choice for this drink because it blends really nicely with the Gin.”

Barry studies said white vine for a second as he hums in agreement. He will have to trust Roy on that; he wouldn’t have known so on his own.

Picking one of the glasses Charlie has put aside for other drinks than beer, Barry pauses again. He has no way of measuring the amount of alcohol to get the right ration, but Roy immediately seems to know what the problem is.

“Just fill it with two fingers width of Gin and one of Sherry, that should do it,” Roy suggests, and while the scientist in Barry balks at the mere notion of doing something as sloppy as that, he still
follows the advice. He is grateful for the assistance in the first place and how the other man doesn’t seem to consider him to be a complete moron for not knowing something like that while working at a bar.

Roy accepts the light amber liquid with a nod, holding it up as if to study it, humming in appreciation. “It looks like it’s supposed to,” he lets Barry know and winks.

Barry tries to smile, feeling a little apprehensive about the other man’s judgment since he wants the drink to taste fine, even though he still isn’t sure whether it was a good idea to agree to make it in the first place.

Taking a sip, Roy hums in pleasant surprise, signifying that the drink is to his liking, which causes Barry to relax.

“It’s good.” Roy gives him an approving once-over, grinning. “It seems you have a hidden talent you weren’t aware of so far, Allen.”

Barry chuckles softly, his cheeks growing a little warm due to the compliment, and he tries to deflect the praise, self-consciously. “I-It’s h-hardly a a-diffic-cult d-drink t-to m-make.”

“You’d be surprised how easily people can mess up an easy drink like this one,” Roy argues and takes another sip, once again looking very much like he is enjoying the cocktail.

It is nice to be told that he did well, even if it is over something as simple as mixing two drinks. Barry is just about to point out to Roy that the praise is his since he pretty much told him what to do when he notices Charlie entering the bar out of the corner of his eye.

The worry that he could get in trouble over making the Martini grabs Barry by the neck, and he tenses up noticeably, already regretting that he agreed to any of this.

His guilty, worried expression isn't lost on his boss, who stops when his gaze falls upon him, and an annoyed frown replaces his tired expression.

“What happened?” Charlie asks gruffly, already glancing around the bar, probably searching for anything broken or missing.

“N-N-Noth-thing,” Barry quickly assures him, shifting uneasily. “E-Everyth-thing i-i-is f-fine.”

“Why the hell do you look like you accidentally pissed into my morning coffee, then?” Charlie turns his eyes back on him, looking not all the way convinced, but the tension starts to ease off his shoulders. He notices Roy then as well as the drink in his hands, which causes him to huff in annoyance.
To Barry’s surprise, Charlie doesn’t direct the dark glare towards him but the criminal, who is smiling innocently at the bar owner while sipping on his Sherry Martini.

“You persisting little prat.” Charlie grunts, nodding to the glass in Roy’s hands. “Did you harass Allen into making you one of your damn cocktails while I wasn’t around?”

“I didn’t harass him,” Roy protests, annoyed, but shoots Barry an uncertain look. “I didn’t harass you, did I?”

“N-No,” Barry assures the other man and shifts his weight nervously as he forces himself to meet Charlie’s still very much annoyed look. “I-I’m s-sorry, I-I sh-should h-have a-ask-ked y-you b- before m-making th-the d-drink.” He feels bad for going behind his boss’ back after he gave him the opportunity to work for him. Barry doesn’t notice how he starts to scratch the back of his right hand absentmindedly, a nervous habit he picked up shortly after beginning to work here. “Y-You c-can t-take th-the m-money i-it c-cost y-you f-from m-my s-salary.”

The irritation in Charlie’s eyes intensifies for a split-second but doesn’t linger. Charlie closes his eyes and heaves a frustrated sounding sigh, and just like that he looks much calmer again, still grumpy, but no more than usual.

“Allen, the fucking couple ounces you used to pour that jackass’s drink probably don’t even add up to two dollars,” Charlie informs him, drily. “Don’t make a habit of doing stuff without asking me first and we’ll be fine.” He snorts, glaring at Roy. “Not that anybody other than Roy will ask you for those fancy drinks of his in the first place.”

“You’re missing out on a perfect opportunity to improve your business,” Roy insists, looking like he has to fight the urge to give Charlie a dirty look. “Don’t know what your problem with cocktails is. They are just as manly as your stupid beer.”

Charlie snorts, rolling his eyes as he crosses his arms, and shrugs. “I’ve no problem with cocktails.” He nods to the bar in general. “My usual clientele is just not very fond of that girly stuff, and you know so, so stop bitching. I won’t bother trying to sell something nobody is interested in just so you can have your pink umbrella drinks.”

“Cocktails aren’t girly,” Roy protests, irked, and again Barry notices that the criminal shoots him a brief, oddly worried looking glance. He then turns his gaze back to Charlie, glaring darkly at him as he insists, “And there are probably a ton of people who’d love to buy them if you-”

“Then these people can ask for them,” Charlie cuts him off, his patience audibly running thin. “Apparently, you’re in luck when it comes to someone being willing to make them for you, so stop nagging my ear off.”

That seems to catch Roy off-guard, as he pauses, looking at Charlie in surprise, who in turn snorts
and turns to Barry.

“How much did you charge for that drink?” Charlie asks.

“F-Fifteen d-dollars.” Barry swallows with some difficulty. His throat suddenly feels much too tight as he realizes that he hasn’t yet gotten the money.

As if reading his mind, his boss’ face darkens, and he is just about to say something, when Roy smacks a twenty dollar note on the bar, pushing it towards Barry.

“Keep the rest,” Roy tells him brightly and lifts the drinks as if to present it to Charlie. “Something as amazing as this certainly deserves a nice tip.”

Charlie scoffs, but he appears more amused than pissed this time around.

“So, your radio is broken now too?” Roy asks in a rather blunt attempt to change the topic. “This place is pretty depressing without music, you know.”

“If you don’t like it here, you can always piss off.” Charlie grunts as he picks himself a bottle of mineral water from the fridge below the bar.

“When will you finally replace your TV anyway?” Roy presses on, not dissuaded by Charlie’s irked tone. “It’s been nearly five months that it broke, and being able to watch the news was pretty nice.”

“Why should I replace the damn thing?” Charlie looks seriously pissed, then, causing Roy to tense up as he glares at him. “So you little bunch of shitheads can break it again?”

“I never broke anything in here-”

“And who the fuck wants to watch TV these days, anyway? The only things they’re showing are those shitty reality shows or stuff about the upcoming votes, and I’m usually in a bad enough mood without jackasses like Alvares aiding to it.”

“That’s not all there is on right now.” Roy huffs. “There’s football and-”

Charlie interrupts the other man with a bark of laughter, shooting him an incredulous look. “Since when are you interested in sports, Bivolo?”

Roy flushes at that, and he glares at the barman in return, but presses on, “And there are documentaries” – this gets him another snort, but Charlie doesn’t interrupt him this time – “and the news.”
“The news that is about nothing but the fucking votes,” Charlie points out, and Barry doesn’t miss the pained expression that flickers over his boss’ face as he rubs his neck. It seems that his headache hasn’t let off him just yet completely.

“They aren’t,” Roy protests. “There’s interesting stuff on them as well.”

“Like what? Some hero handing a villain their ass to them again? Yeah, ‘ve never seen that one before.”

“No, like a Green Lantern coming back from the dead,” Roy tells him, and at Charlie’s caught off-guard look, he grins triumphantly. “See, news can be inter-”

“Wh-Which G-G-Green L-Lant-tern?” Barry is in front of Roy before he even realizes that he has moved. His heart is drumming like the wings of a hummingbird, and he feels short of breath, lightheaded.

Could Roy be talking about-

“Uh… the one who blew up Coast City,” Roy informs him slowly, unsure what to make of his question or the intensity with which he is now meeting his eyes.

“Oh…”

Hal.

Hal has returned.

Hal is alive.

How is that possible?

For a second, Barry feels like someone is pulling the ground from under his feet like he is going to fall, his stomach revolting, his head too full-

The sensation passes, though, and he forces himself to school his face, to push the myriad of emotions down, deep down, where they would not get him in trouble.

The return of a Green Lantern, like the one of a Flash, or any other superhero, is not something most people who are frequenting the Saloon would be happy about, and Barry knows that he can’t react to the news of his friend’s return while being still here.
His heart is still drumming like crazy, he still feels slightly nauseated, and the need to move, to pick up the phone and call Hal is nearly painful in its urgency.

Not that he knows Hal’s current number… not that Hal probably has a current number just yet.

“Is everything alright, Allen?” Roy sounds a little worried, mostly confused, and Barry forces himself to smile and nod.

“I-I’m f-fine.” He chuckles, though it sounds strange to his ears, unnatural. “I-I’m o-only a l-little t-tired.”

Barry can feel Charlie’s eyes on him and glances briefly at him, noticing the odd way he is now being watched. It prompts him to speak before the other man can ask anything that would lead to a possible disaster.

“C-Can I-I t-take a-a sh-short b-break?” It’s only another half an hour till they close, so he is not planning on using all of it, he just needs a few minutes to clear his head.

Charlie doesn’t answer right away as he continues to study him thoughtfully but eventually nods. “Sure, you’d to skip on your break today anyway. You can take the next half an hour off, I don’t need you to lock the door, but you can give me a hand with the closing after you’re done.”

“Th-Thans, I-I w-will,” Barry agrees, relieved, and without another word to either Charlie or Roy, he swiftly makes his way out the back, to the small, dingy, and cold back alley of the pub. The heavy door locks behind him, cutting him off from the people still inside, from anybody who could overhear him as he sinks down, onto the cold stairs, and curls up into a small ball, weeping in utter relief and joy over the unexpected but so very welcome news.

Hal is back.

His best friend is back.

***

The Central City Morrington train station is crowded, loud, and seems to buzz with the energy of the traveling people, despite the early morning hours.

Barry, who hasn’t caught any sleep in the last 36 hours since he went straight to Mary after getting home from his shift at the Saloon, feels not precisely exhausted either, even though he hardly got any sleep even before his last shift.

Restlessness has dug its teeth into him at the beginning of this week, back when it hit him that
Mary’s day of departure was only a few more days away. While he knows that it is a happy occasion for her, and he should feel excited too, he is mostly just apprehensive about her being gone for nearly two months.

It is selfish, and he tries not to show how hard it is to be here, waiting for the train to arrive that will take Eddy and her to the Kansas’ airport, somewhere he, unfortunately, can’t follow due to his parole requirements. The notion to just throw caution to the wind and come along has crossed his mind a few times over the last few days, but airports are known for their security, and in the end, he is just too afraid of running into serious trouble.

Thankfully, Mary understands, and assured him that she is just as happy that he is coming to see her off-

Someone bumps into Barry, causing him to stumble a step forward, and flinch in response.

Whoever the man in the expensive looking business suit is who hurries towards one of the train station exits, he doesn’t even bother to look back to see who he nearly run over.

“Are you alright, Bear?” Mary steps closer to him, studying him with a worried frown.

They are both waiting for Eddy, who went to get all of them some warm drinks, two coffees for Mary and him, and a chai tea for Barry.

“Y-Yes,” Barry assures her and steps closer to the wall where they are currently guarding Mary’s luggage, further out of anybody’s way who wants to pass them.

“What an inconsiderate man,” Mary remarks with a huff, shooting a reproachful look in the direction the businessman just headed towards, even though he is no longer in sight.

“I-It’s f-fine.” Barry shifts his weight from one foot to the other, restlessly, and rubs his palms against the side of thighs.

Being tired doesn’t make it any easier to bear such crowded places, but Mary’s train will arrive soon, and while a part of him is looking forward to getting out of here, a much bigger one dreads that moment to come.

Noticing Mary studying him with a slightly concerned frown, he forces himself to relax and smile at her, hoping that it does look convincing.

“Y-You’re e-exc-cited a-ab-bout th-the f-flight?” Barry inquires, knowing how much Mary loved the experience when she came to the US a few years back.

“I am,” Mary agrees, looking it, and adds with a wink, “About the flight and the duty-free shops, that is.”
Barry chuckles, knowing all about the list of presents his friend plans to pick up in addition to all the other things she already got for her family and friends back in Romania. She wrote down a list, and Barry, as well as Eddy, helped her to get everything over the last couple of weeks, which ended up being enough to fill up one of her two big suitcases.

They are heavy enough that Mary put some cash aside in case she has to pay a fee for her luggage surpassing the allowed weight limit, and while Barry is usually very careful about how he spends his money, he can completely understand why she would take the risk of paying extra for something like that.

When he accompanied Mary on her shopping trips to get all the presents she needed, they talked a lot about her family back overseas, and while they mostly kept their focus on them, Barry opened up a little about his own family he once had. It was painful, but it also filled him with a bittersweet nostalgia, as he remembered how much he loved to get something for Iris or Wally. Seeing them excited over a well-picked gift was always such a rewarding experience, and he misses it nearly as much as their love and smiles.

“Look who is bringing presents to the good children.” Eddy turns up next to them, causing Barry, who has briefly lost himself in his mind, to startle a little. His friends are used to his jumpiness, and, much to Barry’s gratefulness, they don’t mention it.

Instead, Eddy hands them their drinks, grinning. “Have you little rugrats been good while I was gone?”

His friend has been in a very joyful mood since Barry met up with him and Mary a few hours ago. He seems genuinely excited for Mary, and Barry envies him a little for it because he too wants to be happy for her instead of worrying about how her absence will affect him.

“I don’t think you have to worry about us being good, Eddy,” Mary points out, watching Eddy with an amused fondness as she accepts her drink. “I hope you weren't queue-jumping.”

“I would never,” Eddy proclaims with a fake gasp, giving Mary a pained expression, which causes her to roll her eyes and turn to Barry.

“I’m sorry that you will have to look after him on your own for a while, Bear,” Mary tells him, and, despite everything, Barry can’t help but crack a smile, while Eddy protests that statement. “Hey, I’m no toddler you’ve to look after, missy, stop badmouthing me.”

“You expect us to feed you when you’re hungry,” Mary points out but pauses for a moment before adding, “Considering how often we have to put up with your moodiness, maybe you are more like a teenager.”

Eddy snort, giving her a feigned dirty look. “Thank you, that’s so much less insulting.” He turns to
Barry, arching his eyebrows. “You’re not coming to my defense there, Barry? Are you seriously picking her over me?”

“I-I l-like b-both o-of y-you e-equ-qually,” Barry assures him diplomatically, chuckling. “A-And M- Mary h-has a p-p-point a-about y-you b-behaving l-like a r-reckl-less t-teen-nager a-at t-times. Th- That’s p-probab-bly w-why A-Axel l-likes y-you s-so m-much.”

“Pish-posh, the brat likes me because he has taste,” Eddy argues. “And because I’m hip and cool, and not running around all grandpa-style like certain other people I won’t name right now.” At that, he fake-coughs behind his hand, very poorly covering up Barry’s name.

“Y-Yes, y-you’re a r-real g-grown-up,” Barry replies drily and takes a sip of his tea, enjoying its soothing warmth.

“Aw, don’t be mean to me because my expiration date doesn’t approach as quickly as yours.” Eddy slings an arm over Barry’s shoulder and grins as he bumps his forehead lightly against Barry's temple. “Don’t forget, old people like you benefit to be surrounded by whippersnappers like me.”

“You’re getting close to your forties yourself, Eddy,” Mary reminds him as she watches both of them with a tender smile.

“I’m like excellent wine,” Eddy argues with a shrug. “I’m getting better the older I am.”

“Arrogance doesn’t suit anybody, my dear,” Marry advises but doesn’t seem to take Eddy’s fooling around any more seriously than Barry does. The prospect of soon seeing her family again has put her in too much of a good mood for anything to dim it.

Despite Barry not looking forward to seeing his friend leave, even if it is only for a couple of months, he still is honestly happy for her as he watches the twinkle in her eyes and the joyful smile on her lips.

Maybe, he will soon have someone else very dear to him back who will make Mary's absence easier to bear.

Maybe...

Hal is back, the return of the first Green Lantern has been all over the news now for weeks after the JLA stated the whole affair the media is now calling the rebirth of one of the original seven. It has a positive ring to it, makes it seem like people are genuinely happy to have Hal back, but Barry quickly picked up that it is not the case since people don’t seem to have forgotten how the first Green Lantern died, or what destruction he left behind in his crazed state.
There are polls everywhere, about whether people are glad to have the superhero back, whether they think they can trust him, whether his deeds can be forgiven, and Barry’s heart goes out to his friend because he is all too familiar with people turning on him.

In that regard, Barry was lucky, despite everything, since the public never learned of his alleged crimes, and the Flash’s image was never tainted. Hal’s name as the Green Lantern took a beating, and while Barry still doesn’t know what exactly happened that led his friend to destroy his home city and fight the other heroes, he is certain that there had to be another reason behind it. Possibly mind-control or something of that sort, it certainly wouldn’t have been the first time that something like that happened to any of them.

While in prison, Barry only heard rumors about what went on, and he didn’t believe most of it. He just couldn’t, and when he finally was able to look it up after his release, he felt shaken to the bone after what he read. Hal would have never done something like that on his own free will, Barry is sure of it, and it pained him to imagine how his friend has to feel now. Knowing what he was forced to do to the city and people he vowed to protect once, and people looking at him with reproach and anger for his failings is undoubtedly taking its toll on him.

It’s been over three weeks since Hal came back from the dead, and while that can be considered as quite a while, Barry is confident that a lot of things are currently keeping him busy. Coming back from the dead is probably not something a guideline exists about that lets you in on how to handle it.

A part of him, a troubled one, worries about the utter lack of hearing anything from Hal, but Barry isn’t willing to listen to it. Not yet, at least.

He and Hal had been friends for more than a decade before he was put into the Heights, and despite how the other man could drive him up the wall with his carefree, reckless attitude at times, he loved him dearly and felt a deep bond towards him. It was the same for Hal, Barry knows that, and while everybody else turned on him and believed that horrible lies about him, Hal didn’t.

There is no way that Hal would do so now, Barry won’t even consider it-

“Barry?”

Barry is startled out of his thoughts and turns to Mary, who is watching him once more with a worried frown.

“Are you okay?” Mary asks, and at his confusion, she explained. “You looked… sad there for a moment.” She steps closer to him and takes hold of his hand, giving him a small, encouraging smile. “I’ll be back in no time, Bear. You will see, seven weeks will just fly by, and before you know it, we will be baking cookies again and watch boring old movies together.”

“Th-Those m-movies a-aren’t b-boring,” Barry corrects her, returning her smile, and gives her hand a light squeeze. “A-And I-I kn-know… I-I’ll s-still m-miss y-you.”
Mary’s eyes soften, and she says his name, quietly, in that warm, affectionate way that always helps Barry when he feels sad or just wants to hide away from the world. “I will miss you too.” She chuckles, sheepishly, and reaches up to brush over her eyes that look very shiny all of a sudden.

“Hey, both of you, no crying, okay?” Eddy also steps closer and slings his arms around both their backs. “We’ll be back together and painting the town red in less than two months, that’s like no time at all.” He says the last part to Barry, who nods, but feels his throat close up and his eyes start to burn even so.

It is as if on cue that the announcement about Mary’s train arriving sounds, and they have to make their way to the platform.

Barry makes an effort to smile and look alright. He doesn’t want to drag Mary’s mood down because he is behaving like a child.

He doesn’t understand why his guts suddenly seem to coil up painfully, or why every step he has to take appears to cost him more effort.

It is ridiculous; he is behaving ridiculously. Barry has known that Mary would leave for over a month now, and while he didn't look forward to it, he didn’t feel like he couldn’t handle seeing her off. Not like he is feeling just now.

Eddy says something to him, and Barry responds, but he isn’t sure what just a moment later. Probably a question about whether he is doing alright, or a joke, something to cheer him up…

Barry swallows as he comes to a halt next to his friends when they reach the platform where the train is just arriving. It looks new, definitely a more modern model of the ones he used to travel in, and it will take it less than thirty minutes to get Mary and Eddy to the airport, and tomorrow about this time, she would be with her family in Europe.

What if she decided to stay?

The question has been nagging at him for days now, and Barry hates how much he hopes that this would not happen, that Mary maybe would realize that she likes it better in the states, or that she just does no longer fit in back with her former friends and family-

It is a horrible thing to wish for, and Barry tries to push those thoughts away, stomp them down before the guilt can become overbearing because he knows how terrible such a thing is.

Barry, who has been staring at the train with an increasing feeling of dread, notices someone approaching him out of the corner of his eyes. The sudden sense of unsettlement ebbs away when he turns and sees that it is only Mary, but then he notices the concerned, sympathetic look on her face,
and it isn’t difficult to realize that he is the reason for her worries.

“I-I’m s-sor-ry,” Barry croaks, truly meaning it, and the guilt that slowly starts to wind its cold fingers around him grows even worse when he realizes that his eyes are starting to tear up. “I-I’m f-fine, M-Mar-ry, d-d-don’t w-w-wor-ry, p-please.”

“I’m sorry too, Barry,” Mary tells him, and his heart sinks momentarily, as he fears that she could be about to tell her goodbye forever, even though he knows how stupid that fear is.

Instead, she pulls him into a hug, her arms around his middle, and starts to rub his back. “I cannot not worry about you. You are one of my dearest friends. It will always matter to me whether you feel happy or sad, and why that is.”

Squeezing his eyes shut, Barry returns the hug and pulls her closer as he buries his face in the crook of her neck.

“Y-You’ll c-come b-back, o-ok-kay?” Barry doesn’t understand why the idea of Mary leaving terrifies him so much since she made it clear that she will return. She likes her life here in the states and the people she has met and become close to, and Barry believes her, but-

They always leave.

The thought comes out of nowhere, and it nearly chokes Barry with its intensity.

They always leave.

Albert.

Simon.

Bruce.

Iris and Wally…

They always leave.

The sob forces its way past his lips, and before he even realizes it, he is crying in earnest.

He is angry at himself for it, embarrassed even, for causing a scene, for doing this to Mary, who doesn’t deserve to have to deal with his issues on a day that should be nothing but happy for her.
He is an awful friend, a horrible person.

He probably always was, which is why everybody leaves in the end-

“Oh Barry,” Mary whispers soothingly in his ear and pulls him closer. “Of course, I will come back; I always planned to do so.” She kisses his temple and lifts a hand to brush her fingers through his hair. “I have a new family here as well now, and I love the life I have with them, never doubt that.”

Barry sniffles, fighting down another sob but isn't able to let go of his friend just yet. Mary, thankfully, seems alright with that, even though her train will be leaving in less than five minutes.

Another arm joins Mary’s around his back when Eddy joins them.

“I’m all for group hugs,” Eddy informs them, pulling them closer, “especially if we’ve to remember a certain someone that he won’t suddenly end up all alone one sad morning.” He says before facing Barry directly. “You underestimate how difficult it is to get rid of us once we decided we like someone, Bar.”

Barry is so incredibly grateful to have found two amazing friends like them, and it chokes him up all over again. “Th-Th-Thank y-you…”

“There is no need to thank us, Bear,” Mary tells him softly. “We’re friends, something like that is not only a one-way thing, and you make it impossible not to be glad that we’ve met.”

It does good to hear that, to get the reassurance he is thirsting for so badly.

He is needy, and it is embarrassing, but even so, Barry can’t feel too bad about it in that moment.

He needs to hear that, he can’t lose another person he holds so dear, especially if Hal-

No.

Hal is busy, Barry is not going to let his insecurities and fears doubt his friend, that is a horrible thing to do, and he doesn’t deserve that.

Eddy pulls back first, turning to look back up to the clock.

“I think we should get moving,” Eddy advises them and gives Barry an apologetic look when he finally pulls back too, letting go of Mary, as if it was somehow his fault that time didn’t just stop for
Barry brushes the tears trails off his cheeks and nods. He forces himself to smile as he meets Mary’s eyes, which, much to his surprise and relief, is not that difficult to archive this time around.

“I-I w-wish y-you a-an a-am-mazing s-stay w-with y-your f-family a-and f-friends,” Barry tells her, earnestly. “I-I w-will m-miss y-you…” His voice breaks, and he ducks his head, embarrassed. A soft, warm hand cups his cheek, and Mary sounds calm and just as earnest as she speaks, “I will miss you too, Bear, much more than you can probably imagine. You are family to me, another brother I genuinely love, and I’m truly blessed for it.”

This time, Barry pulls her into another hug, and Mary lets him. It doesn’t last as long since the train is going to depart in less than a minute as Eddy informs them, sounding reluctant himself, though.

“I’ll pass by at your place as soon as I’m back from the airport,” Eddy tells Barry after Mary and he stepped on the train. He tries not to show it, but he looks worried, probably troubled by Barry’s breakdown.

Barry nods and smiles, despite how bone-tired he feels, enough so that the journey home ahead of him seems nearly too big of a task.

“Take care of you, Bear. I’ll call you as soon as I can,” Mary promises him.

“I-I’ll k-keep m-my ph-phone t-turned o-on,” Barry assures her and swallows around the lump in his throat. “H-Have a-a g-great t-time w-with y-your f-f… f-family, M-Mary.” He wants to tell her that he will miss her once more, but he knows that it would be unfair and only make this more difficult for her too. He doesn’t want her stay with her family to be weighed down by her being worried about him.

“I will, and I’ll come back with enough photos that it will take us a month to look through them, okay?” Mary has just finished the sentence, when the doors are shut, ending their goodbye abruptly.

Barry waves and gives her another smile as the train starts to move. He is exhausted, and he feels hollow, cold on the inside, and he watches Mary wave back, say something he can’t hear through the glass, and then Eddy and she are out of his sight.

Slowly, Barry lets his hand sink back to his side and watches the train drive off.

A wind picks up, and Barry shivers, but he feels reluctant about moving.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in, filling his lungs with the cold winter air, as the cacophony of the platform around him sweeps over him.
He feels small and utterly alone.

Exhaling softly, Barry eventually turns to leave.

He will catch up on his missed sleep, and later, when Eddy eventually passes by, he will feel more like himself again.

On his way home, Barry tries not to think of Mary, or how much he is already feeling her absence, nor of Hal, who may or may not want to have anything to do with him anymore. He just needs some sleep.

Afterwards, things will look up again.

Chapter End Notes

So, I guess it's probably best if I start with Hal :)

The first (second) GL is back! YAY! :D

Or maybe not...

Hm, something seems to be up with Hal, at least Barry seems to think so since his friend hasn't tried to reach out to him in nearly a month. Then again, as Barry himself points out, coming back from the dead is likely to keep you quite busy for a while, especially if you are a space-cop, so maybe Hal is just busy? Well, we're to wait and see.

Also, Roy, finally! xD Roy, aka the Rainbow Raider, is a totally underrated character imo (especially the silver age version), and I'm pleased that we are starting to get where he is finally more included in the story. He and Barry seem to get along quite well, and he seems to be an honestly nice guy towards him, though I have the feeling that Roy may be interested in Barry for more than any possible cocktail making skills. ;) Let's hope he is more subtle when Len is around; something tells me Len would not take kindly to him mooning over Barry.

Mary is now on her way to Europe, finally visiting her family, which is a reason to celebrate, at least for her, and while Barry is undoubtedly trying to be happy for her, it probably is falling a little flat for him.

Barry has been traumatized by people leaving him time and time again, and he subconsciously fears that his current friends could do the same so that he ends up all alone once more. It is a fear he will have to work through, but that is something he will have to face once he has less more urgent things to worry about.

The scene with Barry being nearly run over by some schmuck in a business suit is
something that happened to me once, and that jerk didn't even turn to see who he ran
into. Some people are just frustrating, and a life goal of mine is to never become like
them. ;)

I want to thank all of my readers who left me a comment since the last update. You guys
are great; you have no idea how much a couple of lines can lift my mood and encourage
me when I'm nearly drowning in work and my studies (university started again, where
did the summer go? Dx ). :)
The Warmth of Trust

Chapter Summary

There is nothing better than an Addams Family marathon with pancakes and friends, well other than for a romantic surprise, that is.

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter has some rather graphic flashbacks to Barry's time in prison and the abuse he suffered there, as well as a mention of suicidal thoughts, so keep that in mind before you start to read. Also, we learn more about Eddy's past which had a lot of violence in it.

I probably unintentionally mislead you guys in the author's note from the last chapter. This chapter is pretty dark, even though it has light moments in it, but it won't be a fluffy one. It was not my intention to lie, for some reason, I just perceived this chapter as less trigger-heavy than it is. Thanks to my awesome beta for pointing this out to me. :)

And, as usual, this chapter was edited by my dear friend Quintessenza, who did a great job with it (as usual :)! Thanks a lot for your hard work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“James, put the plushy aside, or you’ll get batter all over it.” Hartley throws a misgiving look over his shoulder to where James is currently holding the spoon with the paws of the little fox plushy Barry got him for his last birthday, apparently attempting with limited success to steer the batter for their pancakes that way.

“But Mr. Fox wants to help,” James argues, grinning. “He likes Barry’s cooking, and he wants to learn how to make such kick-ass pancakes himself.” He then turns to Barry, who is sitting opposite to him at the kitchen table. “You don’t mind if he does so, do you?”

“O-Of c-course n-not,” Barry assures him and adds after a brief pause, “th-though I’m n-not s-so s-sure a-ab-out M-Mr. F-Fox. H-He kn-knows wh-where y-you l-live n-now, s-so…”
“Speak for yourself, blondie.” Eddy snorts, arching an eyebrow. “I’m as good as invincible. I’m as quick as sound, and I can vibrate through about anything.”

“The evil speedster kicked your butt pretty spectacularly,” James reminds Eddy innocently, causing the other man to glare daggers his way.

“He caught me off-guard.” Eddy sniffs annoyed and adds tersely, “And plushies are for little girls.”

“They are not!” James argues, wrinkling his nose. “And Mr. Fox is no plushy. He’s my friend.”

Eddy snorts and is about to say something else that will undoubtedly cause James to throw a fit. Barry, who wants to avoid any fighting if possible and just enjoy a relaxed evening with his friends, stomps on Eddy's foot before he can open his mouth, shooting him a warning look.

“Ouch, that hurts, you know,” Eddy grumbles as he rubs his foot under the table but thankfully refrains from goading James on any further.

Barry turns his attention back to where he is currently working on a sketch of Mary and Eddy which he started when they visited the CC Leawook park a couple of days before she left. It is coming along nicely, and while he initially thought about water coloring it, he is now starting to like the idea of keeping it a simple penciled sketch better. He glances at the watch Eddy is wearing, picking up that it is already half past seven. They will need to hurry if they want to finish preparing their food and get over to Eddy’s apartment before the Addams Family marathon starts.

Barry muses as he keeps working on Mary's eyes that he will likely end up sleeping on his friend's couch tonight. It is something he tends to do since Eddy's sofa is a surprisingly comfy piece of furniture compared to his own, even though it too seems to originate from sometime in the seventies.

Barry usually doesn’t like to intrude like that, but the idea of falling asleep surrounded by his friends is comforting, especially right now with how intensely he is still feeling Mary’s absence.

She left just two days ago, and he is surprisingly shaken by it, in a way that catches him off-guard and is quite embarrassing, since he feels like he is behaving more like a clingy toddler than a friend.

Mary is someone very dear to him, and Barry knew he would miss her, he expected it, but he didn’t think he would be left feeling so miserable about the whole situation. Even the Rogues picked up on his depressed mood when he went over there yesterday morning to spend some time with Len before he had to leave for work. That is also why Hartley and James are currently here seeing that they decided an evening full of corny sixty television is just the thing to cheer him up.

“You know, I think you've got my nose wrong,” Eddy remarks, causing Barry to turn to him in surprise.

“T-Too s-small?” Barry asks, turning back to the piece of paper with a thoughtful look and nods after a moment. “I-I th-think y-you’re r-right.”

Eddy kicks his chair lightly, amused by his ribbing. “Don’t be a jackass, Bar. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I think he’s right,” James quips up, glancing at the sketch from over his plushy’s head. “It’s too small, and it should be way more crooked!”

“Go fuck yourself, bozo,” Eddy tells him, sweetly and turns back to study the sketch once more. “My nose isn’t that fat.”

“It’s not fat.” Barry snorts, shooting his friend an incredulous look.
“It looks fat on that scrawl you call art,” Eddy argues.

“I’m not done with the shading yet,” Barry defends slightly miffed as he takes a scrutinizing look of work for himself once more.

Eddy is a brat; his nose doesn’t look any bigger than it’s supposed to, despite it not being done yet.

“Sounds like excuses to me,” Eddy remarks, and his smirk grows into an outright grin when Barry glares at him in return. He lifts a hand in a mollifying manner, chuckling, and amends, “Well, Mary looks fine at least. Even if her eyes are a little… squinty.”

“You’re being a brat,” Barry decides and gets up to stash his sketching utensils away.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to break your artistic spirit, Bear,” Eddy points out as Barry makes his way over to the cupboard where he usually stashes his sketchbook.

“You’ve to be more careful about what you say,” James advises Eddy seriously with a misgiving frown from the other side of the table. “You hurt Barry’s feelings.”

Eddy huffs a laugh, lifting both his eyebrows in amused surprise. “I didn’t. He’s a big boy, Tricksy; he can take it.”

“Don’t call me that,” James complains, but any further argument is cut short when Hartley calls him over to assist him with frying the pancakes, which he happily obliges. He insists on Mr. Fox sitting at the small slip of counter between the sink and the heating plates so that he can watch and learn. Hartley isn’t happy about it but relents once it becomes clear that James will throw a fit otherwise.

Twenty minutes later, they move from Barry’s apartment to Eddy’s, since he has a television with cable, and they are just in time to see the last part of the 8 pm news before the marathon’s start.

Barry frowns when he picks up on the current polls regarding their next mayoral election, and he feels an unease settle over him when he is reminded of how Alvares does have quite a good chance to win. The man makes Barry uneasy, and he knows he is by far not the only one, which is why it is hard for him to understand how he can have so many of the citizens backing him.

It’s likely due to his connections to Luthor, who seems hell-bent on backing a handpicked number of politicians all over the country with ridiculous sums.

The mere notion of having someone as corrupt and dangerous as Luthor as the head of their state is sickening, and Barry quickly pushes that thought away, glad when the news about the current political situation change to the weather forecast.

His mood starts to brighten with the start of the marathon a few minutes later, and despite being not especially hungry, the pancakes turn out very tasty, so much so that he even goes for seconds and soon ends up sitting sated and drowsy between Eddy and James, feeling relaxed and comfortable.

James loves the series, and despite how Eddy and he usually end up head-butting, they both are amazing at working off each other when it comes to laying into it for its corniness. Barry can’t but chuckle along as he listens to his friends, while he is slowly but surely drifting off.

Someone pushing him back onto his back wakes him sometime later snapping him out of the fuzzy in-between state of not being asleep anymore but not being entirely awake either.

He fights the hands off, which retreat surprisingly quickly, and for a horrible moment, he is in limbo, uncertain of where he is or who could be with him.
Then, Eddy’s familiar voice reaches his upset mind, unusually low and soothing, and Barry feels the tension leave his body at once so that he slumps back, onto what he realizes now has to be his friend’s couch, with a soft groan.

“You’re okay,” Eddy repeats quietly, and Barry slowly turns his head so he can face his friend who is now crouching next to him. Eddy gives him a vain attempt of a smile, though his brows are knit together, and he looks a little freaked out.

“S-Sor-ry,” Barry murmurs and tiredly reaches up to rub his face, grimacing as he feels a sharp pain flash through his back.

Sleeping in a sitting position isn’t a wise thing to attempt at his age, and his body isn’t happy with him for being mindless enough to do so in the first place.

Eddy doesn’t reply right away. Instead, he keeps studying Barry with a grim, unhappy look.

“You don’t need to apologize for getting spooked,” Eddy finally tells him and cracks a small smile, “we both know you’re a scaredy-cat at heart.”

“I’m n-not,” Barry protests but softly chuckles as he rolls onto his side, grimacing again since his back is still all tensed up.

“You want me to give you a backrub?” Eddy offers out of the blue, and, judging by his expression, Barry isn’t the only one who is caught off-guard by it.

“N-No.” Barry feels a little guilty for how curt he sounds, but there is no way that he will let Eddy see his back. The mere thought is mortifying.

It takes him a moment to realize that the notion of Eddy touching him doesn’t pose a problem, though, which is odd and a little unsettling since Barry can’t imagine anybody doing so in such an intimate way, even Len.

“You could keep your shirt on,” Eddy points out, as he seems to know at least part of the reason why Barry shies away from his offer. He smiles as Barry gives him a surprised look. “It’s not that hard to guess that you’re probably not big on getting topless when you insist on wearing long sleeves even during the summer heat.”

When Barry doesn’t answer since he is unsure how to respond, still mostly confused about how he doesn’t fear his friend’s touch, Eddy adds, “It’s okay if you don’t want to, Bear, it’s just an offer.”

Barry frowns and averts his eyes, feeling suddenly very uneasy. He pushes himself up into a sitting position and grimaces again when another sharp pain runs up his spine to his neck.

“You want me to get you some water?” Eddy asks, breaking the tense silence that has started to settle over them, and Barry shoots him a grateful look, nodding. He is quite thirsty.

As Eddy walks around the couch to get him something to drink from his kitchenette, Barry rubs his eyes groggily, and just then picks up on the otherwise silent apartment and the noticeable lack of two very infamous Rogues.

Barry glances to Eddy’s DVD recorder and is slightly taken aback by the small digital numbers of its clock showing that it is already close to four in the morning.

He couldn’t have fallen asleep long after the marathon started, maybe towards the end of the second episode? He must have been more tired than he thought.
As if on a cue, Barry yawns loudly, still feeling exhausted, despite the seven hours of sleep he just got.

Eddy comes back, handing him the cool drink, which Barry gratefully accepts and takes a couple of sips.

“Wh-When d-did J-James a-and H-Hartley l-leave?” Barry asks as he lets the glass rest on his thigh, feeling already a little more awake.

“Just about ten minutes ago,” Eddy informs him and retakes his seat next to him, a can of coke in his hand. “Trickster wanted to wake you, but Hartley told him to let you rest.” He snorts, and glances over to Barry, smirking. “Just so you know, it could be that you got a goodnight kiss from a plushy fox.”

Barry smiles, amused, and leans back against the couch, yawning once more. He freezes when that causes another sharp pang to cut through his spine, and he decides that he is not going to sleep anywhere other his bed ever again.

Grimacing, he reaches back to rub his neck and notices that Eddy is watching him again with a concerned frown.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Barry assures him, closing his eyes. “J-Just sh-shouldn’t h-have f-forg-gotten th-that I-I’m n-not in m-my t-twent-ies anym-more.”

The expected quip about his age stays out, and he glances over to his friend, who doesn’t look in the least amused or reassured.

“Ed-dy.” Barry sighs and gives the other man a fond smile. “I-I’m ok-kay.”

Eddy doesn’t immediately reply but looks like he is debating whether he should say something that is currently on his mind or not. Barry is not in the least bit surprised when his friend decides to go for it.

“I could just rub your neck, that way you can leave the shirt on and keep sitting,” Eddy offers, who seems for some reason oddly bothered by his current discomfort.

Barry studies his friend somewhat uneasy and is about to decline outright this time when Eddy interrupts him.

“I don’t like it when you’re in pain.”

Barry arches his eyebrows, surprised about how bluntly Eddy stated this. Then again, his friend is quite open when it comes to his feelings, even if he likes to play the macho for fun.

“I’m n-not i-in p-pain…” Barry breaks off at the unimpressed look Eddy gives him and shrugs slightly. “N-Not in m-much p-pain.”

The discomfort he is currently experiencing is hardly worth mentioning, it will pass in time on its own, or he will do some stretches to ease it later on when he is back in his apartment.

“Do you trust me?”

Barry feels his mouth clap shut and stares at the other man with wide, wary eyes.

Eddy grimaces and ducks his head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that, I don’t wanna pressure you into doing something you don’t want.” He huffs and rubs his hands over his face, looking very much
frustrated, much to Barry’s confusion.

Earlier, when James and Hartley were around, Eddy still seemed fine, and he wonders whether something happened while he slept that caused his friend to behave like this.

“E-Ed-dy… is e-everyth-thing ok-kay?”

“Sure,” Eddy agrees, too quickly, and lets his head drop back onto the back of the couch, exhaling a frustrated puff of air before shaking his head. “I'm probably only missing Mary.”

“Y-You d-did g-give h-her a l-lot of b-backr-rubs,” Barry agrees solemnly and smiles when it gets a chuckle in return.

“She is a pretty and smart lady who tolerates someone like me, she deserves all the backrubs she wants.”

“Sh-Sh-e d-does.” Barry nods, but adds, “Y-You’re n-not t-too b-bad e-either.”

Eddy’s grin slips off his lips, and he lowers his eyes to his lap while he rubs his palms nervously on his thighs.

“Eddy?” Barry asks, concerned.

“You know, what Mary said also counts for me,” Eddy tells him and elaborates when he notices his confused expression. “You’re like family to me, both of you.”

The way he says this, in that quiet, earnest tone, tugs at Barry’s heart, and he would have responded that it’s the same for him if Eddy had let him. Instead, the other man presses on, and what he says next causes Barry’s blood to turn cold.

“My dad killed my mom when I was ten.” Eddy pauses, licks his lips, and glances down at his lap. He sounds reluctant, pained as he goes on like it is physically hurting him to get the words out. “I can’t remember her, but I remember his face… he was a monster. He enjoyed hurting her.” Eddy grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut, pained. “They weren’t married, I… I think he kidnapped her and kept her as… as a trophy, and after a while, my little brother and I happened…” Eddy breaks off, looking devastated for a second like he is about to crumble just then and there. He quickly regains a hand over his emotions again, turns away and takes a deep, calming breath.

A thick, heavy silence follows, leaving Barry speechless as he stares at the other man. Eddy, in turn, keeps his eyes firmly fixed on the couch table in front of them.

“I have troubles remembering my childhood, but I started to have dreams about it a while ago,” Eddy tells him, quietly. “Dr. Elias thinks it’s due to the trauma…” He sounds unconvinced, hesitant. Glancing nervously at Barry, he smiles bitterly. “My younger brother, he… we were never close, he… he hates my guts.” He chuckles humorlessly and shrugs, turning his gaze back ahead so that he ends up staring at the wall opposite to them. “He tried to kill me; he wanted to impress dad, but I…” He licks his lips and shudders. “I’m stronger than I look.”

Barry listens, quietly, and the words cause a nearly smothering horror to rise within him as he imagines what such a life must have been like for his friend. He can see it all happen clearly in his mind, his past offers a lot of material he can use as a reference, and the thought that Eddy had to endure so much violence while he grew up is sickening.

Eddy mentioned his family in the past, in somewhat cryptic, vague ways, and Barry assumed that he didn’t have the best relationship with them, that they are likely criminals, who didn’t treat him well,
but he hadn’t expected something like that.

Despite his past and what happened to him, Eddy seems so normal, not broken or bitter, or scared.

“I know that that’s some sick stuff, and if it freaks you out and you want some time to think about what I just told you that’s fine,” Eddy tells him but keeps his eyes firmly in front of him. He sits utterly still, other than for the slight tremble in his hands, which have clenched into fists. “I just wanted you to know… because family tells each other things like that.” He chuckles, and his face briefly crumbling up with emotions before he gets a grip on them again.

“Real family, at least, and…” Eddy finally turns to him, his eyes harsh, stubborn, and pleading, “I don’t give a fuck about us not being related by blood, you and Mary have been more of a family to me than those bastards will ever be, and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The air feels tense, thick, as silence settles back between them once more.

The determination that grabbed Eddy earlier seems to leave him as the seconds tick by, and his stubborn, nearly daring expression is replaced by an uncertain, worried one.

It is enough to shake Barry out of his stupor. He doesn’t want Eddy to believe that this changes anything between them.

“Y-You’re f-family t-to m-me t-too,” Barry assures Eddy, “a-and o-one of m-my c-closest f-friends. Y-Your p-past w-won’t ch-change th-that, y-you’re n-not r-responsib-le f-for wh-what k-kind of p-person y-your f-father i-is.”

The tension that has been holding onto Eddy for the last five minutes seems to vanish at that, his shoulder relaxes, and he appears to nearly slump in on himself as if a heavy weight was lifted off him. The gratitude with which he is looking at Barry then is intense, and Barry once again notices how his friend seems always to expect the worst, to be left behind by people he holds dear.

It is a feeling Barry can understand all too well.

“I-I’m g-glad y-you’re in m-my l-life,” Barry tells him, firmly. “I’m g-glad w-we’ve m-met, M-Mary a-and y-you w-were one o-of th-the f-first p-people wh-who ac-cepted m-me a-after m-my d-disch-charge f-from p-prison, y-you g-gave m-me a ch-chance t-to b-be y-your f-friend, d-despite m-my p-past, a-and I c-can’t t-tell y-you h-how m-much th-his m-means t-to m-me o-or wh-what a d-dif-fere-ence i-it m-made.” He lowers his eyes, looks back to his lap, where he is still holding his glass of water, and swallows around the lump that has formed in his throat. “If i-i t-t weren’t f-for y-you g-guys, I-I d-don’t kn-know wh-whether I-I’d s-still b-be ar-round t-today...”

Barry falls quiet, and neither of them says something for a long moment. He can feel Eddy studying him with a taken aback expression, unsure how to reply to that.

Suicide is not something Barry likes to think about. Ever. It’s something that hovered over him numerous times over his life, and sometimes it was nearly impossible to resist its luring call.

If Barry hadn’t met Mrs. Ming or Mary, or Eddy, he honestly can’t say with certainty whether he wouldn’t have just given up a few weeks into his release, before he went to seek out Len. Even after that, when Len still allowed his temper to lash out at him, and Barry felt like life was just too big for him to take on, he can’t say with certainty whether he would have been able to fight on as he did without his friends’ help.

It is an ugly little secret he hasn’t shared with anybody so far, and probably never will again, but after Iron Heights, he probably was closer to end his own life than he had been ever before. The thought
hovered on his mind a lot during that first couple of weeks when he wasn’t able to sleep because of the fear of what was waiting for him in his dreams.

Taking a slow, deep breath, Barry turns back to Eddy, feeling sorry to have burdened him with something like that, mainly because it doesn’t matter anymore these days, but at the same time, he wants his friend to understand what a difference he made, how much he matters to him.

“Y-You’re a g-good m-man, Eddy,” Barry insists. “I-It d-doesn’t m-matter wh-who y-your f-father is, o-or wh-what h-he d-did, y-you’re n-noth-thing l-like h-him, and y-you d-don’t h-have t-to c-carry th-the g-guilt f-for wh-what h-he o-or y-your b-brother d-did a-around w-with y-you.”

Barry gives Eddy a small but honest smile, not missing how bright the other man’s eyes are just then. “W-We c-can’t ch-chose o-our f-family, b-but w-we c-can ch-chose o-our f-friends, a-and n-nothing s-says th-that th-those c-can’t b-bec-come f-family t-too. Y-You a-and M-Mary c-certainl-ly d-did t-to m-me.”

His words ring true to their core, and even while they are meant to comfort Eddy, they do the same for him.

Having people like his friends, whom he doesn’t only consider as close as family but who also see him like that, is unbelievably reassuring, nearly overwhelmingly so. He always wanted someone like that, someone who loves him in such a sincere, unconditional way and whom he can love right back like that.

For a while, he had that, with Iris, with Wally, with Jay and Joan, but it didn’t last.

He wasn’t able to make it last, in the end.

This will be different. Barry will try his best to make Eddy, Mary, and anybody else of the people he holds dear understand how much they mean to him, how important they are, and that their pasts don’t matter.

Eddy is a fantastic person, he has faults, like everybody, but he is more compassionate and loyal than most, and Barry knows how lucky he is to have him in his life.

“Thank you.” Eddy’s voice is craggy, trembling a little, and for a second he stares at Barry like he is something marvelous, something precious. Then, he huffs a shaky laugh and turns away, rubbing his hand over his eyes, looking both embarrassed but also happy.

“Damn, you’re worse than Mary when it comes to getting all sappy on me.” Eddy laughs again, awkward, cheeks flushed.

Barry smiles slightly, understanding his friend’s attempt to diffuse some of the tense emotion between them. Eddy’s go-to response when he feels shaken or vulnerable is to make silly jokes; he doesn’t want to hurt anybody that way, he only doesn’t know how else to react.

They fall quiet and go after their thoughts, working through all of what has just been said.

Eventually, Barry feels himself grow drowsy again, and while a part of him tries to get him to rise and move to his bed, he wants to stay a little longer with Eddy, who still seems shaken from opening up about his past.

A few minutes later, a faint snoring pulls Barry out of his thoughts, and he turns to his friend, who seems to have finally succumbed to his need to sleep as well.
Quietly, Barry gets up and gets Eddy’s blanket from his bedroom, covering his friend, since the nights are still slightly chilly, and their landlady has turned off heating once again.

Afterwards, Barry returns to his apartment, intending to grab a couple more hours of sleep of his own.

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The air is quiet, warm, filled with the smell of freshly cut grass.

Barry steps out into the night, blinking as his eyes adjust to the faint light the full moon is providing from far above his head.

It’s the end of April, and the weather was nothing but pleasant the last week. It seems that spring has finally shaken off the last tendrils of winter, and all of Central and Keystone City welcome the warmer season with open arms.

Barry is doing so too, and, as he follows Len along the well-trodden path that leads them away from the public restroom where Sam has just dropped them off and further into the park, he can’t but marvel at how lush nature is looking now even in the darkness. It is such a stark contrast to how it was just a couple of weeks ago.

There is nobody else around, the Granite Peak National Part is a favorite spot for campers, but it still is too early in spring for that, not to mention that it is a Monday night. That means they are probably on their own out here, aside from any park ranchers who are on duty.

Len assured him that this spot is one where none of the ranchers tends to pass by on their patrols before the end of the night, and while that doesn’t ease all of Barry’s worries, he allows himself to trust his friend. If there is a person who is an expert at avoiding the authorities, it is Len, after all.

Even so, Barry stays alert, and he sticks close to Len, still uncertain whether it was a good idea to agree to this little late night picnic the other man surprised him with from out of the blue.

Initially, Barry was reluctant to come along, and he still is, if he was honest with himself, but Len assured him that it would be alright, and even while he hasn’t said so, it is clear that this means a lot to him.

Barry still doesn’t know what has brought this on, why Len wants to have a picnic with him, thought the time and place is self-explaining, seeing that his friend can hardly show his face during the daytime when other people are around.

Unconsciously, Barry hugs the blanket he is carrying closer, glancing up to the bright, white moon, and can’t help but feel that this is a little surreal.

It would be unfair to say that this is entirely unlike Len, though. His friend invited him to a candlelight dinner before, and Len may deny it, but Barry knows by now that he does enjoy those romantic gestures as well.

Lisa mentioned to him a while ago that Len never really put a lot of thought into such things, that this is new, something he started to do only for him, and even now the notion causes a pleasant warmth to settle in his belly while a smile tugs at his lips.

Barry is a romantic at heart. He loved to prepare little surprises similar to this one for Iris, like taking her out to a nice restaurant for dinner or cooking one of her favorite dishes so they could spend a quiet evening together at home while Wally stayed at a friend’s place. They also got into the habit of
leaving each other little messages when they didn’t see much of each other because Barry had to get up too early, and Iris came home too late due to work. She loved his attentiveness, he knows so, and she returned his affection with cuddles, with kisses, her patience, and encouragement when he once again failed to-

The memory is squashed, and Barry decides to concentrate on the present, not wanting to drag his mood down when Len wants this to be a pleasant night for them both.

They walk in comfortable silence, Len slowed his pace down so that they are now next to each other, and Barry keeps close to him as they make their way through a small stretch of forest.

Being alone at night in a park with nobody around for miles is probably not the safest thing to do, but he knows that he will be alright with Len around.

Part of it is due to the other man’s Cold gun he took with him, and while Barry feels apprehensive about its presence, it also settles his nerves in a way. He doubts that anybody would try to harm them out here, but he is not ignorant to how often people got hurt in places like this one, more often by other people than a wild beast, and Len assured him that he has his gun set on stun when he notices his unease over it.

They eventually exit the trees and step into a vast clearing with a lake in its middle. Its surface appears calm, hardly a ripple disturbing it so that the reflection of the moon seems as sharp and clear as it would in a mirror as they make their way over to it.

Barry quietly takes in the serene view. It can easily rival the ones he usually sees on postcards with lovely landscapes printed on them, and he marvels over how beautiful nature is while a part of him regrets that he didn’t bring his sketchbook along.

About six feet away from the lakeshore, Len turns to Barry. "Is this spot alright for you?"

"S-Sure," Barry agrees, smiling, and, after Len put the basket with their food down, he helps him spread the blanket he has been carrying on the grassy ground.

The night is calm around them as they open the plastic containers filled with the dishes they brought along. Barry is pleasantly surprised about the choices since he hasn’t been filled in about Len’s plan to make this late-night trip till about forty minutes ago and thus didn’t help to prepare any of it.

“Lisa made most of it,” Len informs him, guessing what is going through his mind, and Barry can’t say that he is surprised to learn so. Lisa loves cooking, and she probably used this opportunity to try some new things out, something she could not do for the other Rogues, who prefer traditional American dishes or even fast food to an overseas cuisine.

It’s mostly Italian dishes, antipasti they can pick up with their fingers, and Barry, who hasn’t eaten dinner just yet, feels his mouth water as he takes them in. There are grilled, and stuffed zucchini flowers, bruschetta with roasted squash and goat cheese, bacon wrapped artichoke hearts and puff pastry rolls stuffed with ricotta, feta, and kale.

Len grabs a tube lantern from the basket, and Barry squints his eyes as it is turned on, though the light is quickly dimmed down so that it’s not too glaringly obvious to anybody passing by at a distance but still allows them a better sight.

“I hope you like her choice,” Len remarks as he puts another two containers on the blanket, and Barry has to smile because he has no idea who is supposed to eat all of the food.

“l-It l-looks g-great,” Barry assures him and accepts the plastic wine glasses Len hands him.
“She thought Italian food is the right choice for a late-night picnic.” Len snorts and shoots him an amused look. “Cretin I am, I’d have stuck to sandwiches.”

Barry chuckles. “S-Sandw-iches w-would h-have b-been f-fine t-too.”

Len opens the wine he brought along, an expensive looking bottle that has an actual cork instead of a screw-cap, and fills their glasses.

“No, she’s right.” Len’s eyes appear darker than usual in the dim light of their lantern as he meets Barry’s, but the warmth in them is still unmistakable. “You deserve something special.”

Barry’s cheeks grow warm, and he ducks his head, touched by the words but also feeling a little self-conscious.

“I-I’ve y-you,” Barry points out and slightly cringes when he realizes how corny that must have sounded.

To his relief, Len doesn’t seem amused but watches him with an affectionate, tender expression he only shows when they are alone.

“Did Lisa prepare all of this herself?” Barry asks after he took a sip of the wine, which filled his mouth with a tart and heavy taste he quite enjoys.

“She got Hartley and Roscoe to help her,” Len informs him, smirking, and Barry is pretty sure that this is because Roscoe had to assist preparing the dishes. It’s not that Roscoe sees cooking as something that is beneath him or anything like that, Barry is pretty sure that the man enjoys it whenever he assists Lisa, but he certainly couldn’t have been happy about the part of doing something nice for Len.

Even after all these years, both men firmly hold onto their dislike for each other, though Barry is sure that it mostly is so because they’ve gotten used to it by now instead of any real persisting animosity.

“Th-They d-did an am-mazing j-job,” Barry remarks, letting his gaze wander over the numerous dishes that look delicious even in the dim shine of their lantern.

Len hums in agreement and picks one of the fried and stuffed zucchini flowers up. He turns towards Barry and offers the dish to him, close enough to his mouth that it is obvious he wants him to take a bite of it.

“These are delicious,” Len encourages him when he hesitates, his voice low and pleasant.

Barry looks from the offered food to Len and back, his face growing warm while his stomach flutters. He takes a bite, his taste buds are immediately flooded by the rich flavor, but the feeling of his lips accidentally brushing against Len’s fingers overshadows that. The contact is unexpected, electrifying, and he jerks back, sure that even in the faint light his blush has to be glaringly obvious.

Looking anywhere but to the other man as he chews on his bite, Barry hums in agreement and adds after he swallowed, “I-It’s g-good.” He swiftly takes another sip of his wine and glances back to Len, who is still watching him with fond amusement, but there is something else in his eyes, something he isn’t sure how to feel about.

Desire.

It’s not the first time he noticed Len watching him with that emotion, but it still causes him to feel flustered and unsure of how to react. It’s not that he is scared of what Len will do.
Barry trusts him, he really does, and by now, his scars from what Cameron did to him have started to pale somewhat and joined the rows of old ones he is caring around with him, so that he is once again okay with Len touching him.

The idea of Len finding him attractive is still nearly absurd to him, though. Barry sees himself in the mirror each morning, and he knows that attraction doesn’t have to be only of physical nature, but he honestly can’t understand what the other man sees when he looks at him. He is not attractive, not in the least, and Barry is okay with that, in a way, he is glad for it because a part of him hopes that it will keep the wrong kind of interest away from him.

Len doesn’t see it the same way, though, and Barry feels conflicted over it. He is glad that Len finds him appealing, and he is even flattered by it, but people, men, seeing him as attractive has never ended well for him, which causes a persistent unease and wariness to settle in his guts even though he knows that his friend will never hurt him. He just can’t help it.

“Try the stuffed peppers,” Len advises him, pulling him back out of his mind.

Barry doesn’t miss that a familiar grimness has returned on Len’s face, and he regrets his reaction to what his friend meant to be a display of affection if a somewhat bold one.

Grabbing one of the recommended peppers, Barry takes a small bite and hums in pleasure, enjoying the contrast between the sweet and spicy vegetable and savory ground meat. He relaxes a little when he notices Len’s once again pleased expression, and after hesitating briefly, he offers Len the rest of the dish to take a bite.

Surprise flickers across Len’s eyes before it is replaced by a much warmer emotion, and Barry shivers lightly when his partner takes hold of his wrist and tries the stuffed pepper. There is no unintentional contact between lips and fingers this time, but it still leaves Barry’s cheeks feeling too warm.

“Delicious,” Len remarks, meeting his gaze firmly, and Barry shoots him an amused look. He keeps smiling when the other brushes his thumb against the side of his wrist and pulls it closer to kiss the back of his hand lightly.

“L-Lisa is a-a g-good c-cook,” Barry agrees, and his flush deepens at how breathlessly he sounds.

Len is the one who watches him with amusement now when he pulls back and lets go of his hand.

“She is,” Len agrees, picking up his glass of wine to take a sip. It doesn’t come as a surprise, when he grimaces in response, causing Barry to smile fondly and ask, “T-Too sweet?”

It is no secret that Len is not fond of wine, and it probably was also Lisa’s idea to bring it along instead of a six-pack.

“It’s g-good,” Barry agrees and takes another small sip, enjoying the richness of the wine that is covering his tongue as he swallows it.
“Good.” Len’s face relaxes, and he looks quite pleased once more as if Barry enjoying the drink made his dislike for it much more tolerable. It causes the flutter in Barry’s stomach to return.

“Wh-What b-brought th-this on?” Barry inquires and quickly adds, as he doesn’t want Len to think that he doesn’t enjoy it, “I m-mean, I-I l-like i-it, d-don’t m-misunders-stand m-me, b-but i-is th-there a r-reason f-for th-thi-this m-moonlight p-picnic?”

Len lifts a shoulder and lets it drop again in a half-shrug. “You’re done with your probation period at the Saloon, and I thought you deserved something special after how busy you’ve been the last month.”

Barry feels a soft smile settle over his lips as he watches his friend. That’s right, Charlie let him know a few weeks ago that he is now hired as a regular employee, which is fantastic, but something Barry hardly registered with how busy things are at the Saloon.

More often than not, he still feels unsure whether it is the right decision to work at the bar, since it is a very overwhelming and demanding job for him, and while he has gotten used to the work itself, handling their customers can still be very exhausting.

“Th-Thank y-you.” Barry takes a sip of his wine, cheeks warm, and chuckles self-consciously. “If i-it w-weren’t f-for y-you a-and th-the oth-thers, I-I’m n-not s-sure I’d s-still b-be w-working th-there.” He lowers his gaze. “I’m s-still m-mostly t-terrified wh-when it g-gets r-really f-full, a-and I-I kn-know y-you’ve m-made s-sure th-that p-peo-ple a-aren’t as a-awful a-as th-they c-can b-be.”

There is a slight pause.

“Barry, what you do is impressive, don’t downplay it.” Len meets his uncertain look firmly, mouth briefly set in a thin, slightly displeased looking line. “You put yourself in a situation that is horrifying to you every time you go to work, and you still do it because you have to, that’s not something many people would be able to pull off, even when they have outside support.” He slowly reaches for Barry’s hand, all the while observing him as if to make sure his touch isn’t too much.

A shiver goes through Barry when Len’s hand grasps his, but he doesn’t shake it off or try to pull away.

Len’s touch has once again regained something unbelievably soothing, and Barry wants his friend to know so, especially after how long he couldn’t stand it due to Cameron’s doing.

“And you’re overestimating how much I or the others can influence those jackasses. They respect us, but we can’t always be there to watch your back, and everybody knows that.” Len furrows his brows, giving his look a deeply unhappy quality as he adds regretfully, “I wish I could do more, you don’t deserve how they treat you. You’re so much better than any of us could ever hope to be.”

“Th-That’s n-not t-true,” Barry disagrees firmly, not liking that his friend would think so little of himself. “Y-You’ve d-done s-so m-much f-for m-me, L-Len, d-don’t o-verl-look th-that. Y-You a-are a c-criminal, b-but y-you a-aren’t w-without m-morals o-or e-emp-pathy.” He squeezes Len’s hand lightly. “I-It t-takes a g-good a-and s-strong p-person t-to c-care a-and aid s-someone e-else i-in n-need. M-Most w-wouldn’t h-have c-cared ab-bout m-me, e-especially i-if th-they h-had th-the s-same sh-shared p-past as w-we d-do.”

Instead of easing the grim expression on Len’s face, it deepens, and he pulls his hand back. Barry lets it go reluctantly, confused and hurt, and worried that he said something wrong that could have upset his friend.
“I didn’t do shit while you were in that hellhole, did I!?” Len snaps, and his glare dares Barry to disagree. “I let them fuck you raw and do who knows what those sick bastards came up with because I was too much of a pussy to face how I feel about you.”

The words are harsh, sharp, and cut deep. Barry shrinks back, it feels as if someone punched him in the guts, and before he knows what he is doing, he is stumbling to his feet, hardly noticing as he knocks over his glass of wine.

“Barry,” Len sounds alarmed, taken aback, and gets up as well. He is at Barry’s side just a moment later, who hasn’t moved much, other than winding his arms around himself as he tries to fight off a familiar panic.

Thankfully, Len doesn’t try to touch him, something Barry really can’t deal with right now as memories from his time back in the Heights flicker cross his mind-

“I’ll let them fuck you raw if you don’t open your sweet little lips, cunt.” Puckett looked down at him with that awful smirk of his. He was enjoying this, he always did, and Barry, who was kneeling on the hard, cold tiled floor, with the other man’s hard cock close enough that he could smell it, felt a nearly smothering hopelessness join the pain and humiliation currently rattling his body.

Barry shakes his head, grunts in the effort as he tries to detangle himself from that awful moment that was only one of many of that kind.

He can feel the weight of Puckett’s cock on his tongue, the arch of it thrusting relentlessly into his mouth at the back of his throat and in his jaw, the intense musk taste and smell as he is forced to take it-

They will fuck you raw.

I’ll fuck you raw.

Puckett loved that phrase, more of a promise than a threat, and he nearly always delivered on it.

Where Michael had a certain amount of finesse to how he caused Barry to shake in absolute terror and desperation, Puckett was all blunt, harsh words he liked to accompany with fists.

“N-No…” Barry is trembling, he feels like a leave in a storm, thrown from side to side, unable to keep his ground, and all of this is so sickening, so overwhelmingly horrible, that he wishes he could just hammer those memories out of his skull.

“Breathe, Barry, it’s okay, you’re safe.” Len’s voice reaches him, he knows the other man is there, and it is an anchor, even if he isn’t able to pull himself out of molasses of the haunting ghosts of his past just yet.

Len sounds worried, even scared, and Barry whimpers, feeling horrible for having his friend see him like this.

It feels like an eternity till he can shake himself free of the memories, and he is so unbelievably glad that Len keeps talking to him through all of it, assuring him of his safety and just letting him know that he isn’t alone with what his treacherous mind is concocting.

Eventually, Barry blinks, feeling disorientated and only slightly ashamed that he has been crying again, and finds himself back at the clearing close to the lake.
He shivers, his arms still slung around himself, and he numbly turns to Len, who is standing close enough that he can feel his presence now that his mind is clearing up.

“S-S-Sor-ry…” Barry coughs lightly, his voice is craggy, and his throat hurts, and he can’t bring himself to meet the other man’s eyes.

Len doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and it causes the tears to return in Barry’s eyes as he fights down a sob.

“Hey, don’t, it’s okay.” Len makes a soothing sound; Barry can see him reach for him but halt a mere inch from his arm, where it hovers for a second before he lets his hand sink again. “You’re okay.”

Barry squeezes his eyes shut and wishes he could believe that.

He isn’t okay, though, hasn’t been for many years, and it is exhausting.

“Barry…” Len sounds uncertain, nearly scared, and Barry hates it. He doesn’t want Len to feel like that, not because of him in any case.

“Can I hold you?” Len eventually asks.

Barry hesitates, not sure whether this is a good idea since he knows that being touched so shortly after a panic attack can set him off again, but he despises it, how his mind forces fears on him that make him feel all the more miserable, and he doesn’t want Len to leave.

Trembling, he nods, sniffs, and whimpers when he feels the other man’s hand touch his back gently a moment later, but can keep still as he silently reminds himself that this is Len, that Len is safe.

Carefully, he is urged closer to his friend, whose body is warm and firm, alarmingly similar to the ones that continue to haunt his dreams. Len keeps talking to him, though, in that low, soothing tone of his, and Barry can hold onto that, remind himself that he doesn’t need to be afraid of the other man, his partner.

Arms close around him, and then he is leaning against Len, at first with his body as tense as a bowstring, but eventually, he relaxes and welcomes the comfort that is offered to him.

He is tired and shaken, and the night seems to have gotten so much colder.

“You’re okay, baby,” Len murmurs, his breath hot against Barry’s ear. “I won’t let anybody hurt you again; you’re safe.”

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat, his eyes closed, and rests heavily against Len, who is now stroking his back soothingly. It’s nice, a stark contrast to how he felt just a few minutes ago, and he feels his eyelids drop as the exhaustion makes it difficult to stand.

“C-Can w-we s-sit d-down?” Barry asks quietly, and Len quickly complies.

Sitting is a relief, his legs didn’t feel like they would have been able to carry him much longer, and he has to marvel at how draining such a period can be.

“Here.”

Glancing over to Len, Barry is surprised that the other man took his leather jacket off he is now
offering to him.

“Tr-I’m not cold,” Len assures him just when Barry is about to protest.

“Thank y-you,” Barry accepts it, grateful for the additional layer that not only helps him to warm up but makes him feel safer as well the instant he puts it on.

Len gives him a bottle of water next which Barry accepts too, though he only takes a couple of small sips since his stomach still is too upset to deal with anything more.

Unhappily, Barry glances over the containers of food they have hardly touched at all so far.

“It’s fine.” Len meets his eyes with a faint smile. “Lisa will understand, and we can eat it tomorrow when you feel better.”

Barry lowers his gaze to his lap. “I-I’m s-sorr-ry, y-you p-put s-so m-much e-effort i-i nto th-this a-and I-I r-ruined-”

“You didn’t ruin anything,” Len cuts him off, nearly harshly. He adds in a calmer, more soothing tone when he notices Barry tensing up once more, “I’m the one who messed this up, I should have kept my mouth shut instead of saying something that would obviously set you off.” He looks truly miserable then. “I didn’t mean to upset you; I didn’t think. I’m sorry.”

Barry nods, accepting his apology, as he rubs his eyes with a heavy sigh.

He isn’t angry with Len. He knows he didn’t intend for any of that to happen by the couple of thoughtless words he chose.

They sit together in silence for the next few minutes.

“You want to head back?” Len eventually asks, not sounding disappointed but still very much worried.

Barry studies the prepared food absentmindedly and shakes his head. “N-No… c-can w-we p-put th-th-the f-food a-a-way a-and s-stay h-here f-for a l-little l-longer?”

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“Of course,” Len agrees readily, and Barry thinks he sounds somewhat relieved.

The containers with the numerous dishes vanish back into the picnic basket, and Barry uses the paper tissues Len brought along to wipe the wine he accidentally spilled earlier.

They end up lying on the blanket, Barry’s head resting on Len’s shoulder and both looking up at the sky above them.

The night around them is quiet, calm, and it helps to ease the last of the tension that stayed behind in Barry.

One of Len’s hands rest on Barry’s hips, stroking it lightly in a gesture that is comforting instead of intimidating, and for a long while, they only watch the countless stars filling the vast darkness stretching past nearly all of their vision.

Barry enjoys it, the panic from earlier gone once more, and he feels safe with Len and more like himself again.

Stargazing is something he always loved to do, especially as a child. Imagining how vast the universe is, how much there has to be out there, helped him to forget whatever was bothering him at
the time, even if it was only for a few precious hours.

As a grownup, that didn’t change, and he ended up taking Iris to this very park to camp and watch the stars at night. Iris never really liked the camping aspect of the whole business, but she too very much enjoyed the view, as did Wally, when they took him along later on.

Barry misses them.

He closes his eyes and nestles himself a little closer to Len, who in turn tightens his grip around his back.

“You know any of the constellations?” Len asks.

Barry looks up to him in surprise and turns back to study the sky. “Y-Yes… a-astronomy w-was a h-hobby o-of m-mine.”

Len hums and points at a row of stars. “You know that one?”

Barry smiles, his hand resting on Len’s chest, and nods. “Th-Th’s p-part o-of L-Leo, i-it’s h-head.”

For a couple of second, Len seems to consider the constellation quietly. “Looks like anything but a lion to me.”

Chuckling, Barry lifts his arm and starts to point out the different part of the famous constellation while Len listens attentively.

“Well…” Len squints at the sky, still looking unconvinced. “With a lot of imagination…”

Barry grins and presses his cheek against his friend’s shoulder. “I-I’ll sh-show it t-to y-you o-on a m-map, i-it’s u-usually r-recog-niced e-easier th-that w-way.” He looks back to the said constellation. “I a-alw-ways l-liken th-this o-one.”

“Why?” Len inquires and turns his head to press a kiss on Barry’s temple.

“I-I’s th-th-e c-closest y-you g-get t-to a c-cat u-up th-there,” Barry explains, smiling. “I-I l-like c-cats.”

“Really?” That seems to surprise Len. “Why don’t you have a cat then?”

“Th-Th’e r-r-exp-ensive,” Barry points out, a little sad. “A-And i-it w-would b-be m-mostly a-alone wh-when I-I’m a-at w-work, wh-which m-means I-I’d n-need a s-second o-one f-for th-them t-to k-keep e-each o-other c-company, a-and th-that’s e-e-enough e-exp-pensive. M-My a-apartment a-also r-really isn’t b-big en-nough f-for p-pets a-anyw-way.”

“You could let it roam the streets while you’re not home.”

“I l-live c-close t-to a n-number o-of b-busy s-streets, th-that’s l-like t-tryin g-get it r-run o-over b-by a-a c-car,” Barry says with a sigh.

“When your parole is over, you can move somewhere nicer,” Len points out. “Either a bigger apartment or somewhere with some green to it.”

It is odd being reminded that his parole is going to end in less than two years and that with its end he will get back the freedom to move somewhere else, maybe even travel if he feels like it. Right now, the Twins are his prison, though it doesn’t feel like it most of the time since he loves the cities.
The thought of being able to do so, to do things in general without always having to worry about a wrong step getting him back into a cell leaves him with several conflicting feelings he isn’t sure he wants to take a closer look at just then.

“You ever owned a cat?” Len asks his eyes again on the constellation of Leo.

Barry swallows, presses himself firmer to Len, and hums in agreement. “Wh-When I-I w-was y-young… t-ten, I-I th-think.”

Smudges…

Len gives him an odd look then. He seems hesitant but still inquires, “It was your foster family’s cat?”

Barry smiles humorlessly, thinking back to the drunkards he was stuck with at that time, how they hardly could take care of themselves let alone of children. A cat would have either run away or succumbed under their supervision within weeks.

“N-No… i-it w-was m-mine.” Barry closes his eyes and tries to ignore the pang in his chest as he remembers the little dirty black ball of fur with the one cloudy, unseeing eyes, and the ripped ear. “I f-found i-it, a-and I-I t-took c-care o-of it.”

It was his secret, something he protected and looked after, and the little thing loved him in return. For a while, it even was like he had a friend.

Len doesn’t ask what happened to it, he probably picked up that it could not have been something good by Barry’s somber expression, and Barry is grateful for it.

“So, what’s that one.” Len breaks the heavy silence that has settled back over them for a long minute, pulling Barry out of his mind as he points to another group of stars.

“That’s part of Scorpius,” Barry explains, tracing its outline with his fingers.

Like earlier, Len studies the constellation silently. “That looks even less like a scorpion than Leo looks like a lion.”

Barry grins and assures him that he will show him a star map with already traced constellations later on. “Th-They’re d-difficult t-to sp-spot a-at f-first.”

“I think they are difficult to spot at all,” Len remarks drily but doesn’t disagree any further.

They spend the next couple of hours like that, lying on the blanket, holding each other, talking about constellations and whatever else crosses their minds. It is just when the sky starts to brighten in the east that they decide to make their way back to the public restroom where Sam would pick them up.

“Th-Thank y-you f-for t-tonight.” Barry squeezes Len’s hand he has been holding since they left the clearing, smiling. “I-I e-enj-joyed i-it a l-lot.”

Len expression softens, he looks relieved and pleased, and Barry lets his hand go when he reaches up to cup his heck.

“Anything for you, baby,” Len says as he closes in, and Barry lets him, his heart beating like crazy in his chest. There is a faint fear mingled with the excitement and love at the thought of being kissed, but he ignores it and concentrates instead on the other man, whose eyes are dark but kind as they meet his firmly, attentively.
The kiss is brief, just the touching of lips for a few seconds, nothing too intimate, but it leaves Barry breathless, shaken, and happy.

Len brushes another kiss against the corner of his lips. “Are you okay?”

Barry nods, smiling softly, and reaches up to cup Len’s cheek. “Y-Yes… th-thank y-you…”

He wants to say more, he wants to tell Len how grateful he is for having him in his life, for him sticking around despite everything, but he doesn’t want to appear clingy.

Len seems to understand it anyways as he kisses his forehead, his lips warm and soft, and says, “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm not entirely sure why but I like this chapter a lot, even if there are some sadder moments to it. Maybe because it shows the support Barry has now in his life despite how he is still suffering from the afterglow of all the trauma he had to endure? Or maybe it's because of Len's surprise picknick which shows once again a more romantic side of him we aren't used to? Len is a very caring person, probably much more so than he thinks, and Barry allows him to explore this side of himself, something he wasn't able to in the past because of his fear to appear weak.

That aside, Hartley and James show once again what good friends they are too. They picked up on Barry feeling sad over Mary's departure and want to cheer him up. It is a pity I don't have more time to include them and the friendship they have with Barry in this story. Then again, it's probably a good thing, or we wouldn't progress at all. x)

The Addams Family is a show I greatly enjoyed to watch as a child. Morticia is probably my favorite character of them, and there are still days where I wish I could be more like her or the rest of her family when it comes to being happy and satisfied with who you are and simply not caring about others' expectations or what people deem as normal. Barry likes the show for the same reason, it is funny and entertaining, but it also is reassuring in a way by offering the possibility of being happy despite being an outsider and not fitting into any norm. :)

By the way, if any of you are wondering, yeah, Rosco is totally going to bitch about the fact that he had to help to prepare food for them (aka do something nice for Len) and then they ended up not eating it.

A huge thank you to all of you who left me comments again, you lovely people make my days so much brighter! :) 

Next chapter will be from Len's POV, something we haven't had in a while, and Len's anger issues are going to flare up again, though, don't worry, his ire is not directed towards Barry.

Till Sunday in two weeks! :)
Len isn’t having a good night.

This chapter has been edited by my wonderful editor and friend Quintessenzza. Thank you for the amazing job you did again - you seriously ROCK! :)

Warning: Mentioning of past sexual abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

!!!IMPORTANT!!!: Okay, so, I was not sure whether to put this announcement in the beginning notes or the ones at the end, but I decided to put it here because people hopefully will read it.

Since I'll be really busy the next 3 to 4 months, I'm confronted with a little bit of a dilemma. I've enough chapters done to last us until end of March, but they are all rather long which is a pain in the butt to go over again and get them into a state I'm satisfied to send them to my editor next to all the other stuff I've to take care of.

So, I was contemplating to put Singularity on a HIATUS until the middle of March after the next chapter is uploaded or start to split the chapters I've so far (length would vary between 3k to 6k). Doing so would make it much easier for me to work through them and also give me additional backup material because I doubt I'll have a lot of time to work on new ones. If you decide for the later, I'll go back to posting the chapters in their original length as soon as I'm done with my last exam in March, which will either be on the 18th.

If you instead prefer for me to take a break and go on with posting the chapters in their usual length I'll be back on the 18th of March next year too.

Please let me know via voting for of those two options under the following link:

https://goo.gl/4Cc1Hs

I’ll take the votes that were put there until my next update on Sunday in two weeks into consideration.

Thank you, and without further ado, now on to the story! :)
The buzzing of people around Len, who are talking, laughing, and getting drunk, is filling the air, making it dense with the toned down aggressive energy that always settles over the Saloon at a busy night.

Len hardly takes notice of it, he knows that he can allow himself to indulge his urge to watch Barry work since the others are here too and watching his back should someone of the other patrons decide to stir shit up with him because of some unfinished business or to impress their friends. Not that either’s likely.

A bonus to making a name for yourself in the circles they frequent is that people not only start noticing you, they also know that it’s better not to mess with you if they can help it. He and his Rogues are far beyond the level of any common criminal, even the big fishes in the Twins’ pond. They are crazy enough to mess with capes and, at times, to even get away with it so they can spend their loot and tell the story.

Other than the mob, they don’t have to worry about any other criminals, and since the mob doesn’t tend to frequent the Saloon due to how Charlie hates their guts, Len feels fairly safe to let his mind wander.

Sitting at the bar, with his second beer in hand, he has a perfect view of Barry, who is busy keeping up with the orders. The blonde is currently working alone while Charlie and a plumber are in the back where a clogged drainage caused a small flood last night.

Charlie is in an accordingly lousy mood, and Barry, who knows so, is putting double an effort into not accidentally becoming the target for his boss’ ire.

Len takes another sip of his beer and keeps an eye on the people Barry is serving.

Nobody has tried to get funny with Barry so far, even the snide comments the blonde has to endure most of the time haven’t happened yet, and Len is well aware that this is due to his presence. It quickly made its round that Barry is pretty close with the Rogues, after all, and people are reluctant to get into a clinch with them over something as petty as making fun over their new bartender’s stammer.

Unfortunately, that alone isn’t enough to keep jackasses from giving Barry a hard time whenever the Rogues aren’t around, which is something that irks Len to no end, but there isn’t much he can do about it.

Criminals are assholes, most of them thrive on kicking people who are already on the ground, and while Barry wants to believe otherwise, the reality is that the Rogues were pretty much the same once. These days, they are calmer, some may even say nicer, but once they were vindictive assholes who would have relished in seeing the former Flash being put into his place.

The thought alone causes the bitter taste of beer to turn into acid in Len’s mouth. He thinks back to the picnic he surprised Barry with last week, to how they touched upon that very fact, and the memory of how little Len or the others did to help the blonde during his horrendous time in the Heights still makes his skin crawl.

For the longest time, Len told himself that he couldn’t have changed things anyway, that Barry would likely not have accepted his help because of who they were to each other back then, but he knows that that’s only an excuse. He let those awful things happen to the other man because it was
easier to look away, more convenient to turn a blind eye to the abuse instead of facing it and thus his growing feelings.

Len takes another sip of his beer that has started to taste like ashes and tries to ignore the anger and self-loath that is filling him to the brim.

The Rogues were no different in that regard than those fucking capes who stabbed Barry in the back or those assholes here who are making Barry’s life harder just because they can.

That changed with time after Len was finally enough of a man to jump over his shadow and introduce the blonde to their group, but for the longest time, they were like the rest of the scum that will let a man drown because it’s inconvenient to jump into the cold water and help.

The other patrons seem to notice his bad mood as they start to give him more space. Len welcomes it; he doesn’t feel like socializing, not that he ever really wants to mingle with the other patrons of the bar. He lifts his gaze from the mug in his hand he has been glowering at for the last minutes and turns his attention to his surroundings, noticing that Barry is shooting him concerned looks while he is keeping up with handing out drinks.

Len schools his features in a calm mask, annoyed with himself for slipping like that and wearing his emotions on his sleeve. He doesn’t give a fuck whether the other criminals picked up on his piss-poor mood, but he doesn’t want to make Barry worry.

Someone slips into the now empty chair next to Len, causing him to glance over to the man with a dark scowl since he preferred the additional space he got.

His mood makes a nosedive when he notices who it is, and he has to fight down a sneer when Roy briefly glances at him, looking surprised and uncomfortable as their eyes meet making it clear that he hadn’t noticed whom he just sat down next to till this very second.

The unease on the other criminal’s face is quickly replaced by a much more stubborn expression, and Len fights the urge to tell that idiot to fuck off. He doesn’t want to start anything with Barry around, and Roy has never been good at taking a hint or backing down from a fight even when he knows that he will get his ass handed to him.

As if sensing the tension, Barry turns up in front of them a moment later, looking tense and a little exhausted but greets Roy with a friendly smile, much to Len’s annoyance.

“H-Hey R-Roy, y-you w-want a-a b-beer?” Barry asks in a tone that is much too welcoming for Len’s liking.

“Sure,” Roy agrees readily, though his smile is awkward, a little too wide with too many teeth showing though the idiot couldn’t pull off to appear threatening even if he tried to. Barry doesn’t seem to notice since he quickly taps the other criminal a beer and hands it to him with another pleasant smile.

Len keeps his face relaxed, blank, despite how he balks on the inside while he watches how Roy hands the other man a ten dollar bill and tells him to keep the rest. At least Barry doesn’t look exactly happy either about the ridiculously big tip but he doesn’t have time to protest when another guy calls for three beers.

Roy grimaces slightly, not missing that the extra cash didn’t get the reaction he probably hoped for.

“You’re in a generous mood tonight, Bivolo. You’ve pulled off a heist that didn’t blow up in your face for once?” Len asks, voice low enough so that Barry won’t overhear him, and shoots Roy
mocking look. “The one you did two weeks ago went pretty south, didn’t it? With the Flash nearly hauling your ass back to the Heights.”

“I don’t think my finances are any of your concern, Snart.” Roy scoffs and shoots him a hostile look.

“Touchy, touchy,” Len smirks and takes a sip of his beer.

Roy scowls at him, and he seems close to saying something that would inevitably lead to the situation escalating quickly. Fortunately for the idiot, it doesn’t happen as he gets a grip on himself and instead turns back to where Barry is busy keeping up with orders.

Len snorts audibly, enjoying how Roy tenses up even more for a second, obviously fighting down the urge to spit some insult his way, but he too leaves it at that. While the other man bothers him, and he very much would enjoy it if he started a fight, he doesn’t want it to happen with Barry around.

Things start to slow down a little after half-past ten, shortly before Charlie returns, looking less pissed than he did the whole evening so far, which likely means that the plumbing problem is resolved. He sends Barry on his break, who looks relieved to have the possibility to get some time for himself, away from the loud crowd.

Len doesn’t follow as Barry leaves for the back of the bar, partly because Charlie would have a problem with it and partly because he doesn’t want people talking. Criminals can be worse gossipers than a bunch of old women, and while it is alright for them to know that Barry is under the Rogues’ protection, he doesn’t want them to get the idea that his relationship with Barry could be used against him in particular. Amunet and Cameron made sure that he is more careful about it these days.

Marco, Sam, and Digger come up to order another round for themselves and the others, who are still involved in another game of poker, but only exchange a couple of words with Len since they quickly pick up that he isn’t in the mood to socialize.

“Hey, Roy, how are you, buddy?” Sam greets the other criminal with a broad grin, the friendly tone palpably fake, and Roy shoots him a dirty look before turning back to his beer, intending to ignore him and the others.

“You took quite a bad beating by our favorite red Flasher a couple of weeks back, I’ve heard,” Sam presses on, not in the least discouraged by the clear dismissive attitude of the other man. “Nearly got yourself a one-way ticket back to the Heights, didn’t ya?”

“Fuck off, Scudder.” Roy grunts and Len can’t help but relish the man’s palpable unease since Barry isn’t around. He never liked Roy, and his poorly masked interest in Barry has been rubbing him the wrong way for a while now.

“Aw, come on, Rainbow, you don’t need to feel embarrassed, we’ve all clashed with the red fuck before,” Sam points out, still grinning. “We may not look like a total laughing stock when we face him, but everybody knows you can’t help it.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Scudder,” Roy grousers, a sneer on his face as he now turns to Sam, “I think we both know that you and your friends still take the spotlight for that with your colorful attire… or maybe gay would be a better word to describe it?” He smirks when Sam narrows his eyes, knowing all too well that he hit a sensitive spot. “Which I mean in a completely no-homo way since we know how masculine you all are. And really, running around in those outfits is impressive, not every hetero guy would have the guts and poise to pull that off.”

The little shit directs his gaze at Len, then, giving him a fake sunny smile. “Not that anybody would
dare to think that you've got a problem with fairies like me. That would be quite hypocritical, after all, seeing that you let Piper run around with you, and now your Captain—"

Len’s fist connects with Roy’s face hard enough that it throws the man back over the chair, causing him to slam into the side of another guy who has been watching their little squabble quite interestedly along with most of the other guests who are currently frequenting the immediate area of the bar.

“For fuck’s sake, Snart,” Charlie bellows, pissed off. “No barfight! Are you jackasses too dumb—"

Len ignores him, grabs a still very stunned looking Roy at the back of his jacket, and starts to drag him towards the exit.

The other visitors quickly clear the way for him as he crosses the bar, which has probably less to do with his reputation and more with the anger seeping off him just then.

“For fuck you,” Roy protests, regaining his senses again, and tries to get him to let go, but Len only punches him another time, hard enough that his nose cracks soundly before pushing the idiot ahead of him which causes Roy to stumbles to the ground with a pained whimper. Len takes hold of his shoulder, his grasp hard enough that it has to hurt and drags him on. Hartley chooses that moment to push his way through the crowd of onlookers.

“Cold, come on, let him go,” Hartley demands, though his eyes are pleading, worried about his friend. Why he is friends with an idiot like that Len will genuinely never get, and he doubts that it is merely due to both of them being gay.

“Please, you don’t wanna waste your time beating up someone like him, do you?” Hartley goes on while following him as he keeps hauling a once again struggling Roy to the exit.

“We’re not supposed to cause any trouble when Barry’s working,” James, who has followed Hartley from their table, joins in. He sounds worried, much younger than he is, and Len is sure that he would see that godforsaken fox plushy clutched in the other man's hands if he turned to look at him now.

“Len, the hell are you doing?” Lisa joins the protests as she shoulders her way through the crowd, who seems quite entertained by the thought of a possible brawl.

Len pushes the door open, the fresh night air washing over him as he steps out and forces Roy down the stairs. The man stumbles, tries to regain his equilibrium and fails so that he ends up falling down the three steps, and would have landed on his face if he hadn’t pulled his arm up to shield himself.

Roy emits a low, pained groan but it only takes him a couple of seconds before he is trying to push himself up from the hard, dirty ground.

“You think you’re a funny little fellow, don’t you?” Len asks, voice low and dangerous, and he enjoys the scared, nearly panicked look the other man shoots him in response.

“I-I didn’t mean to start any trouble, Cold,” Roy sputters, nasal sounding thanks to his broken nose that has already started to swell up. He pushes himself onto his knees and gets to his feet, panting, his eyes wide and frightened. “I was just joking.”

Like fuck you were, Len thinks furiously.

“Please, look, I don’t-” Roy just stumbled back when Len punches his stomach hard, causing his legs to give out under him once more as he drops back to the ground.

“Cold, stop it, he had enough,” Hartley demands from somewhere behind him, just as Lisa steps up
next to him. She is glowering at him in anger and confusion as he spares her a glance before turning his attention back on the now groaning, quivering man on the ground in front of him.

“Len,” Lisa says his name in that calm, reasonable tone she only uses when he lost the grasp of his temper, and it causes his fists to itch. “That’s enough; you don’t want to put that idiot in hospital.”

Oh, but he wants, he wants to beat the living daylights out of that little shit, who called him a fairy to his damn face!

“Go back inside,” Len tells Lisa, coldly, shooting her a warning look, and turns back to Bivolo.

Roy has just gotten onto his knees, looking ready to keel over at the slightest breeze, and glances up at him with a scared but also resigned expression.

Fucking idiot brought that on himself-

Someone pushes himself between Len and the target of his anger, catching him briefly off-guard since nobody should be stupid enough to do so, even his Rogues know not to mess with him when he is in such a mood.

“Hey, I think that fellow had quite enough,” the man says, and Len’s fury briefly takes a backseat when he recognizes the face as the one of Barry’s former employer’s grandson and friend, James.

The fuck is that guy doing here?!

“L-Len?!” Barry’s voice cuts through the air, and just like that Len is snapped out of his state of white-hot anger. He feels his stomach drop as he turns around and sees Barry standing there at the top of the stairs, between Mick and Marco, a confused and worried expression on his face which quickly turns horrified once he spots the very battered looking Roy on the ground.

“Wh-What a-are y-you d-d-doing?” Barry comes down the stairs, his whole demeanor tensed up and screaming of unease while his face is sickly pale.

A heavy guilt settles over Len the moment he realizes that Barry had to push his way through the crowd to get here, something that must have been an utter nightmare for him.

Barry crouches down next to Roy, who has gotten concerningly white, and still looks like he is about to keel over any second now. It’s likely he got a concussion next to the broken nose.

Hartley follows Barry’s suit and crouches down on the kneeling man’s other side.

“Why can you never keep your damn mouth shut?” Len hears Hartley mutter under his breath and isn’t surprised when he gets an angry glare from the ginger as he notices his look.

“H-He n-needs a-a d-d-doct-tor,” Barry points out, worriedly.

“Yeah,” Hartley agrees with a heavy sigh and turns to Sam who is among the small crowd that joined them out in the night to watch the spectacle. “Sam, can you drop us off at Bivolo’s place?”

Judging by Sam expression he doesn’t seem to like that suggestion at all, but Barry adds softly, pleadingly, “Please, Sam, he needs medical help.”

“Fine.” Sam huffs after a moment, clearly pissed that he has to play taxi once again, but it is Len he shoots a dirty look instead of Hartley or Barry before he adds, “Get that idiot to the bathroom, and I’ll drop you off there.”
“The rest of you little shits can move your asses also right back inside if you wanna keep staying at my bar for the rest of tonight. Otherwise, you can fuck off.” Charlie, who just pushed his way out the door, glares at the assembled crowd. “I’m not paying for fucking heating just so you jackasses can keep the door open and let the damn cold in.” He then pins Barry with an annoyed frown. “Watch your fucking idiot friends, Allen; I’m not joking about banning their asses if they keep pulling shit like that.”

With that, the spectacle is dismissed, and people start to return inside.

“Come on, Roy, let’s get you on your feet,” Hartley tells his friend after he slung his arm over his shoulder. The man in question groans in pain as he is pulled to his feet, and noticeably staggering, enough so that it causes James to step close and take his other arm. “I’ll help you get him to the…” At that James pauses a second and shoots Sam an odd look. “Bathroom?"

“I need a mirror to get annoying twerps from point A to point B, and this is no beauty salon, so the only mirror you’ll find around here are in the restrooms, nitwit,” Sam explains, bored sounding, and turns to re-enter the bar.

“Th-Thanks, J-James,” Barry tells his friend quietly, already appearing more relieved now that he knows that Roy will get some help.

“Don’t mention it,” James returns, smiling, though his expression dims somewhat when his gaze falls on Len. He glances to Barry, a little worried looking, which causes the rage in Len to flare up once again, because who does that schmuck think he is?!

“Um, are you coming along?” James asks, still watching Barry as if he is afraid that anything could happen to him should he leave him out of his sight.

“I-In a-a m-mom-moment,” Barry agrees, but his eyes are no longer on James but Len.

James doesn’t seem to like this, but Hartley starts to move and so does he, even though he keeps shooting concerned glances at Barry till they vanished back inside the bar.

The only ones left outside are Len, Barry, and the other Rogues, sans Hartley and Sam.

A tense moment of silence follows while Barry studies Len with a profoundly disapproving frown, and when he finally addresses him, his anger comes as no surprise.

“Wh-What th-the h-hell w-w-were y-you th-th-think-king?” Barry grits out, upset enough that speaking causes him more trouble than usual again, and Len feels horrible for being the cause of it.

“Wh-Why d-did y-you b-b-beat h-him u-up? H-He l-looks l-l-like y-you t-t-took a-a b-bat t-to h-his f-f-face, L-Len!” Barry pushes on bitterly.

“The idiot asked for it,” Len replies, punching the anger down till he can snuff it out. With Barry around, it’s not even that hard, since he swore to himself that he wouldn’t lose his temper around the other man again, and he intends to keep it like that.

“H-He a-a-a-a-a-a-asked y-you to g-give h-him a-a a-conc-cussion?” Barry asks incredulously and reaches up to rub his face, looking much too unsettled for Len’s liking.

“He-”

Len stops himself.
He insulted me.

He called me a damn fairy.

Yeah, neither would go over well. Now that Len's temper has started to cool off, he has to grudgingly agree that his reaction to Roy's words was way out of proportions.

Roy did goad him on, but the man only did so in response to him and the others doing the same, and Len doesn’t need anybody else to point out to him what an asshole he is for reacting the way he did.

He used the other criminal as a punching bag because he needed to let off some steam, his guilt and self-hatred had been eating away at him for days, and Roy, the unlucky idiot he is, chose precisely the wrong moment to mess with him.

Len turns to the other Rogues, who are still around.

“Go back inside, Barry and I will follow in a minute or so,” Len tells them, and it doesn’t sit well with him that all of them seem reluctant to do so, especially Lisa, though with her he expected it.

“You sure we can leave you two alone without you losing your grasp on your temper again?” Lisa asks him, her tone sharp and gaze reproachfully. She doesn’t want him to redirect his aggression from Roy to Barry, now that the former is no longer around, and Len would have been angry over this if she didn’t have every right to worry about it considering what just happened.

“Yes,” Len replies curtly, which is not reassurance enough it seems since Lisa keeps holding his gaze for a long moment as if she was searching for something in his eyes. Eventually, she appears to have found what she was looking for and relents, even if still very much reluctantly.

When the others are finally back inside the Saloon, Len makes a step towards Barry, reaching out to grasp his wrist, but stops when the blonde steps back, away from him, while not meeting his eyes.

A tense silence follows.

Len lets his hand sink back to his side.

“Barry, I-”

The door opens, and two guys step out, probably to have a smoke. They shoot them curious looks, and Len decides that here is not the place to have this talk.

“Can we move to the back alley?” Len asks Barry quietly, who, after glancing uneasily at the two other men, gives a curt nod but doesn’t seem to like the prospect very much.

The alley offers a semblance of privacy, and Len feels himself relax a little as soon as they enter it.

Barry is still keeping a distance from him, and while he is not meeting his eyes, his face shows the anger and uncertainty he is feeling very plainly.

“Barry, I lost my temper,” Len starts, voice low and careful. “Bivolo is an idiot, he never knows when to shut up, and he said something that caused me to snap-”

“Y-You b-beat h-him i-int-to a-a m-m-mess b-bec-because h-he i-ins-sulted y-you?” Barry asks doubtfully, sounding harsh and angry as he glances back to him with an afflicted frown. “L-Len, R-Roy s-stands n-no ch-chance a-ag-against y-you, a-and y-you kn-know th-that. Wh-Why w-would y-y-you b-beat h-him u-up l-like th-that? Th-That w-was u-utterly u-un-n-nec-ses-sary a-and c-cruel.”
Barry’s voice breaks towards the end, and he crosses his arms in front of his chest, looking once again less deviant and more like he is trying to comfort himself, which causes Len to regret going after Roy even more.

I am a cruel man, Len thinks but doesn’t say it.

It’s the truth, at least to a point. Len did many horrible things over the years, especially when he was still younger, unable to handle his anger like he does these days, and convinced he needed to prove himself to the world.

With the passing years, his anger didn’t exactly go away, but it lost some of its intensity. As Len is now studying Barry, standing in the dark back alley that smells like things you don’t want to think about, he is grateful that Barry didn’t know him back then, not on a personal level at least. He knows that he was the kind of person the blonde would have hated, the kind which likely caused him a lot of grief and pain in his younger years.

“I didn’t mean for it to get out of hands like it did,” Len admits, which at least is the truth.

The unhappy expression stays on Barry’s face, and he doesn’t look very comforted by that little fact.

Len heaves a sigh and rubs his eyes, the night suddenly feeling like it had gone on for much too long.

“Y-You’ve b-b-been i-in a-a b-bad m-mood f-for a-a wh-while n-now,” Barry says quietly, surprising Len, and lifts his gaze from the dirty ground, meeting his eyes, uncertain and worried. “S-Since y-you t-took m-me t-to th-th-that p-picnic… d-did s-something… d-did I I d-d-o s-something th-th-that u-ups-set y-you?”

Len grimaces, the words are like a punch. “No, you didn’t upset me, and you’re not responsible for me going after Bivolo,” he assures him, feeling like shit for how he caused Barry to think that he is to blame for how awful his mood has been lately. “Something has just been on my mind…”

“Wh-Wha-What i-i-is i-it?” Barry urges, and Len suddenly has troubles to meet his concerned look. “L-Len, y-you c-c-an t-tell m-m-e i-if s-something i-i-is b-both-thering y-y-you,” he goes on, and to Len’s surprise and relief, he makes a small step towards him, apparently no longer as averse to his presence.

Barry adds softly, “I-I’ll a-alwa-wa-y y-ll-listen.”

Closing his eyes for a moment, Len feels helpless, unsure what to do. A part of him wants to assure Barry that it is nothing, that he shouldn’t worry about it, but he knows that the blonde wouldn’t buy it and likely feel hurt over being shut out again.

Talking about these things is a lot like pulling teeth to Len, though. He hates to open up about his feelings, to anybody, and while he knows that Barry won’t think less of him, he still worries how he will react.

The funny thing is, Len isn’t sure whether he would prefer him to grow angry or not.

He certainly deserves it.

“It’s nothing,” Len says, squaring his shoulders. “Just something I’ve to mull over. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Barry’s face falls, and for a split-second, he looks disappointed, dejected even. Then, he makes a step
back and nods.

“F-Fine.”

“Barry-”

“I-It’s f-fine,” Barry insists, even though his hurt expression says otherwise. He turns to the entrance
of the alley, his lips pressed into a thin line, and seems to hesitate before he goes on, “W-We sh-
should g-go b-back i-ins-side, I-I’ve t-to g-get b-back t-to w-w-work.”

Len wants to argue, but there is nothing he can say, and Barry is right, his break has to be over by
now.

“Barry,” Len tries anew even so, and reaches for his wrist, taking hold of it. Barry tenses up, startled
by the unexpected contact. “Don’t be angry.” Len gives it a slight squeeze. “Please.”

For a moment, they stay like this, the tension between them tangible, and then Barry shakes his hand
off, causing a sharp pang in Len’s chest.

Barry, who turns back to him with a grim, hurt expression, seems to notice his reaction since the
anger immediately dims from his eyes and is replaced by a much more tired looking emotion.

They watch each other silently.

“I-I d-don’t w-want u-us t-to f-fight,” Barry tells him quietly, the exhaustion and sadness thick in his
voice.

Len makes a step closer to him but doesn’t reach for him again. “Me neither.”

Barry lowers his gaze, frowning unhappily. “D-Did I-I d-do s-someth-th-thing th-that u-upset y-you?” he asks again, and Len bites down on a curse.

“No,” Len insists, “you didn’t.”

Barry presses his lips into thin, grim line, apparently still not believing him, and Len wishes that man
wasn’t so damn stubborn and insecure at the same time, which is mean and unfair, but he wants him
to drop this.

“I’ll tell you about it after your shift is over, okay?” Len offers, surprising himself as he does so, and
his immediate regret over the words is a little softened by the relief and gratefulness with which
Barry looks back up to him in return.

“Ok-kay,” Barry agrees, and when Len reaches for him this time, he doesn’t pull away or shake his
hand off.

The air in the bar is warm and smells of smoke, sweat, and beer when they reenter it a minute later.
People shoot them curious looks, but they ignore it as they make their way back to the bar, where
Charlie glares briefly at Barry.

“My break was over five minutes ago, Allen,” Charlie informs him tersely, causing Barry to shrink
a little in on himself.

“S-Sorry, Ch-Charlie, i-it w-won’t h-hap-pen ag-gain,” Barry promises, unmistakably feeling bad for
being late, especially on a Saturday night and with how crowded it is.

Charlie grunts annoyed but leaves it at that, probably because he knows by now that Barry is the
There are no free seats at the bar, much to Len’s annoyance, since he would rather stay close to Barry, especially when he notices that his schmuck friend, James, is seated there. He doesn’t want to leave them alone, but he is aware that this is mostly due to his jealousy rearing its ugly head again as he watches them exchange a few brief friendly words. It will be better for everybody involved if he doesn’t stick around right now.

The concern, James whole caring, overly friendly demeanor rubs Len just the wrong way, and as he listens to Barry worry about that idiot having turned up at the Saloon in the first place, he feels his knuckles starting to itch once more.

“I told you I want to see the pub you’re working at,” James reminds Barry, the comfortable, warm smile on his face setting Len’s teeth on edge. At least, Barry looks not all that happy about having him here either, even though it’s mostly out of concern in this case.

Their chitchat is cut short when Barry has to get back to taking orders since their customers don’t care about those two catching up and want to order their beers.

Len gets one too, giving Barry a generous tip much to the other man’s confusion, and shoots James a dark look while the blonde has to move on to the next order.

He returns to the other Rogues for now.

“Well, someone sure looks like he just bit into a lemon,” Lisa remarks, smirking as Len takes a seat opposite to her. He grunts, not in the mood for his sister’s observations. Lisa, of course, doesn’t give a damn.

“James’ quite a charming guy,” Lisa points out, sweetly. “Good looks, cute smile, mild temper, level-headed. Contrary to certain thugs who think they’ve to behave like cave dwellers. Something, I’m pretty sure, our dear Barry is not all that crazy about, to begin with.”

“Lisa.” Len shoots her a warning glare. She’s had already enough to drink, it seems, and he doesn’t have the patience to deal with her jibes right now.

“I’m quite a catch,” James, theirs, agrees brightly, causing the other men to snort and snicker, while Lisa rolls her eyes.

“Pretty sure she’s not talking about you, numb nut,” Mick remarks as he studies his cards, one arm slung lazily over the back of his seat.

“Doesn’t matter, it still counts for me! I’m also a real cutie,” James insists, grinning. “Barry would certainly agree.”

“Watch it, Trickster,” Roscoe warns him with fake concern and shoots Len a taunting look. “Our dear Captain seems to be emotionally compromised tonight, and you don’t want him to go after your ass next.”

“If you don’t shut your trap, Dillon, you’ll be the one who gets to spend the rest of tonight nursing a concussion,” Len promises Roscoe with a sneer as he feels the aggressive energy from before return.

“Cut it out,” Lisa interjects, her tone no longer playful and pestering since she must have picked up on him being serious about his threat. She regards him with exasperation, her brows knit together. “You really should do something about your piss-poor mood, Len; you know that it usually ends badly if you let yourself go as you did with Bivolo earlier.” She glances over to the bar, and Len
follows her look, spotting Barry’s light crown of hair easily as he hurries to get the work done.

It seems that Charlie left him alone once again, probably taking care of some business in the back, much to Len’s irritation. Barry shouldn’t have to deal with all those people on his own during a rush like this. His gaze falls upon Barry’s friend next, who is with his back to them.

Jackass at least was mindful enough not to turn up in one of his fancy business suits, though Len certainly wouldn’t have minded him getting unwanted attention for it. Not that the man doesn’t still scream that he does not belong here, not necessarily due to his clothing maybe, but due to his whole demeanor, the way he holds himself, how unguarded he appears.

Idiot.

“Did you smooth things out with Barry?” Lisa’s question pulls him back to the others, and he glares at her in annoyance, still very much not comfortable to discuss anything that concerned their relationship with her or any of the others.

“Don’t give me that look.” Lisa scoffs. “Everybody of us knows what is going on between you two by now, and I didn’t ask you about anything too personal, I know where we are, so stop behaving like a prat.”

“It’s none of your business,” Len replies curtly, returning his sister’s glare with just as much vigor, and tries to ignore the presence of the other men.

“Yeah, not to mention that I don’t need to know about any specifics, mate,” Digger points out, looking a little uncomfortable.

“Same goes for me,” Marco agrees and looks up from his cards with a wrinkled nose. “I’m not interested in any of your guys’ sex lives.”

“Same here,” Sam agrees quickly, grimacing.

“You probably don’t need to worry about learning anything regarding Snart’s sex life,” Roscoe points out, a sardonic smirk on his lips. “It died a while ago.”

“Roscoe.” Lisa hisses and digs her elbow in the other man’s side, causing him to grunt in pain. “You clearly had enough to drink for tonight,” she decides firmly, glaring at him angrily. “You’re behaving like a real jackass again.”

“Because there’s a time he doesn’t?” Mick asks with a snort as he puts his wager down, shooting Roscoe an amused look. “Dillon is an asshole through and through. Everybody knows that.”

“Go fuck off, Rory, why don’t you go and put some little orphans on fire?” Roscoe replies tauntingly, and Len feels the shift in the air as the tension turns into aggression.

“Mick,” Len warns the other Rogue, whose amused grin dropped off his face and is replaced by a murderous expression.

“For fuck’s sake, Roscoe.” Lisa looks ready to smack Roscoe herself, who in turn looks not even remotely like he is about to back down.

What a night.

Len decides that he should have foreseen that coming here would be a stupid idea since he isn’t the only one whose mood is currently miserable. Being sitting ducks puts them all on edge, especially so
soon after their last break from business, and it isn’t surprising that those bozos try to goad each other on since they usually become more reckless when they get enough alcohol in their system.

Roscoe and Marco are especially prone to start something in situations like this one, and while the latter seems to be in a rather mellow mood tonight, Roscoe certainly isn’t.

“I’ll set your fucking ass on fire, Top, what do you think of that?” Mick offers dangerously, a sneer on his lips, and looks ready to get up and make his threat come true.

“That’s enough, guys,” Lisa cuts in, annoyed. “We won’t have another fight tonight. You idiots want Charlie to ban us from his bar for a couple of months again?”

“Yeah, stop it,” James agrees, agitated. “I want to come here and visit Barry when he works.”

“Shut up, Trickster,” Roscoe tells the other Rogue, though the earlier aggression has started to seep out of him, and he looks mostly just annoyed now, probably because Lisa will make him sleep on the couch tonight thanks to his petty behavior from earlier.

“You shut up,” James retorts, glaring. “We’re here to have fun! Stop ruining it!”

“Maybe we should call it an early night?” Sam offers just as he puts his cards done, calling it quits for the game. “It’s getting too crowded here for my taste anyway.”

“Not before I win this round,” Marco argues and eyes him with a smirk. “And not now that you’re out. For once, I’d like not to have to worry about a cheating ass like you while playing poker.”

“Nonsense, Mardon, I’d never cheat,” Sam assures him, but it comes over way too smug to be believable.

“Liar, you’re the worst cheater ever.” James lifts his plushy fox and declares, “Even Mr. Fox saw you do so.”

“Mr. Fox better keep his mouth shut if he doesn’t want to end up with all of his stuffing in the trash,” Sam threatens, sounding way too amused to mean it sincerely.

James still looks alarmed and pulls the plushy fox closer, glaring at Sam. “You do that, and I’ll sell your Mirror gun on eBay!”

Len feels himself relax as Sam and James continue to bicker. The aggression has mostly dissipated by now, and while Roscoe keeps looking sullen and like he would love nothing more than to edge someone else on some more, he knows that it isn’t a bright thing to do with Lisa already being pissed at him.

Turning his gaze back to the bar, Len notices that things have currently calmed down, enough so that Barry can talk with James, who looks much too comfortable while mingling with the lot like them.

At least, Barry seems less tense as well and instead appears honestly pleased to have his friend pass by, which still irks Len, though he knows that there is nothing he has to worry about. Not if he doesn’t mess things up.

Fuck his bad mood; he should have stayed at the hideout.

As he rubs the scar at the back of his head absentmindedly, Len’s mind wanders to the reason for the tension and unease that are currently clinging to him, and while he is not looking forward to opening up to Barry, he knows that it is only part of the problem.
There is something else going on, something that has nothing to do with the blonde or their shared past, and he is confident that he isn’t the only one who can sense it. The bar is full of unruly energy, it always is on nights like this one, but the aggression and anxiety that simmers below it that caused the number of bar fights to spike over the last two weeks is unusual, even for a location with customers like them.

There are rumors, of people vanishing, people like them, criminals, big names like some of the Bat’s lunatics who haven’t been seen or heard of in a while. There is always the possibility of them just lying low to let things cool off, of course, but Gael warned Len about keeping a low profile as well if possible.

“I don’t know any specifics,” Gael told Len the last time he passed by to discuss a possible heist. He looked worried, something he hardly ever does other when there is a threat that has to be taken seriously. “Jose heard from a friend that something is brewing and someone is out for people like you.”

“People like me,” Len clarified, frowning. “Criminals?”

“Criminals with recognizable names attached to them,” Gael corrected him with a grim smile.

It sounds farfetched but not as farfetched as Len would have liked. Especially after their last heist about three weeks ago, when the feeling of someone shadowing them plagued him during the whole duration of it, even though they didn’t run into any trouble, and Sam couldn’t spot anybody other than a couple of guards.

It’s possibly nothing, only his paranoia, fed by the restlessness that comes with the fact that they are lying low again, much to anybody’s displeasure, but Len trusts his instincts. He can always rely on his gut feeling, and right now it tells him that trouble is in the making, even if he has still no real proof for it.

As Len lets his eyes drift through the bar, he notices that judging by the number of people that are occupying the Saloon these days, he and his Rogues are not the only ones who try to stay away from unwanted attention and thus have too much free time on their hands-

Laughter stirs up at the bar, causing Len to turn his attention back to it, and he is surprised and somewhat annoyed to see that Barry’s friend seems to get along just fine with the rest of the people there. He furrows his brows when he notices the bright orange drink in the man’s hand, something that looks nothing like the usual mug of beer or glasses of whiskey people order.

He didn’t know Charlie had cocktails on his menu as well.

Barry hands another of those brightly colored drinks to the petite prostitute that sits on the lap of the man next to James, and he seems flushed, embarrassed but also oddly pleased.

What the hell is going on there?

Getting up, since his curiosity gets the better of him and he is not particularly fond of the other’s company right now, he makes his way back over to the bar, ignoring Lisa’s questioning look.

“It’s good.” Len hears the prostitute, a brunette, probably in her early thirties, say.

“Right?” James agrees, grinning.

The brunette woman turns to Barry and asks curiously, “Can you also make Mai Tai?”
“N-No, I-I d-don’t h-have a-all th-the i-ing-gridients f-for i-it around,” Barry explains, apologetically.

“That’s a pity, I’d have loved one of those,” the woman remarks with a sigh before she takes another sip of her brightly colored drink.

“Since when do you offer cocktails?” Len asks as he joins them at the bar, stopping next to James.

“We don’t,” Charlie, who has returned from the back by now, informs him drily, “at least not officially.”

“You should,” James points out and lifts his drink. “They are delicious, and Barry seems to have a real hand for it.”

Charlie grunts, not looking particularly convinced, which causes the proud smile to slip off Barry’s face. Instead, Barry shoots the other man a slightly worried look, as if he was afraid he could have accidentally upset him by making this drink.

“What is that one?” Len inquires, nodding at the colorful drink in James’ hand.

“T-Tequila S-Sunrise,” Barry explains.

“Make me one,” Len tells him as he pulls his wallet out.

“Uh, s-sure.” Barry seems surprised about him wanting to try the cocktail, probably because Len usually sticks to beer and doesn’t like tart drinks. Len is curious, though, and it seems important to Barry. Not to mention, James also got one.

A few minutes later, a brightly orange Tequila Sunrise is placed in front of Len, that really doesn’t look like anything he usually would get for himself.

“How much is it?” Len asks.

“S-Seventeen d-dollars,” Barry tells him and shoots him a guilty look, probably because he thinks he should have told him about the price beforehand. While Len tends to stick to beer, he is very familiar with the costs of various alcoholic beverages. Thus he isn’t in the least surprised.

“Keep the change.” Len puts a twenty-dollar bill at the bar and picks the drink up to try it.

It’s sweet, but not as sweet as the cocktails he’s tried so far, and in a way, he enjoys the fruitiness of it. Still, he will always pick the bitter hoppy taste of beer over this, but for a drink he generally doesn’t like, this one turned out quite good.

“‘s good.” Len remarks and is satisfied to see Barry blush, looking even a little smug with himself.

“How come you make in-official cocktails?”

The pleased expression slips off Barry’s face, and he suddenly looks quite uncomfortable.

“Bivolo pestered him into making one for him,” Charlie replies in Barry’s stead, not picking up on his employee’s discomfort as he is currently reading something on his smartphone. “Seems Allen enjoyed it.” He shoots Barry a slightly disapproving frown. “Enough so that he pestered me into ordering a crate of fruit juices with the last delivery.”

“I-I d-didn’t p-pester y-you,” Barry protests. “I-I j-just a-asked y-you a-ab-bout i-it.”

“Repeatedly,” Charlie points out but doesn’t sound especially annoyed, his gaze already back on the screen of his cell.
Len glances down at his drink with a frown, and he isn’t sure whether he regrets beating Roy up more or less now after that piece of information. He knows it’s none of his business whom Barry befriends, but he hates the thought of him doing so with Roy. The Rainbow Raider is someone who always rubbed Len the wrong way, and it doesn’t help that the dumbass is nearly absurdly bad at hiding his interest in Barry.

“Well, I think offering cocktails isn’t such a bad idea,” James points out. “I mean, it will likely increase your intakes, and you could even draw in new customers.”

“Yeah?” Charlie snorts. “I think most of my clients will stick to the hard stuff after maybe trying a cocktail due to its novelty.”

“I don’t know,” the prostitute on James other side pipes up, “I would love to have an alternative to the gnat’s piss you call beer, Charlie, and I’m sure so would many of my colleagues.” She grins toothily when Charlie shoots her a frown and shrugs. “Don’t worry, men seem to have bad taste in general when it comes to alcohol, so I’m sure most aren’t bothered by it.”

“You start badmouthing my beer, and I’ll put a house ban on your pretty little head, Patricia,” Charlie threatens, evidently failing to intimidate the woman.

“What’s that you’re drinking, Lenny?” Lisa comes up behind Len, giving the drink in his hand a curious look.

“Tequila Sunrise.” Len offers her the drink to take a sip, which she promptly does.

“Oh, that’s good,” Lisa decides and turns to Barry. “You made that one?”

Barry nods, the flush returning to his cheeks.

“Can you make me one as well?”

“S-Sure.”

Fifteen minutes later, after Lisa returned to their table with her own Tequila Sunrise, all of the Rogues have those very brightly colored drinks standing next to their beers, as well as a few other tables, leaving Barry with a nice amount of tips and a crate of empty fruit juice boxes.

“Looks to me like cocktails could be quite a lucrative business investment after all,” James remarks cheerfully to Charlie, who gives him an annoyed look in return but settles on, “Maybe.”

The next couple of hours till closing pass by in relative peace and James takes his leave around two in the morning. Much to Len’s displeasure, he watches how Barry tells his friend that he is glad he passed by, looking truly sad to see him leave.

“I’ll visit you again soon,” James promises and glances over to Charlie. “Maybe then you’ll have more cocktails on the menu.”

The bar stays unusually crowded till they close about two hours later. While the Rogues vanish into the restroom, and Charlie ushers the other people out, Len remains to give Barry a hand. It is something he tends to do a lot lately, at least once a week, and Charlie doesn’t even bother to comment on it anymore as he returns to the back office with the cashbox.

While Len puts the chairs on the tables, he notices that Barry seems to be in a good mood, a happy if somewhat tired expression on his face as he sweeps the floor. Barry feels his eyes on him and turns to meet them, giving him a warm smile which Len returns.
It is a relief after how hurt and angry Barry seemed due to the rather disastrous turn tonight took when Len went after Roy, and he is glad that things between them seem to be back to normal again.

Sam gets them over to Barry’s apartment around quarter to five in the morning, just when the sky outside starts to brighten slightly.

“I’ll make some tea,” Barry informs Len as they leave his bedroom.

Len hums in agreement and takes a seat on the couch, feeling pretty beaten and not at all like talking about what is currently bothering him or his feelings in general.

He sighs quietly and rubs his hands over his face.

There is no way around it, though, not if he doesn’t want to upset Barry again.

Len closes his eyes and can’t help but smirks, exasperatedly amused by himself, by how he became like this, someone who cares enough about someone else that he is willing to open up.

The only other person he tends to do so is Lisa, and with her, it is not always entirely voluntarily, since she often knows what is bothering him without him needing to tell her so. It is annoying but also easier that way; he can just let her do most of the talking when she deems it necessary for him to talk about his emotional state since she can guess what is going through his head even without his assistance.

Lisa grew up with him, they stuck together for most of their lives, and there has probably never been anybody else he ever trusted as profoundly as her. He glances over to Barry, who is currently pouring hot water over the tea bags, and knows that this isn’t entirely true anymore.

Letting his head drop back onto the back of the couch, he glances up at the ceiling with the flaking paint job, his body feeling heavy and tired. He takes a deep, slow breath in, closes his eyes and wonders how Barry will react to him bringing up his time in the Heights.

Probably not well.

Len listens to how Barry moves around in the small kitchenette before he makes his way over to where he is currently resting on the couch.

“Hey.”

Len opens his eyes and sits back up, accepting the warm mug Barry hands him with a small smile.

“Thanks.”

Barry takes the spot next to him, and Len watches him with a growing warmth in his belly as he pulls his legs up to his chest, slinging his free arm around it and resting his cheek on top of his knees as he looks back at him.

“Thanks for helping me with the closing.” Barry’s eyes are warm, a soft smile on his lips, and even though he looks exhausted, Len can’t help but think that he is utterly handsome.

“Of course.” Len turns back to the couch table in front of them and brushes his thumb over the warm, smooth ceramic of his mug.

Silence settles back between them for a minute or two.

“Len.” Barry sounds uncertain, a little reluctant even, causing Len to meet his eyes once more. “I-I
“I’m not a nice person, Barry,” Len calmly points out and isn’t surprised by the hurt he sees in the other man’s eyes when they are directed back at him.

“N-No,” Barry agrees after a moment, sounding sad and tired. “Y-You’re n-not.” He digs the fingers of his free hand into his shin, looking pained. “B-But y-you’re n-not a-a m-mean b-brute e-either, L-LEN, a-and y-you n-normal-ly d-don’t g-go a-after p-people wh-who a-are w-weaker th-than y-you.”

Len frowns, annoyed to be reminded how unfair the confrontation between him and Bivolo was. Usually, he has a much better self-control, he needs to have it considering that he is the one who keeps the other Rogues in check when they get too hotheaded.

Barry is watching him again with that worried expression of his he always gets when he fears that Len will lose grasp on his temper, and that makes it all even more frustrating since Len is well aware that Barry has every reason to be wary of him in situations like this one.

“I know,” Len eventually settles on, rubbing his eyes before pinching the bridge of his nose, exhaling an irritated sigh. “I’ve been in a shitty mood lately, and Roy was unlucky enough to cross my path today.” He frowns and grumbles. “Idiot never knows when to keep his mouth shut.”

“R-Roy i-is a n-nice g-guy,” Barry argues and stubbornly meets Len’s annoyed look he gets in return. “H-He i-is, a-and I-I kn-know y-you t-two d-don’t l-like e-each o-other, b-but y-you us-suual-ly j-just i-ignore h-him.” He searches his face as he adds, quietly, “Wh-What is g-going on, L-Lenny?”

Len feels the sharp anger that briefly flared up in him subside due to the concern with which Barry is now studying him. He wishes he had some whisky or at least another beer at hand, though it would hardly make the upcoming conversation much easier.

“You’ve been in that hellhole for nearly eight years, and I let you rot there, knowing exactly what those miserable fucks were putting you through.” Len sounds bitter, angry, and memory of how little he did to aid Barry when he needed his help causes a nearly sickening fury to settle over him.

“I turned a blind eye on it because of how I felt.” He grits his teeth; his empty hand clenched into a fist. “Because I’m a damn coward, and I didn’t want to face the possibility that I could have feelings for another guy.”

Other than being responsible for Lisa becoming a criminal, Len doesn’t regret anything more than his inaction back then, when Barry needed his help more than anything. He often wonders, when he lies awake, sleep just out of his grasp, how different things would have been for the blonde had he stepped in and tried to stop the abuse, or just snatched him away from all that awfulness, in the first place. Not that Barry would have approved the latter in the beginning. Hell, Barry was a sitting duck there for more than seven years since he believed it to be the right thing to do, despite the pain and horror, moral fool he was.

His words are greeted with a tense silence, and when Len eventually turns his head to look over to Barry, he is not surprised about how ghostly pale the other man looks. What is like a punch to his guts is the fear he can make out next to the pain in those sky-blue eyes, and it is depressing to imagine that Barry is still afraid of his former tormentors, even now, years later.
“Barry?” Len asks quietly, trying to get his friend’s attention, who is now looking at the small couch table in front of them with a lost, faraway look.

A shiver runs through Barry; he briefly tightens the arms he has around his shins and closes his eyes as he takes in a shuddering breath.

“I-I…” Barry swallows thickly and licks his lips. “I-I d-don’t l-like t-to r-rem-member th-that t-time.”

“I know,” Len quickly agrees and adds apologetically, “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

Hurting Barry by touching on his time in prison is another reason why Len was so reluctant to talk about this, and seeing how shaken the blonde looks now, he regrets that he decided to bring it up at all.

“N-No.” Barry shakes his head and slowly opens his eyes that shimmer with unshed tears. He turns back to Len. “I-w-wanted y-you t-to t-tell m-me wh-wha-t’s b-bothering y-you… th-thank y-you f-for o-op-pening u-up t-to m-me.” He pulls his knees closer, making himself smaller, and goes on, “I’m n-not a-a-ng-ry a-at y-you, L-Len, a-and I-d-don’t w-want y-you t-to b-be e-eith-ther. O-Ours r-re-lationship b-back t-then w-was h-hardly a-amiable, a-and I-I u-unders-stand wh-why y-you k-kept a-way.”

Of course, you do, Len thinks grimly, bitterly, and has to bite down on his tongue to keep quiet. Barry isn’t the reason for his irritation and directing it against him would be unfair and probably have disastrous consequences.

Barry still must have picked up on what is going through his mind since he averts his eyes, lips back to being pressed into a thin, unhappy line, and he curls in on himself even more.

“I should have helped you,” Len tells him, voice low, soothing, and he hopes that Barry understands that he isn’t angry with him.

“I-t-I d-doesn’t m-matter.” Barry presses his forehead against his knees, shivering once more. “I-It’s th-th-the p-p-past, a-and w-we c-can’t ch-change i-it. I-I’m n-not a-a-ng-ry w-with y-you, a-and y-you h-holding th-th-this a-a-gainst y-yours-self w-won’t h-help e-either o-of u-us.”

It is frustrating, how Barry refrains from getting upset over this, feeling reproach for how Len deserted him when he could have helped.

“I k-know,” Len agrees. “I’m s-still s-sorry.”

Barry squeezes his eyes shut, and Len watches him swallow thickly, fighting for control over his emotions. It is painful to observe, like claws digging into his inside and tearing away at it.

“I w-won’t l-let aanything l-like t-that h-happen t-too y-you a-ga-in,” Len proceeds, and even as he speaks, he knows it is only an empty promise. He is just a man, and he can’t shield Barry from the awfulness of the world, not that the blonde would want that. That doesn’t mean that he wouldn’t do his best to keep him safe, and Barry seems to understand.

“Th-Thank y-y-you.” Barry’s voice is small, filled with emotions, and when he starts to cry, bitter, pained tears, Len feels his throat close up too.

Len puts his mug on the coffee table and moves closer to Barry but is careful not to touch him yet.

“Can I t-touch y-you?” Len asks, and it is a relief when Barry hardly hesitates before giving him a small nod. After taking the mug from his hand and putting it aside, Len lays his arm tentatively around the
crying man’s shoulder.

“I’m here,” Len assures him quietly, pulling him close, and Barry lets him so that he ends up resting against his chest. “I won’t leave you behind, baby.” He kisses Barry’s head, listening to his sobs, and starts to rub his back soothingly.

I love you, he thinks, and even just in his head, the words feel too massive, intense enough that they are painful.

One day, he will be able to tell Barry so, but he isn’t sure when.

Resting his cheek on the top of his partner’s head, he hopes that it will be in the near future. Barry deserves to hear them, and maybe, he deserves to say them too, despite his past mistakes.

Little bonus:
Much thanks to minny28 for sharing this cool image with me! :D

Chapter End Notes

So, the summary probably should have said Roy isn’t having a good night everything considered. Poor Roy, he didn’t deserve the beating, and he’ll probably make sure to stay out of Len’s way for the foreseeable future. Hopefully, he won’t start avoiding
Barry as well since Len’s fists can be quite persuasive.

Len’s temper really acted up there, something he isn’t proud of now that his temper has cooled down again. It shows that he still has anger issues, something that is not really surprising since you can’t easily get rid of such a problem within months, especially without real help. Even so, it does show how far he has come since he was able to calm down pretty quickly again once he realized what his meltdown did to Barry.

At least, James turned up the right moment to prevent worse from happening to Roy, and it seems that he fits in quite well among the shady crowd that visits the Saloon despite him being a well-off businessman (much to Len’s annoyance).

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, it was fun to write from Len’s POV.

Once again much thanks to all of my awesome readers who left me feedback last chapter, you know that I love reading your comment. :) I also got a really sweet image from minny28, it shows the Rogues from the TV universe which I’d love to share with you. One day I’ll come around to either look up look-alikes for how I imagine the Rogues in my story or even draw them, but for now, I’ll make do with you having the show-versions in your head. ;)

Btw, if you wanna share some pics, art, etc. that you think go along nicely with Singularity feel free to do so. *winkwink*

Next chapter will be chapter 100, which is just unbelievably awesome because I was hoping from the beginning that my experience posting chapters on ao3 would go this smoothly and it is just gratifying that it really did. :)

Due to my preparing for a couple of exams and working on a project paper for work, I’ll have to start cutting the chapters with next one. It really bothers me to do so since I wanted for 100 to be a long one, but at least it does fit tone-wise, and it does have a sweet moment between Barry and Lisa that does show how far Barry’s relationship with the Rogues has come.

Next chapter will be up on Sunday in two weeks!

Thanks for reading and please don’t forget to vote! :)
Trust is a growing thing with a beating heart

Chapter Summary

Barry and Lisa get some coffee.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited by my wonderful beta Quintessenzza, whose reliability is just outright amazing. Thanks a lot for your great work again, my friend. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I love their blackberry smoothies,” Lisa informs Barry as she looks through the menu of the little cafe they, or pretty much she, decided to take a break in.

Barry hums, neither very hungry nor particularly happy about going along with this since he doesn't like spending time in these big shopping malls, to begin with. Places like that are just too busy for him, and being there with a wanted criminal doesn't help to put his nerves at ease.

Lisa is once again wearing a disguise. She wears a hazelnut brown wig that is expensive enough to pass for her own hair, as well as contact lenses of the same color behind thinly rimmed glasses that go along nicely with the crème colored business suit she picked for their little shopping trip today. Nobody will be able to recognize her at first glance; Barry is sure of that.

He is also sure that her good looks that are only emphasized by her choice of clothing cause quite some people to take more than one look, which feeds into his paranoia and apprehension.

Attractive people like her attract attention by default, it’s nothing Lisa can do about, and Barry certainly doesn’t fault her for it.

He just wishes she had chosen some less well-fitting clothing, maybe a sweatshirt and plain jeans.

“Relax,” Lisa tells him as she shoots him an amused but also slightly exasperated look over the top of her menu. “We’re going to be fine, Bear. Nobody here is paying us any attention.”

“Oth-ther th-than f-for th-the w-waiter wh-who i-is og-gl-ling y-you,” Barry points out, voice low and nervous, and he shoots an unhappy glance over to the bar, where said man is once again studying Lisa with an interested glint in his eyes.

“Ignore him,” Lisa suggests, smirking. “I’m sure he ogles dozens of good looking women each day, I doubt I’ll stick around in his mind for too long.”

She is probably right, but Barry still doesn’t like the interest the waiter is paying their table.

“What are you going to drink?” Lisa asks, attempting to distract him. “You like bananas, don’t you?
According to Hartley, their banana smoothie is also delicious.”

Barry turns his attention back to her in surprise, frowning slightly. “Y-You’ve b-been h-here o-

Lisa shrugs and brushes a lost strand of hair behind her ear. “A couple of times. You do know that
we do other stuff other than hanging out in the hideout in between jobs, right?” She sounds amused
asking this, causing Barry’s cheeks to grow warm.

“O-Of c-course,” Barry agrees. “I-I w-was j-just s-surp-

“I know.” Lisa chuckles. “I’m just teasing you a little.” Her face falls then, and a rather sour
expression settles over it. “Not that you wouldn’t have a point thinking so. We’ve been sitting duck a
ridiculous amount of time over the last year and a half.”

The mention of that fact makes Barry uneasy, even though he knows that Lisa didn’t mean it as an
accusation. Still, Barry knows that he is at least partly the reason that forced his friends to lay low for
the majority of the last year. Len wanted to keep attention away from the Rogues, not only to avoid
any confrontations with the Flashes or the police but so that neither Cameron or Blacksmith would
turn their attention back to them and possibly try to go after Barry again.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work out in the end, and Cameron got his fingers on him again.

The thought of Cameron causes Barry to grimace, and his already lacking appetite ceases to exist.

“I’m glad you agreed to come along, I don’t know whether I’d have made this little trip otherwise,”
Lisa confides, leaning back in her chair and putting her menu down. The right corner of her lips
slightly lifts as she adds, “With how the mood is at the hideout right now, I’d have probably ended
up strangling one of those idiots instead.”

“Y-You c-can a-alw-ways p-pull s-smaller j-jobs s-somewh-

Lisa’s eyes are sparkling with amusement as she agrees, noticing his reaction, “I know, and we’ll
probably fall back to that if things don’t change soon.” She heaves an unhappy sigh and pushes her
glasses higher up her nose. “It’s not the same, though.”

Yeah, Barry can understand that, even though it makes no real sense.

The Gems are the Rogues’ turf, the twin cities are their home, and maybe it is because of Barry’s
time as the Flash, but he can understand their sentiment a little. When he still fought crime, he
occasionally assisted other heroes when they needed help handling something troubling their cities or
had to take care of disasters outside his Twins as a member of the Justice League. While doing so
and making a difference never failed to make him feel proud and grateful for having his powers, it
still always felt different to him, not nearly as gratifying as patrolling Central or Keystone City.

His cities.

It must be the same for Len and the others, and unbiddenly his mind wanders back to the last year, to
how they stayed in their hideouts for most of that time, caged like rats, because of him-

What a stupid thing to think. Barry is quite apt when it comes to feeling guilty, even over things that
lie outside his range of influence, and he knows so.
It is just...

_Doll_.

Cameron went after him, though. That psycho wanted to use them to intimidate and get back to Len, sure, but when he kidnapped Barry and Izzy, he certainly had already decided to keep Barry.

The notion is still as unsettling.

What did he do that caught the other man’s interest?

“Don’t do that,” Lisa tells him, her tone annoyed, catching him off-guard. She meets his confused expression and huffs a somewhat irritated sounding sigh. “Barry, none of last year was your fault, stop guilt tripping yourself over everything.”

It is surprising and a little annoying that Lisa knows him so well by now that she is able to pick up on what is bothering him.

“I-d don’t d-do th-that,” Barry argues, irritated and slightly hurt that she would say that.

He isn’t guilt-tripping himself over everything.

Lisa gives him an incredulous look. “You are prone to faulting yourself for everything that goes wrong around you, Barry.” Lisa doesn’t sound harsh, more matter-of-factly, and in a way that is even worse. “You are not responsible for my brother fucking up and pulling you and us into that whole mess with Blacksmith and the Blue Velvet.”

Barry breaks contact with her eyes and looks back down to the menu in front of him.

A heavy sigh sounds from the other side of the table, and Barry knows that there is an unhappy, disgruntled frown on Lisa’s face even without looking up.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you,” Lisa tells him after a tense moment, sounding rueful. “I think laying low is just really starting to grate on me.”

“I-kn know,” Barry says, and he thinks about asking what caused them to pull out of the game again for the time being, but decides against it. Len was very close-lipped about it when he tried to talk to him about it before, and he doubts he will get any more of an answer from Lisa.

He is sure that it means that whatever is bothering them is probably not connected to Blacksmith since Len would have told him about her possibly being up to something again. In a way, he is relieved about his partner's reluctance to share any details, despite how he dislikes being kept in the dark. While he worries about the sudden tension that has settled over the hideout whenever he passes over, he still doesn’t want to know any more about his friends’ business than is necessary.

“Y-You d-don’t h-have t-to d-do th-that, y-you kn-know,” Barry remarks, and this time it is Lisa with a confused look on her face. He elaborates, giving her small, unhappy smile, “T-Touch m-me w-with k-kids’ g-gloves a-all th-the t-time. I-I’m n-not m-made o-of g-glass.”

Frowning, Lisa studies him for a moment. “I know that,” she eventually points out, sounding a little ruffled. “And I don’t.”

“R-Really?” Barry arches an eyebrow at that, causing her to snort and roll her eyes.

“Okay, maybe I do so a little,” Lisa allows, “but it's not because I think you’re made of glass.”
“I-It i-isn’t?” Barry asks in audible disbelief and is glad that he is able to keep the hurt out of his voice. He tries to smile, but the thought of how his friends must perceive him most of the time makes it pretty much impossible.

“No.” Lisa frowns as she studies him thoughtfully. “You aren’t made of glass, Barry, if you were, you wouldn’t be around anymore after all the crap you’d to deal with so far.”

Barry flinches, can’t help it, and averts his eyes.

The waiter comes up to their table, and Barry tries to put on a relaxed expression. It doesn’t go over too well judging by the man’s frown as Barry orders a banana smoothie, even though he isn’t sure he can stomach it right now.

“I didn’t mean for it to come out like that,” Lisa admits when the waiter is out of earshot again.

“I-It’s f-fine-”

“It isn’t. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” Lisa insists, unhappily, nearly frustrated. “It’s just difficult to touch any of this at all without stepping on some verbal land mine.”

Any of this.

It’s not difficult to understand what Lisa is talking about, and it’s just so weird to think that his past abuse is a topic anybody would want to touch upon at all.

He certainly doesn’t.

Barry shrugs, absentmindedly scratching the back of his hand, and glances up to Lisa. “Y-You d-don’t n-need t-to w-worry a-all th-the t-time a-ab-bout h-how I-I t-take s-someth-thing y-you s-say. I-I’m… I-I h-hate th-that i-it h-hap-pened, b-but i-it’s p-part o-of m-my l-life a-and wh-who I-I a-am. I-It m-may h-hurt, b-but I-I w-won’t b-break.”

Lisa nods, her lips pursed grimly, and he wishes she wouldn’t look so gloomy because of him.

It doesn’t matter what the public says, they may perceive the Rogues as horrible people who are out for money and nothing else, and to a degree, it may even be true since they are thieves, but there are not heartless.

They feel sympathy for others if they allow themselves to care for them, and Barry has become one of these few people they’ve let that close over the years.

“I know,” Lisa agrees while picking up one of the paper tissues on the table and absentmindedly starting to fold it. “It still sucks that you get hurt by something I say, even if you can take it.”

Barry chuckles, while reaching up to rub his forehead, and gives Lisa a fond look. “Y-You’d h-have m-made a-a g-great o-older s-sister.”

Lisa smiles softly, her eyes warm, and Barry doesn’t tense up when she reaches across their table to squeeze his hand. “You’d have made an amazing little brother I’m sure.” A smirk forms on her lips, then, and she adds, “Though that would have made things between you and Len quite creepy.”

“L-Lisa.” Barry sounds scandalized, his cheeks flaming hot, which seems to be precisely the reaction his friend aimed for as she snorts a very unladylike laughter in response.

“I’m just saying.” Lisa grins and pulls her hand back. “Not to mention that you’re two years my
senior, old man.”

“Y-You kn-know, I-I t-take i-it b-back, y-you’d h-have b-been a-an an-noyng b-brat o-of a s-sib-blng.”

“Sorry, but you can’t take it back,” Lisa insists, pleased with herself. “Not to mention that it would be a lie. I’m a wonderful sister, just ask Len.”

Barry huffs a laugh, but before he can point out that Len certainly will side with him on this one, their drinks arrive.

“Th-Thanks,” Barry says to Lisa when their waiter, who exchanged an unmistakably flirtatious look with her, is out of earshot.

“What for?” Lisa asks, curiously.

“F-For t-taking m-me a-along t-today.”

“Really?” Lisa arches an eyebrow and points out. “You didn’t seem too happy when I pestered you into it earlier.”

“W-Well, I-I’m s-somewh-what o-of a-a w-worryw-wart a-as y-you kn-know.”

“Somewhat?”

Barry ignores her quip, but he can’t help the amused smile as he presses on, “B-But i-it’s n-nice t-to g-get o-out a-and d-do s-stuff w-with y-you.”

“Even if it is shopping for clothes?” Lisa sounds doubtful there, causing him to laugh.

“E-Even i-if i-it’s th-that,” Barry agrees.

He never particularly enjoyed shopping for clothes, but he doesn’t mind it either, especially when he tagged along with Mary every once in a while, and with his friend currently in Europe, this reminds him a little of those times.

“I’ve to be honest with you,” Lisa tells him, putting an overly serious face on. “I’m really glad you think so, because I’ve decided that we’re definitely going to do this more often from now on.” She holds her hand up, as Barry is about to protest. “No, no taking back now, Bear. It’s decided.”

Barry bites down on a smile and frowns. “Wh-What a-ab-bout H-Hartl-ley, i-isn’t th-this a th-thing y-you t-two u-usually d-do t-together?”

“Oh, Hartley will certainly come along as well at times, but our fashion tastes are very different, and he is horrible at giving me tips on what to choose.”

“A-And I’m n-not?” Barry asks incredulously, considering that Lisa usually loves to point out how she doesn’t like his way of clothing.

“Nope,” Lisa agrees, popping the p, and grins. “I was honestly surprised, but you do have a good eye when it comes to what looks good on me. You gave me sound advice earlier when I was looking for new tops.” She knits her brows, looking a little confused. “I don’t get it why you have such a horrible taste when it comes to picking stuff for yourself, but I guess nobody is perfect.”

“I-I w-wear th-the c-clothes y-you b-bought me-me,” Barry points out, a little miffed.
“Yes, and you do look quite fetching right now.” She gives him a flirtatious look and shrugs. “But the sad truth is, you’d still be running around in those potato bags if I hadn’t come to your aid.”

“L-Len i-is r-right,” Barry decides, frowning, “y-you a-are ir-ritating.”

“Hey, no ganging up on your beautiful sister in law behind my back, cupcake,” Lisa protests and seems quite pleased when Barry blushes in response to her words, ducking his head and looking quite uncomfortable.

“Oh, stop it, will you?” Lisa asks, smirking. “Everybody knows about you two by now. You being so squeamish about it makes absolutely no sense anymore.”

“L-Lisa,” Barry says unhappily as he shoots her a pleading look. “I-I kn-know, b-but i-it’s s-someth-thing p-priv-vate b-between L-Len a-and m-me.”

“And that’s fine,” Lisa agrees. “I’m not saying I or one of the others wants any saucy details.” She snorts at that, grinning. “I’m pretty sure that’s probably the quickest way to get them to vacate the room you’re in.” Her expression becomes more serious again as she proceeds, “That doesn’t mean that you’ve to worry that any of us will have a problem with it should you decide to express your feelings a little more openly.”

Barry averts his gaze to the banana smoothie in front of him, which he hasn’t touched yet. Lisa means well, but speaking about this with anybody other than Len makes him uneasy, and even with Len they hardly ever discuss their relationship this directly.

“You do know that none of them has a problem with homosexuals, right?” Lisa inquires, sounding a little concerned now. “Digger is just an idiot when he says some homophobic shit. That man doesn’t even pick up on what comes out of his mouth half of the time.”

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees. “I kn-know.” He rubs his eyes and exhales a soft sigh. “A-And i-it’s n-not th-that.”

Barry is a very private person, has always been, and he feels even more reluctant to open up about his relationship with Len these days. It probably will get easier once he gets more used to it all and stops worrying about it only being a fluke, something good and beautiful in his life that will eventually be ripped away from him like it always was.

“Is it…” Lisa sounds hesitant, and Barry glances up to her, noticing her studying him with a hard to read look that causes him to suddenly feel nervous once more.

“I’m sure,” Lisa starts anew, slowly, carefully, and Barry feels the urge to fidget under her intense gaze, “it can come over like we are the sort of people who will hold on to their grudges forever, especially against someone we clashed with once-”

“L-Lisa,” Barry tries to stop her, his tone sharp as he nearly hisses, and it feels like his heart jumps up into his throat when he realizes what this is about.

“- but we’re all only human,” Lisa insists, pressing on, meeting his eyes firmly, causing Barry to realize that she is really doing this.

His heart is drumming like crazy in his chest, he breaks a sweat, and his stomach feels like it is coiling up into a small, tight knot.

He feels sick.
“It doesn’t matter to us who you once were, Barry,” Lisa assures him, lowering her voice slightly, and Barry jumps when she reaches for his hand this time, but he can’t bring himself to pull away. “You’re Barry Allen, a good person we are happy to have as a friend, someone who cares enough for us that he puts himself in danger at times only so he can help us, and someone who is honest and loyal, qualities that are hard to come by in our circles. Nobody of us gives a damn about what happened ten or fifteen years ago. That’s the past, and things were different back then.” She squeezes his hand. “You’re one of us now.”

Barry swallows thickly, the lump in his throat a painful presence once again, and he feels like a mouse cornered by a cat, but he is no longer sure whether the cat is hungry or not.

One of them.

His eyes burn and water up, blurring his vision.

It feels overwhelming, being confronted with the possibility to share that secret, no matter that it probably hasn’t been one for a while now.

He is terrified, utterly, utterly terrified. He suspected for a while that his past as the Flash is about as much of secret to his friends as his romantic feelings for Len are, but that doesn’t mean that he can put aside his worry about what will happen when they eventually acknowledge their shared past as hero and villains.

At least, of all the Rogues who could have touched upon it, it’s Lisa, and it’s just the two of them.

He can try to deny it, say that he doesn’t know what she is talking about, that she got it all wrong…

But what good will that do? His friends have probably known about his past as the Flash for a while now, at least since Sam listened in during his stay at the Watchtower, possibly even longer, and if he weren’t such a coward, he would have faced the consequences of it all already.

Barry swallows again, a small shiver runs up his spine, and his voice is hardly more than a whisper when he asks, “D-Do th-the o-others th-think s-so t-too?”

Surprise flickers across Lisa’s face as if she didn’t expect him to admit to his past as the speedster. She gives him a small, somewhat sad but fond smile, looking relieved.

“Yes,” Lisa assures him, squeezing his hand. “Neither of us cares.”

“Th-Thy j-just…” Barry looks down at the table, pressing his lips together firmly in helpless frustration and disbelief. He pulls his hand back, and Lisa lets it go.

Taking a slow, deep breath to calm the turmoil of emotions in his chest, Barry looks up. He meets Lisa’s eyes reluctantly as he demands, “S-So, th-they j-just f-forgive m-me?”

Lisa frowns. “You do realize that you’ve just as much of a reason to hold the past against them?”

Barry grimaces and lowers his eyes back to the drink in front of him, which causes Lisa to sigh.

“Well, I haven’t been around back then, but I got to fight your successor, so believe me, I can imagine how damn frustrating and exasperating it must have been for them to deal with you,” Lisa informs him. “We aren’t on opposite sides anymore, though, and the last four years change everything. We got to know you, and you became our friend, that’s all that matters now.”

It would be so nice if it could be just that easy, but things never work like that.
Barry digs his fingers into his thighs, fighting the urge to cross his arms in front of his chest since he knows how much he looks like he is hugging himself, and keeps his eyes firmly on the smoothie in front of him that seems less and less appetizing with each passing second.

“I-I…” He swallows, his mouth feels dry, which makes it even harder to get the words out than usual. “I-I p-p-put th-them… th-th-th-there.” He squeezes his eyes shut and bows his head. “S-s-so m-m-m-many t-t-t-times…”

Lisa doesn’t ask what he means; she doesn’t need to.

Iron Heights is a place she is more than familiar with herself, all the criminals of the Gems are, and it is a place nobody wants to see from the inside, with a reputation among lowlifes similar to the one of the boogyman among children.

It’s a horrible place that doesn’t only lock its inmates up to protect other citizens but gives awful people the possibility to act on their sick urges. It doesn’t encourage criminals to live a law-abiding life, it doesn’t offer them an opportunity to change, other than for the worse, for violent people to get more violent, for sick people to get sicker.

Iron Heights is a hotbed for hopelessness, fear, and anger, and instead of a cure for crime, it is a center of infection.

Neither people nor heroes know about that, and Barry didn’t either till he was put into Wolfe’s and his men’s care.

Barry knows that it was never nearly as bad for the majority of inmates as it was for him. He was once again the odd one out, and, thankfully, none of his friends ever had to endure the same kind of abuse as he did, but they still had to suffer during their stays there.

As the Flash he put them there time and time again because he trusted their justice system, he trusted Wolfe, despite how he didn’t very much like the man even back then.

It should have made him pause, he usually has a good sense when it comes to people, but the Heights were no Arkham, they kept people inside for more than a month, and his Rogues weren’t the Joker or Two Face, or any of the other psychopaths Bruce has to grapple with. Len and the others breaking out was an annoyance but not a disaster, and maybe that is why he never looked deeper into the whole thing, why he didn’t take the time to investigate. What if they didn’t only break out because they didn’t like being caged up but because Iron Heights itself was the reason?

He didn’t consider that possibility, and instead, put people into a place that has nothing to do with justice.

“Barry,” Lisa says his name in that soft, caring tone she uses when she wants him not to be so hard on himself. “You didn’t know-”

“I sh-sh-should h-h-have,” Barry argues, stubbornly. “I-It w-w-was m-my r-responsibility t-t-to m-make s-sure th-th-that s-something l-l-like th-th-d-didn’t h-happen.”

“You’re only human,” Lisa points out, again, no trace of anger in her voice, which is even more upsetting. “You wouldn’t have let anybody be put in that miserable hole if you had known.”

The burning sensation at the back of his throat and of his eyes grows worse, and Barry fights the tears with all his might.

He can’t break down over this, not here, not with Lisa around. They are probably getting already too
much attention from the café’s other patrons.

“C-C-Can w-we p-please l-leave?” Barry asks with some difficulties and brushes his fingers over his eyes, frustrated to feel the familiar wetness of tears there.

“Of course,” Lisa agrees after a moment. “I’ll go pay.”

Barry wants to protest, tell her that he is going to pay for his smoothie, which he hasn’t even touched, but his throat hurts enough that he doesn’t even attempt to get the words out.

They leave less than five minutes later, and Barry is grateful when Lisa doesn’t try to talk with him about Iron Heights, his relationship with Len, or his past as the Flash again.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter despite its rather short length. Tbh, it doesn't feel like a proper 100th chapter to me, simply because I would have liked to give you something more spectacular for that great milestone, but, alas, it was not supposed to be.

It is great to know that I was able to post 100 chapters of this story so far, and I hope it will progress just as smoothly in future. Some of you have been a companion on my and Barry's journey for a very long time now, and I want you to know how amazing that is. I never expected to reach many people with this story, English is not my first language, and I started this out as something private I just wrote for my own entertainment, but it still ended up reaching you. I'm truly glad Singularity grew into what it is now, and I'm truly glad that you people are reading and enjoying it.

I guess what I want to say is thank you for giving Singularity a chance and sticking around for so long. :)

The results from my poll are in, and it seems the majority of you guys - surprise, surprise - wants me to continue posting even if the chapters are shorter. This result doesn't come unexpectedly, and I'm actually glad that I won't go on a hiatus with this story. I enjoy working on it a lot, it helps me to pause and take a breather, and I think I would end up missing you all very much too.

A neat extra of the site I posted the poll from was that I was able to see on a google earth map where people voted from (don't worry, it isn't too accurate), and it is such an odd and just astonishing thing to see. It makes me feel very humbled and excited that I have readers from all over the world, and while I knew so before since the internet connects us no matter where we are from, it is still different seeing a visualization of it. I was always curious about where the people who are reading Singularity are from, and it is just awesome to have an idea of it now. I'm from Austria, btw, in case you didn't known, from good old Vienna, to be exact. :)

Things are a little crazy right now in my personal life; I've learned that I can use the topic of the project I've been working on the last two and a half years for my master thesis, but I've to finish it till the end of December, which is not much time. Next to that,
I want to do a couple of exams till Christmas, and I'm going on a trip to Germany from the 8th to the 13th, so I'm currently trying to find the time I need to get everything done. xD I'm not complaining, tho, it would be amazing if I could write my master thesis already, and I try to stay positive all in all.

The trip to Germany is going to mess my posting schedule up, though. The next chapter will be up next week so that it will be early, but the one after it will be posted on the 24th of December, like its supposed to, which means a three week waiting period.

Anyway, this AN is getting too long (again), and I need to grab some sleep (I usually pre-write these the day before posting a new chapter). I'll see you next week (and so will Jay ;)!)!
A knocking at his door startles Barry out from his unintentional nap at the kitchen table. He grimaces as he sits back when this causes a sharp pain to flare up in his neck which is a reminder that he is far too old to nap anywhere but his bed.

Blinking, he feels disorientated, his mind still groggy as he turns to the door. Is he expecting anybody-  
Jay!  
Right, Jay wanted to pass by in the early afternoon.

Barry frowns, looks at his clock, and bites down on a groan when he notices that he must have napped for at least three hours.

No wonder his back feels like it hates him.

“C-Coming,” Barry calls out and gets up, but pauses when he spots his sketching pad on the table in front of him. He has been working on another sketch before nodding off, which can lead to very uncomfortable questions should Jay notice one of his many drawings of Len and the other Rogues.

Barry relaxes when he remembers that the current one only shows Mary but presses his lips in an unhappy line when he sees that he drooled on a part of the said sketch while napping.

He uses his long sleeve to dap the paper dry before picking the pad up and closing it.

As usual, he stashes it away next to the little collection of books he has in the small cabinet next to the entrance of his apartment.

When he eventually opens the door, he finds Jay waiting in front of it, just as he has expected.
The older man called a few days ago and asked whether Barry had time for him to pass by. Barry’s unease at that request must have been palpable even over the phone as Jay quickly clarified that it was just to chat and catch up, since they haven’t seen each other in over a month.

“Hey Barry,” Jay greets him with a friendly smile. It drops when he seems to notice Barry’s rather groggy expression. “Is this a bad time?”

“N-No.” Barry shakes his head and steps aside to let the other man in. “J-Just t-took a-an u-unplanned n-nap.”

“Are you getting enough rest?” Jay inquires, studying Barry with a concerned look.

Barry tries not to frown as he leads the other man to his kitchen table.

It is still so odd to have Jay treat him like this again, and he is still not sure how he feels about it.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Barry responds. “Y-You w-want c-coffee?”

“That would be great,” Jay agrees as he takes a seat at the table. He puts a white plastic bag on the table and explains at Barry’s curious look. “Joan made a marble cake and thought that you would like some.”

“Th-That’s v-ery k-kind o-of h-her, p-please t-tell h-her I s-said th-thanks.” Barry smiles as warmth settles in his chest at that sweet gesture.

They talk a little about the weather that has been getting better and how Joan is doing as Barry prepares the coffee, and it feels nice how relaxed things between them are now, so unlike a year ago.

Of course, Barry should have known that this can’t last.

He hands Jay his coffee and a plate for the cake, and it is when he retakes his seat at the table that he notices the slight frown the other man is studying him with.

“I-I s-say e-everyth-thing alr-right?” Barry asks, uneasily.

“Yes,” Jay agrees and gives him a tight smile. “I was just wondering whether we can pick up a conversation we decided to postpone a while ago.”

Barry knits his brows, not sure what the other man is talking about. “S-Sure…”

Jay studies him briefly, a hard to read look in his eyes, and Barry has to stop himself from fidgeting. Eventually, the other man says, “Before I breach the subject, I want you to understand that nothing of this is meant as an accusation, and you will not get in trouble for this, alright?”

There is not much Barry can say to that, so he only nods, already feeling slightly ill.

“Your new job is at the Saloon, isn’t it?” Jay asks, and Barry feels the blood drain from his face.

He wants to protest, but what good would that do? It would be a lie, and he would dig the hole he is already in only deeper.

His reaction seems to be answer enough since Jay’s frown deepens.

“Barry, why would you take a job at a place like that?” The way Jay is looking at him right now is a mixture of confusion and disappointment, and it is as if someone was pressing down on Barry’s chest, making it difficult to breathe. “The only people who frequent that place are criminals, and not
only petty thieves but the likes of the Rogues.”

Barry wants to defend himself, at least try to explain it, somehow, but he can’t talk, he can hardly think with how the throbbing in his ears is getting louder and louder.

He can’t breathe-

“Barry, relax.” Jay is suddenly next to him, causing him to flinch back in a mixture of surprise and fear, and he would have fallen off the chair if the other man hadn’t grasped his upper arm. The contact is sickening, utterly terrifying, and Barry would have whimpered if his throat hadn’t closed up.

He is going back to jail. He is going back to the Heights! Jay knows, he found out, and how stupid was he to believe that this very thing won’t eventually happen?!

“Barry, please, you have to calm down,” Jay tells him, voice low and soothing. He doesn’t sound angry, he doesn’t even sound disappointed anymore, the only thing that is plain in his voice is worry, but Barry hardly picks up on it with how lightheaded he starts to feel.

“You’re hyperventilating, Barry, you’ve to slow down your breath. Can you do that for me?”

The hand is still on his upper arm, has still a firm grasp on him, and it would be all too easy for Jay to get him back to the Heights, it would take him hardly more than ten seconds.

Michael comes to Barry’s mind, forces his way in like a fist through glass, and it is a terrifying image, that awful man standing over him, smiling down at him, his still half-hard cock hanging out of his opened fly, wet from Barry’s spit.

“You’ve been a good little bitch tonight, Allen,” Michael tells him, looking pleased, and there is still this awful hunger in his eyes. “I think you deserved a little treat.” He opens his pans, pushes them and his boxers down, and turns to the side where one of the other guards stands. “I’m sure our little sweetheart won’t be able to keep her voice down when I fuck her, why don’t you give her mouth something to busy itself with.”

There is laughter, and Barry wants to protest, but he knows that that would make it all only worse.

His arms are grabbed, firmly, painfully so-

For a horrible moment, Barry’s mind isn’t able to distinguish between the past and the present, and while his eyes see Jay, he can also make Michael out, watching him with that gleeful glint in his eyes.

It is as if that man was right there, an image that is terrifying, chokingly so in its intensity, and Barry’s bladder gives out on him before he even realizes what is happening.

Jay, whose expression has grown more and more concerned, also needs a moment to notice, and when he does, he freezes for a heartbeat, looking utterly taken aback, a mixture of disbelief and dismay on his face.

It is then that Barry realizes what has just happened, and it is enough to shake him out of his terrified stupor.

The hand lets go of him as if the touch burned it, and Barry scrambles to his feet, knocking over the chair as he does so. He rushes to his bathroom, the only room with a lock in his apartment, and locks himself in as he is still gasping for air. His legs give out under him, and he sinks to the tiled floor,
shaking like a leave in a storm.

This can’t be happening.

It has to be a nightmare.

Please, let it be a nightmare.

Barry curls up, tries to make himself as small as possible with his back resting against the door, and he fights the sobs, he can’t let them hear him-

No, not them, Jay…

Jay who just saw him wet himself like a damn toddler.

The mortification is enough to knock the fear a notch down, so that Barry feels like both emotions play tug of war with him, making it impossible to decide which one is worse.

How could he do that? How could he let that happen?!

What is Jay thinking now?

Barry doesn’t even want to imagine; he feels dirty, disgusting, and weak. He can’t even control himself on such a basic level.

Michael would make him piss himself at times, would lock him in a holding cell or other room with no toilet until he wet himself like a child, and afterward, he would punish him for it. That twisted bastard loved games like that.

He can’t go back!

Jay can’t bring him back there. He can’t live like that again; last time was already nearly too much, he can’t do it-

A soft knock on the door causes Barry’s body to freeze.

“Barry?” Jay asks, voice low and thick with worry. “Are you… Do you need help?”

“N-N-No.” Barry grits his teeth when they start to chatter, and curls in even more on himself. “G-G-Go a-aw-w-way…” He sobs, and presses his forehead painfully hard against his knees. “P-P-Please…”

There is a pause, and Barry hopes with everything he has that Jay will listen, that the older man is disgusted and wants to leave-

“Barry, you are not in any trouble,” Jay tells him, sounding much calmer once more. “I’m sorry if I made it sound like you are.” Quieter, he adds, “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

Barry’s throat hurts, it feels swollen, and it is ridiculously hard to speak.

“L-Leav-ve m-me a-al-lone.” The words are more of a plea than an order, but it doesn’t really matter anyway. He can’t order Jay to do anything, and while he heard his words, his upset mind is still convinced that he is just about to be sent back to prison.

His whole body is trembling, and he feels nauseated, his stomach a tight knot that sits aching in his abdomen.
“I can’t do that,” Jay replies, and a white-hot anger surges up in Barry, because why now?! He and the others let him rot in prison for over half a decade, back then they didn’t seem to have any damn problem to leave him to his own devices.

The rage lasts only a second and leaves Barry feeling even more shaken and hurt.

“I will give you some time to collect yourself, okay?” Jay offers, and while he tries to sound calm, his concern is audible. “I’ll go back to your kitchen, and if you need anything, just call me.”

Barry stays silent, and listens to how Jay’s footsteps eventually move away from his bathroom door.

Minutes pass, and the tears eventually stop while breathing starts to get easier again. Barry still stays curled up like this for a while longer, too tired and ashamed to bring himself to move.

His pants cling uncomfortably to his thighs as he shifts slightly, making it hard to ignore what just happened, and he closes his eyes, ignoring the smell of urine as he tries to take a calming breath.

His mind feels clearer again, now that the smothering fear has started to recede.

Why did he have to react like this?

Heaving a tired sigh, Barry slowly unwinds and rubs his eyes, wiping away the tears that are still clinging to his eyelashes.

Jay will undoubtedly question the reason for his strong reaction, and Barry has no idea what he is supposed to say.

Slowly, Barry climbs to his feet, grimacing at how the wet, by now cool fabric slides against his skin, and walks over to the basket for his dirty laundry. He picks the sweatpants he used to sleep in last night, and which are clean enough for him to put on. Afterwards, he takes his messed-up pants and boxer shorts off to rinse them through briefly and throws them into the now mostly empty basket.

Absentmindedly, as he grabs one of his smaller towels and wets it with water from the sink, he thinks that he would need to do his laundry later today even though he did so just yesterday.

After cleaning himself up, Barry puts the sweatpants on, grimacing slightly at the notion that he was going commando below that, but it can’t be helped by now. He washes his face and takes a deep breath, feeling a little dizzy.

Turning to the door, he feels a new wave of dread overcome him. He really doesn’t want to go out there and face Jay.

For a split-second, he thinks about calling Sam, about crawling through the mirror and hiding at the Rogues’ place and just try to forget any of this ever happened.

It is a nonsensical idea, a disastrous one even, but it is still alluring.

Swallowing thickly, Barry takes the few steps to the door, and after hesitating for another moment, he unlocks it and steps out.

Jay is sitting at the kitchen table, just as he said he would, and Barry absentmindedly notices that the other man picked up the chair he knocked earlier when storming into the bathroom.

Jay’s eyes are on him the moment he comes into view, but Barry can’t bring himself to meet them. He walks towards the table but stops at some distance from it, shifting uneasily as he tries to think of
something to say.

An awkward silence follows in which neither seem sure what to say.

“Are you okay?” Jay eventually asks, and seems about to get up but stops when he notices Barry tensing up in response.

“F-F-Fine,” Barry says, only glancing towards Jay for a second before turning his eyes back to his kitchen window. It’s a sunny spring day out there. He coughs lightly, his voice still sounds craggy from crying, and proceeds, “I-I’m s-s-sor-ry f-f-for h-how I-I r-reac-cted b-bef-ore.” His face heats up, and he grimaces at the notion of Jay seeing him like that.

It’s so damn humiliating.

“Barry-” Jay sounds like he wants to protest but stops himself. Instead, he asks him, “Can you sit down, please?”

Barry shifts again, nervously, and glances to the chair and then to the other man.

He doesn’t want to sit down and have a talk. He wants Jay to leave.

Slowly, reluctantly, he retakes his earlier seat and tries not to think about how he would have to clean the chair later.

God, he feels sick.

“I made you some tea,” Jay tells him, nodding to the second mug in front of Barry that he hasn’t noticed till then.

It is a gesture that is both surprising and not, and Barry blinks as his eyes start to itch once more.

“It’s chamomile,” Jay informs him and adds, “I hope you don’t mind that I did so. I didn’t go through your things, I remembered from when you prepared us some before where you have your tea stashed.”

Barry shakes his head, signalizing that he doesn’t care, though it is odd to think that Jay worries about something like that.

But maybe it isn’t, not anymore, and damn, isn’t his life one confusing cluster-fuck?

The ceramic of the mug feels warm beneath his finders, soothingly so, and Barry picks it up but doesn’t take a sip.

“Are you feeling better?” Jay studies him, brows still furrowed slightly, though he tries to look relaxed.

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees quietly and licks his lips, nervously. “I-I’m s-s-sor-ry a-about-”

“You don’t need to apologize for that,” Jay interrupts him kindly. “What just happened was out of your control, and if there is someone who should apologize, then it is me. I should have realized that you wouldn’t react well to me touching you, I just…” His frown deepens, and he shrugs helplessly. “You caught me off-guard there, I didn’t anticipate that my question would terrify you like that.”

Barry lowers his eyes and feels his face grow hot in embarrassment once again.

If there were a hole around he could crawl into and hide, he would have done so by now.
“I know you don’t trust me anymore.” Jay’s eyes are sad when Barry glances up at him, then, lacking any reproach or anger he expected. “I understand why that is, and I can’t fault anybody but myself, but I need you to understand that I’m not going to cause you any trouble for talking to me.”

It’s an interesting wording, and Barry feels a shiver run down his spine.

He bites his lower lip, not really wanting to speak, but he still finds himself asking, “Wh-What a-ab-bout m-m-my j-job?”

“You work at a bar that is infamous for its criminal clientele,” Jay points out, though he sounds calmer than earlier.

Barry presses his lips into a thin line and averts his eyes back to his mug. There is no defense he can bring to the table for that. It would be different if his parole were already over, but as it is right now, working at such a location means a lot of trouble.

Charlie gave him a fake address he could give Ms. Jenkins, one that belonged to the man’s uncle, who owns another bar closer to the docks, and who agreed to say that he worked at his location should anybody ask. That alone is a severe breach of his parole requirements, and it would undoubtedly lead to him returning to Iron Heights, especially if Ms. Jenkins found out what a bar he is working at.

This possible consequence kept Barry up for some nights after Charlie hired him, but despite Barry’s initial worries about it, everything went off surprisingly smoothly.

He should have known that it can’t be that easy, and it seems that Jay somehow found out about the lie.

“Barry, why are you working at the Saloon?” Jay asks him calmly, and Barry can’t help but wish it was still yesterday when he had no idea in what kind of trouble he would end up in today.

Barry shrugs, the movement small and slow, since it seems nearly too much effort to bear. “I-w-w-was th-the o-o-only p-p-p… p-place th-that t-took m-m-me.”

“You can work at Garrick Industries, I told you before that we would be happy to have you there,” Jay reminds him, and Barry looks back at him, eyes wide in surprise. He didn’t expect that this offer was still standing, not after this lie got busted or in general.

Wally won’t take kindly to Jay giving Barry a job, and they both know so.

It is still an unexpectedly generous gesture, but Barry can’t get himself even to consider the possibility to work in a laboratory, not after everything that happened.

“I-I c-c-can’t,” Barry says quietly, and lowers his head. “Th-Th-Thank y-you, J-Jay, r-r-real-ly, b-b-but I-I c-c-can’t a-a-ac-cept.”

He can feel that Jay wants to ask him about the reason, and he is grateful when he doesn’t because he would rather not open that can of worms on top of everything.

“We can find you a job somewhere else,” Jay offers instead. He sighs and leans back into his chair, giving Barry an apologetic look. “I should have helped you with that earlier, I’m sorry I let you deal with it on your own after you already told me how difficult it is for you to find something.”

Barry feels his grip tighten on the mug in his hands, and he keeps his eyes down as he shakes his head. “Th-Th-That’s n-not n-n-nec-c-es-sary, J-Jay.”
His words cause Jay to pause, and Barry can feel how he is being quietly studied again.

“Barry, you work at a place where the people Wally and I fight go to have a good time,” Jay eventually points out, not soothing his tone this time.

Barry doesn’t know how to respond to that since he can hardly defend himself seeing that Jay is saying nothing but the truth, and hearing it hurts.

“Why do you want to work there?” Jay inquires further, sounding somewhat frustrated. “It is a dangerous place, and not to mention that this can get you in so much trouble as you very well know. Why would you risk that?”

When a long minute of silence follows, with Barry keeping his head down, Jay sighs softly.

“Barry, despite what it may look like to you, you are not in trouble,” Jay reminds him. “I’m not going to force you to quit or report you to your parole officer, I know that you don’t want to cause anybody any problems, and while it is not exactly legal, I think you deserve some leeway after everything that happened to you.”

Barry freezes, his breath caught in his throat.

What Jay just said is not what he expected to hear, not at all, and he slowly lifts his gaze to meet the other man’s eyes, confused but hopeful.

“You don’t need to worry about returning to Iron Heights,” Jay carefully watches him as he says this, but Barry is momentarily too caught up in the sheer relief over learning that his new job is not going to get him back to that hellhole to notice.

It is as if a weight is lifted off Barry’s shoulders, one that was heavy enough that breathing becomes easier again now that it is gone.

There is still doubt persisting, of course, it sounds too good to be true, but Barry is exhausted, he wants to cling to the belief that Jay is saying the truth, no strings attached.

Why the other man would do that is beyond him, though, since he isn’t only doing an illegal but also a very amoral thing by working at a place like the Saloon, and Jay usually feels very strongly about those.

“Something crossed my mind, it’s purely hypothetical, but I would like to share it with you,” Jay states quietly, pulling Barry’s attention back to him. “I am not insinuating anything with it, and you aren’t in any trouble.” He meets Barry’s eyes firmly, searchingly. “I only ask you to listen.”

Barry isn’t sure what to think of that and watches Jay warily as the other man seems to consider what to say next.

“Let’s say, I was put in prison for a crime I did not commit.” Jay speaks softly, nearly kindly, but Barry hardly notices as he listens with a mixture of confusion and dread. “It turns out, the prison they put me in is an awful place, where I’m not treated like I’m supposed to, and a lot of bad things happen to me. I feel lonely and hurt, and hopeless, and none of the people I once knew seem to care.”

Barry suddenly feels caged, and once again like a mouse cornered by a cat as Jay observes him like he is looking for some reaction from him that gives something away he doesn’t want to share.

He doesn’t understand what Jay is trying to get at with this, and he really doesn’t care. He doesn’t
want to talk with him about his time in prison.

Jay is smart, too smart not to connect his disastrous reaction from earlier to the horror returning to the Heights instills in him, and that realization is both terrifying and humiliating.

“Then one day,” Jay proceeds, “I make some unlikely friends there, someone I would never have imagined myself wanting to be around, but they make life easier, and over time we grow closer. Close enough, that we stay in contact after my discharge.” His eyes don’t leave Barry for even just a second as he speaks, but there is no accusation in them, only sorrow.

“I think that’s quite an understandable thing for me to do in that situation, wouldn’t you agree?” Jay asks, and Barry has no idea what the other man expects from him.

Is this a trap? A cruel game?!

How does Jay know about the Rogues? He certainly means them by unlikely friends, but how does he know?

“Barry, it’s okay, please breathe.” Jay meets his panicked expression with concern, and assures him, “I promise you are in no trouble.”

It’s difficult to calm his nerves, Barry feels like on an emotional rollercoaster, it hardly slows down before speeding up again, giving him no time to adjust, and even though Jay assures him that he won’t have to fear any repercussions from this, it’s hard to believe.

“I-It’s n-n-not l-lik-ke th-th-that,” Barry protests, the words difficult to get out, and he tightens his grips on his mug to stop his hands from shaking. He should shut up. Saying anything would only deepen the hole he is already in, and while Jay says it was hypothetical, they both know that it is anything but so playing dumb would be the smart thing to do.

The other man gives him an out, but Barry still can’t stop himself from protesting.

“Y-Y-You’r-re w-w-wrong… I-I d-d-don’t… I-I-I… I-I w-w-woul-ld n-n-nev-ver w-w-want t-to h-h-harm y-you o-or W-Wal-ly…” Barry squeezes his eyes shut, and grits his teeth. “P-p-plea-s-se…”

“I know, Barry, and that’s not what I’m saying,” Jay assures him, and then he pauses, seems unsure how to go on, and Barry prays that he just would let this topic drop.

He doesn’t, of course.

“If you are in contact with the Rogues, I trust you that you don’t provide them with any information about us,” Jay points out, “I'm sure we would certainly have noticed by now if that wasn't the case.”

Barry forces himself to warily look back at the other man, and hardly notices when a couple of warm tears start to run down his cheeks.

Does Jay say that he is okay with him being friends with the Rogues? With the Flashes' villains?

“I can’t say that I would be happy about it,” Jay goes on as if reading his mind, frowning slightly, “and I can’t say that I would understand. They are dangerous people, and you know so yourself, but…” His tone softens a little as he goes on. “I know that you are a good man and that you don't mean any of us any harm.”

The frown returns to Jay’s face, and the way he studies Barry makes it clear that something is very much troubling him though.
“I know that trust between us is still an issue, and it will probably stay like that for a while longer, but I need you to understand that you can come to me if someone is bothering you, it doesn’t matter who.” Jay eyes him carefully as he speaks as if he was trying to read his reaction. “You won’t get in trouble even if it is someone you aren’t supposed to be in contact with according to your parole requirements.”

It takes Barry a moment to realize what Jay is getting at, and when he does, he feels anger flare up in his chest, irritated about what he is insinuating. Len and the others wouldn’t harm him. They aren’t the ones who have turned their backs on him-

Jay doesn’t know any of that, of course, and it is silly to get upset over it. The older man only means well.

“Can you do that for me, Barry?” Jay asks him when he fails to say anything in response to his earlier statement.

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees, tiredly.

That seems to satisfy Jay, who relaxes somewhat, and for a minute or so, they sit together in a silence that isn’t exactly uncomfortable, but Barry would still prefer to be left alone again.

The apprehension that Jay wants to try and talk about Barry’s stay in the Heights returns, and he doesn’t know how he would react to that. He feels drained, too worn out to be able to try and duck any of Jay’s questions.

“You look tired,” Jay observes, and Barry can’t help but shoot him a grateful look.

“Y-Y-Yes, I-I…” He shifts uneasily and lowers his eyes to the mug in his hands. “I-I f-feel a-l-it-tle e-exh-hausted…”

“I’m sorry I jumped you like that with my question,” Jay apologizes. “I should have approached it differently.”

“I-It’s o-ok-kay.” Barry shrugs, really not caring much anymore about that. He is mostly just glad that their conversation is over, and he is not on his way back to prison.

“I think I’ll be going then. You probably want to lie down for a bit.” Jay gets up and gives him a tight, somewhat sad smile. “I hope you can enjoy the cake after you’ve rested a little.”

“P-Please t-t-tell J-Joan m-my th-thanks.” Barry gets up too. “I-I’m s-sure i-it w-w-will b-be a-am-mazing.”

“I will,” Jay agrees as they start to make their way over to the door. “Thanks for having me over.”

His expression dims at that, and he adds, “I’m very sorry for upsetting you like that.”

Barry waves him off, too tired to deal with what happened. “I-I kn-know.”

It is just when Jay put his jacket back on and turns to leave, that Barry thinks of something that causes him to stop the other man once more.

“J-Jay?”

Jay turns to him with a mixture of surprise and concern. “Yes?”

“D-Do y-you…” Barry bites his lower lip and shifts nervously, unsure whether he should ask or not.
Eventually, his worry wins out, and he presses on, “D-Do y-you kn-know h-how H-Hal i-is d-doing?”

The old man pauses at that as he studies Barry, frowning slightly.

“He hasn’t contacted you so far?” Jay doesn’t seem surprised, despite the question, and the slight sadness Barry can make out in his eyes causes a sharp pang in his chest.

Barry presses his lips together and shakes his head.

It looks like Hal won’t try to do so in future either.

“He’s doing okay, he has a lot to adjust to, but he is coming around. His work as a Green Lantern has kept him busy since his return,” Jay explains and adds with a small but comforting smile, “I’ll talk to him the next time I see him, he probably has just too much on his plate right now that keeps him from catching up with everybody.”

That is a lie, Barry can tell, but he still nods in understanding. “Th-Thank y-you.”

Jay leaves afterwards, and Barry returns to his seat at the table.

He stays there for a while, sipping the slowly cooling chamomile tea, thinking.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this chapter is definitely on the heavier side, and it shows how traumatized Barry still really is by what happened to him and how much the prospect of being put back into Iron Heights frightens him. I know that Barry losing the control over his bladder in front of Jay may raise some eyebrows, but he is someone whose psychological issues tend to manifest themselves strongly in physical ways, like his easily upset stomach, lack of appetite, and urge to scratch himself raw when he is nervous/stressed out. Losing control of your bladder out of fright/anxiety does happen but rather rarely and only in very severe cases. It is something Barry suffered from before in his life and something he utterly despises because it diminishes his feeling of being in control even more and leaves him helpless and disgusted with himself and his body.

Jay is pretty unsettled by what he has seen and learned from his conversation with Barry, and we will see more of the consequences their talk is going to have over the next chapters. It seems that Jay's view of Barry and his stance on Barry's guilt have changed completely to how they were towards the beginning of this story. He knows of the Saloon and Barry's friendship to the Rogues, and he is not dragging him back to prison despite that, which is surprising but certainly welcome, though it will leave Barry pretty shaken up for a while.

I've mentioned before that Jay did not have the best introduction to this story, but that he is a good man, and it deeply hurts him to see Barry like that, to realize the trauma Barry is suffering from. He has known for a long while now that something is seriously wrong with Barry, and he did connect it to his time in prison, but he is just now really starting to get what he and the other heroes did to him by locking him away in Iron Heights.
I hope you all liked the chapters despite its heaviness, and you will soon learn more about how things are now starting to change once again for Barry.

I want to thank all of you who left me comments last time and congratulated me for reaching 100 chapters. I very much appreciate your kind words, and I hope Singularity will progress in future just as smoothly as it has so far. :)

The next chapter will be up on the 24th, and it will have Jay seek out someone from his past and try to get into contact with some people who won’t be happy about that.
Jay visits an old acquaintance and asks for a favor.

My talented friend Quintessenzza edited this chapter! Thanks a lot for your marvelous and hard work! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jay stops in front of Saints and Sinners and studies the rundown door absentmindedly, still uncertain whether this is a good idea or not.

In a way, he is going behind Barry’s back, and that doesn’t sit well with him, but…

Barry befriended the Rogues.

The mere notion would have been laughable just a year ago, but there is nothing funny about it anymore.

The Rogues are criminals; it is as simple as that. They are not the worst of the worst that probably goes to Bruce’s rogue gallery, and Jay himself can readily agree that they have morals they stick to. Questionable ones for sure, but there is a line they usually don’t cross, and he can respect that.

That doesn’t change the fact that the Rogues are still working on the other side of the law, and while they mostly settle for stealing these days, Jay knows that most of them did far worse in the past.

Barry seeking the company of people like that makes the fact that he has been utterly abandoned by the rest of them even harder to overlook.

Jay studies the metal door with a deepening frown, his hands clench into fists, and he can’t help but remember Barry’s reaction to him yesterday, the sheer terror in his eyes when he grabbed his arm to stop him from falling off the chair.

“What happened to you?” Jay murmurs, and a part of him is glad that nobody will answer him because he has been in this business for more than five decades by now, he has seen reactions like that before, and the thought that Barry…

It is sickening, infuriating, and he wishes he could undo it all.

Jay wants to be wrong, he hopes with everything he has that he is, that all of it is just a misunderstanding, but he is pretty sure that it isn’t.

How could he let this happen to the boy?
“Are you feeling comfortable on your high horse? Looking down at the likes of me?”

Jay frowns and shakes his head lightly.

“We aren’t all that different, Flash.”

His clenched hands tighten in frustration as he listens to the memory of that goading voice.

“Stop talking, Abra,” Jay told the man gruffly as he dodged the flashes of light the futuristic techno-wizard aimed at him. A hiss escaped him when one hit his right shoulder and nearly caused him to stagger as blinding pain momentarily spread up his neck and down his back. He had always hated the bad timing only criminals seemed able to master to perfection.

He needed to get to Wally and Max; there was no time for this.

“There are more urgent things I’ve to take care of right now.” Jay pushed himself, speeding up, and flickered across whatever illusion they were in right now. He hoped he could break it by knocking the man responsible for the bizarre landscape out and get back to the street where that damn wizard had ambushed him mere minutes ago to make this already catastrophic day even worse.

“I don’t doubt that,” Abra agreed readily, and Jay gritted his teeth in frustration when his fist went right through the man, exposing him as nothing more than another mirage.

“And I’m not here to demand a lot of your precious time, Flash,” Abra went on, suddenly from somewhere behind Jay. “I’m not even supposed to be here, and if things didn’t turn out as they did because of you and your little friends messing up, I would certainly not have come in the first place.”

Jay evaded another flash of white lightning and swiveled around to dash towards the criminal once more, even though he already knew that the man currently talking to him from the other side of this illusion was about as real as the world he had created. He didn’t have the option to slow down, though.

“What are you talking about?” Jay demanded, and he damned the theatrical streak most criminals seemed to have in common and which seemingly forbade them from just saying what they want and not make a show out of it to feed their egos.

“As I’ve said,” Abra indulged him, “we aren’t all that different, Flash, no matter how much it pains you to agree.”

Jay fought the urge to roll his eyes over those words. That was hardly the first time he heard them.

His fist moved right through the wizard’s face again, just as he saw it coming.

Odd, something seemed different about him, Jay thought as he watched the all too familiar visage dissipate.

“We criminals love to indulge our needs, and inevitably destroy lives on our pursuit to get what we want, whether it be power or money,” Abra continued from somewhere to Jay’s left. “It’s certainly not something that keeps me up at night, it’s business, so to speak.”

“What are you going on about?” Jay demanded again, and again his fist moved right through the other man’s smirking face.

A face that looked quite a bit older and worn out than what Jay could recall from their last fight about two months ago.
“If you would listen, I could tell you so,” Abra pointed out in a miffed tone, apparently not too happy about Jay not playing along and listening to his prepared speech.

“I’ve more important things to do right now than listening to you,” Jay reminded Abra, annoyed.

“More important than knowing that you’ve been played like my marionettes?” Abra’s voice got a sinister, nearly angry quality then, and Jay could hardly duck under the fist from the Flash look-alike that had suddenly sprung into existence right next to him.

And it wasn’t Wally who was glaring at him from behind the red mask.

“Abra, stop this!” Jay ordered, angrily as he tried to stay ahead of the second Flash’s double. The mere notion of fighting him was unsettling, even though Jay knew it was nothing but another one of the technowizard’s marionettes.

“But I can’t, Flash, not yet,” Abra argued, his voice rising, “I need you to understand that you put an innocent man in prison and damned us all by doing so!”

Jay threw a glare in the direction where he could make out the other man’s mirage of himself.

“What are you talking about!?” Jay tried to ignore the apprehension and dread that settled over him as he asked because he already had an inkling where this was going.

Abra laughed, sounding bitter and angry, and just off. “Come now, Garrick, didn’t it ever seem odd to you that your successor betrayed you? That he would f*** his little sidekick and kill his wife? You damn fools never once wondered why the man would suddenly change so drastically from one day to another?!”

Jay nearly staggered then.

How did Abra know about that!?

“What-” Jay was cut off by a fist painfully connecting with his jaw as the other Flash, the doppelganger, used his moment of distraction to catch up with him.

“You’ve been played all along, Flash!” Abra presses on, and his laughter echoed off unseen walls surrounding them. “You and your dumb little friends, you let yourself be caught with your pants down, and now we all have to pay for it!”

What the hell was the man talking about!?

He meant Barry, Jay was sure of it, but how could he know, and what did he mean by saying that they had been played!?

Jay dodged the false Flash’s next attack but had difficulties to keep up with the speed and force of the younger speedster's doppelganger. He tried not to allow himself to notice how unsettling it was to fight Barry, even if it was not him.

The hate with which those blue eyes were watching him was daunting, and he tried to remind himself that Barry was responsible for what happened to him.

Not that Jay believed all the accusation against the younger man anymore.

There were doubts, had been for a while now, and Abra seemed to know about that.

But how?
Nobody should know that Barry was the Flash once or what he did to Iris and Wally, nobody outside the hero community, at least.

“What are you going on about, Abra!” Jay exclaimed, frustrated, blocking another punch while trying to evade the persisting lightning bolts at the same time. He couldn't find it in himself to appreciate the nutjob’s humor just then, and after a second, despite a voice telling him not to play along, he asked, “Are you telling me he is innocent!”

Please, Jay thought, nearly desperately, please tell me he didn’t do it.

It made no sense for him to hope for that, Abra is a criminal, a liar, and even if he should tell him that Barry was innocent, he could hardly take it seriously.

There had been a nagging doubt regarding Barry’s guilt for a while now, though, eating away at him, and the more time passed, the harder it got for Jay to look at his former friend and believe what he supposedly had done.

“The Flash, Barry Allen,” Abra started, voice booming, and damn him and his theatrics, “was destined to save the Multiverse, like all the others, and that was taken from him!”

Why the hell couldn’t that man make a lick of sense!?

“The Multiverse!?” Jay repeated in confusion before another pained cry was ripped from him. He had let his attention slip for another second, which caused one of that bright white lightning flashing around him to hit him again.

Like earlier, it caused Jay to stagger momentarily and slow down. The other Flash used that opportunity, of course, and slammed right into his side, with enough brute force that he ended up falling, skidding across the floor at a neck-breaking speed.

“It’s unwinding, coming apart, and with it the-”

Abra stopped abruptly, and then the illusion around Jay started to waver as the real world replaced it again, giving way to the view of the street in which the wizard had caught him off-guard earlier.

The Flash’s doppelganger was gone too, and Jay pushed himself up onto his knees looking around in a slight daze since the marionette had made good use of the imitation of his speed powers and his head was still ringing from hitting it on the grind after losing his footing.

The street was still vacated, though, which was strange and unusual for how Abra Kadabra's mirages usually dissipated. It caused Jay to fear that he was caught in another illusion once again, but then he noticed the faint outline of people, around him, moving around him like in another plane of existence-

There was one figure that was in focus, though, he noticed as he looked around in concern, straight ahead of him, hidden away in what looked like shadows even though they stood in plain daylight. The stranger seemed to study Jay, the intensity of their look palpable, and while he couldn’t make out their face, he was overcome by the intense feeling of unease.

Had he been able to face the person he was sure he would have seen anger in their eyes. Anger and malice, and -

Glee?

Then it was gone, just like that, and the world around him came back into focus, and he had to
vibrate not to be hit by the car that suddenly turned up right ahead of him, blaring its horns at him as if that would somehow help.

That happened nearly four months ago.

A lot has changed in that time when it comes to his stance towards Barry.

Unfortunately, he is the only one, so far, and, as expected, everybody put Abra Kadabra’s words up to be a lie, a way to unsettle him so he could get the upper hand. They dismissed them so easily, too easily, Jay thinks, and it is strange to remember how he was no different in that regard not too long ago.

It concerned everybody greatly that the magician knew of Barry’s past as the second Flash, though, since they worried where he had got that information from. Barry is and always will be a sore spot for all of them and not only on emotionally level. His knowledge of them landing in the wrong hands could have catastrophic consequences, and the League has been worrying about that from the very beginning. It was at least part of the reason why they took Barry up to the Watchtower to interrogate him when Wally’s kids had been kidnapped. The thought of how Barry was likely treated while among his former colleagues still causes Jay to feel immense guilt since he can imagine how hostile some of Barry’s past colleagues must have been toward him.

Their suspicion is not entirely baseless it seems, and Jay feels a bitter smile tug at his lips as he thinks back to the talk he had with Barry yesterday.

Barry didn’t outright admit to anything, but it is still glaringly apparent that he is in contact with his former enemies.

Who would have thought that Barry and the Rogues could ever get along? Become friends of all things?

It seems nearly absurd thinking about it.

Then again, in prison unlikely friendships tend to happen, and if Barry had been abused during his time there, it would make sense for him to look for people who could offer him some protection. Jay scowls at the dirty ground in front of him as he reminds himself that the Rogues certainly have the reputation that causes others to think twice before messing with them or someone they took under their wing.

But why someone like Leonard Snart or his men allowed Barry, a former forensic scientist who worked for the CCPD, to stick around with them is a question he can’t find a satisfying answer to, no matter how much he keeps mulling it over.

The Rogues are well known for not being particularly friendly towards or even tolerable of other criminals who can’t offer something in return, and they haven’t expanded their group in nearly one and a half decades other than letting Cold’s younger sister join. Why did they allow Barry to stick around?

It can be a coincidence, the universe works like that at times, but after Barry’s reaction, Jay is pretty sure that the actual reason is that the Rogues know about Barry’s past as their enemy.

Why something like that caused Cold and the others to befriend Barry is beyond him, though.

In all actuality, Jay would have assumed that this would only end up in tragedy, with them going after Barry instead of offering him their protection-
“If you keep standing there any longer, you’ll take roots, Garrick.”

Jay is startled out of his thoughts and shifts to his right, where a tall, black man in his early sixties eyes him with a displeased frown.

“Hello, Edmund,” Jay greets the other man in a friendly manner, and nods to the closed door he has been standing in front of for the last ten minutes or so. “You mind if I come in for a moment, I know you are not open yet, but I have something I would like to talk to you about.”

Edmund’s frown deepens, and he appears somewhat annoyed by Jay's request but eventually nods.

“Get inside.” Edmund grunts and turns around. “I’ll be there in another minute or so. I need to take care of the trash first.”

Jay feels himself relax a little, glad that the other man agreed to the meeting, and phases through the door, inside the rather crummy looking bar he hasn’t visited in nearly eight years.

Not a lot has changed, by the looks of it, only the barstools and chairs seem to be new, which is not a surprise since those tend to get broken first in case of a fight stirring up.

That thought doesn’t sit well with Jay as he remembers that Barry is currently working in a very similar location that probably has to deal with a crowd just as rowdy and violent as Saints and Sinners does.

His gaze slowly drifts over the dark room that is only lit by the faint light entering via the window next to the bar.

He makes his way over there, passes some tables on which the wooden chairs are still standing, and briefly glances over the many pictures on the walls, mostly framed old photos of Edmund’s dad and their family, giving this place an oddly intimate and homely feeling. There are also some posters of cars, sparsely clad women in incentive poses, and some with both, as well as a few postcards, mostly from overseas.

The color of the walls is chipping off, though Jay is sure that they had to have gotten a fresh paint job since the last time he was here, seeing that he remembers them being a dirty white instead of an olive green.

Jay has to smile at that, and he isn’t surprised at all that Edmund would go for a cheap color just to save a couple of bucks. The man has always been stingy to a fault.

The sound of the back door being opened and shut pulls Jay’s attention back to the present.

“Getting a visit from one of our mighty protectors,” Edmund grouses as he enters, shooting Jay an annoyed glare, “what a lucky man I am.”

“It’s been a while,” Jay points out as he steps closer to the bar.

“Not long enough if you ask me,” Edmund replies and makes his way over to the tables to start putting down the chairs. He doesn’t seem to be in a hurry as it’s not even three in the afternoon, still another two hours till Saints and Sinners opens.

“I’m sorry to intrude on you like that-”

“Yeah, sure you are.” Edmund snorts and shoots Jay an impatient look. “What do you want, Garrick?”
The man’s temper seems to have only gotten shorter with age, and Jay fights down a disapproving frown at the tone he uses since he has pretty much known what to expect when he decided to come here. At least Edmund never was one to beat around the bush.

“I need you to get a message to Snart for me.”

“To Captain Cold?” Edmund barks a laugh. “You do realize this isn’t the Saloon, Garrick, my clientele may be made up of scum, but they aren’t your big-time criminals. I don’t want to deal with your little protégé kicking in my doors too, so you’re out of luck.”

The answer isn’t unexpected. Edmund has always been a complicated fellow, and it only got worse since the incident with the man’s nephew. Still, he and Jay go back a long while. They aren’t friends, but Edmund is a pretty decent man, despite how he likes to portray himself. He doesn’t keep people like Murmur out of his bar only because he doesn’t want to deal with the heat the man would bring along.

“I know you’ve got a way to contact them via your nephew,” Jay argues as he watches the man go back to his task of getting the bar ready for opening.

“If you think I pull my nephew into any shitty business with you capes, you’re really growing senile on your old days, Flash,” Edmund states darkly and turns to face Jay grimly.

“It’s not about your nephew or his business,” Jay assures him. “This has nothing to do with the Saloon.”

“Really?” Edmund snorts incredulously. “That’s kinda difficult to believe.”

“It’s only a message,” Jay points out patiently once more.

“Why not deliver it to him yourself?” Edmund asks, arms crossed. “Pretty sure that would go faster.”

“You know I can’t,” Jay reminds him, biting down on a sigh.

“You can’t?” Edmund smirks. “Why would that be the case?” His expression changes then and he sneers in anger. “Oh right, your little shit of a successor trashed his bar the last time he decided to grace him with his presence. Right after breaking his wrist.”

Jay frowns but doesn’t argue since there is no point in doing so seeing that Wally's actions are hard to defend without knowing what caused the young man to snap in the first place.

“This has nothing to do with Flash business,” Jay explains, “and nobody but me is involved in this.” He gives the other man a tight smile. “You know me, I’ve never caused you any trouble, Edmund, and I’m not planning on doing so now.”

“What reason do you have to talk with Snart then?” Edmund demands. “You two aren’t exactly pals.”

“It’s about a mutual friend.”

Edmund snorts and lifts his eyebrows in disbelief. “Someone like that exists?”

“Yes,” Jay simply replies, “and I’m very worried about him.” He sighs and gives the other man a pleading look. “You can see this as a personal favor for me, Edmund.”

The other man studies him with a deep frown thoughtfully for a long moment, considering his
options, which Jay takes as a good sign.

“You’ll owe me one for this,” Edmund eventually decides, crossing his arms over his board chest.

“I know,” Jay quickly agrees since he didn’t expect anything else.

With a very annoyed sounding grunt, Edmund turns back to the task at hand, grabbing the next chair. “What’s the message you want me to give to Charlie for Snart?”

“I need to talk to him.” Jay makes his way over to the table next to the one the other man is currently at and starts to help him. “I’ve one of Scudder’s mirrors at hand he lost during their last job inside the Twins, and I want him to contact me on that one tomorrow at six pm.”

Edmund scoffs and shoots him a look like he is an idiot. “You expect Snart to do so? He’ll think it’s a trap.”

“Tell him it’s about our mutual friend, he will understand.”

“Tch, if you say so.”

Jay gives the other man a grateful smile. “Thank you, Edmund.”

The other man snorts and doesn’t look particularly happy about the prospect of playing his messenger.

“Whatever, Garrick, just get your ass out of here, I’ve more important things to do than playing messenger bird for you right now,” Edmund tells him, glaring slightly. "I'll let Charlie know about your message tonight, now scram and let me do my damn work in peace."

Jay nods and does just that.

Chapter End Notes

I'm early, it's still around half an hour till Sunday, but I will probably be too busy to post this chapter tomorrow since Christmas is a rather hectic affair as it is and I'm planning on cooking for my family this year again. So, to not have to worry about uploading it sometime tomorrow, I decided to post it today, you probably don't mind. ;)

This chapter is on the shorter side, but the initial chapter was tough to cut at another place. Initially, the next chapter would have gone along with this one, and it would have been a much nicer read as a whole, but since I need to spread things a little out, we are stuck with a comparatively meager one this time. The next one will be longer, and I think some of you are looking forward to it since we are going to see Jay coming face to face with the Rogues (or three of them).

Edmund's bar wasn't called Saint and Sinner originally, but I think it is a nice little nod to the TV show since that name seems to have gotten quite popular in the fan community by now. Initially, its name was Bad Habit, but Saint and Sinners does just as good of a job.

Thank you guys for your feedback on the last chapter (and in general), your words lift my spirits when I feel down or a little exhausted with everything going on at the
moment, and I know how lucky I am to have such fabulous readers as you. :)  

I'm pretty tired and will go to bed soon, thus a rather short AN this time from my side.  

I just want to wish you all a very Merry Christmas with your loved ones, or any other holiday you celebrate, and if you don't celebrate any, then just a pleasant and calm Sunday. Happy New Year as well since the next chapter will be up after the 31st! Let's hope the next year will be a good one!
“Would you like to enlighten me how the fuck he can contact us in the first place?” Lisa demands in irritation as she follows Len out of his room and down the corridor. It is hard to miss that she is upset about the news of Jay Garrick trying to contact her brother and wanting a heart to heart with him. “The fucking speedsters can’t get to Charlie’s Saloon. No damn cape can.”

“Well, theoretically they could,” Sam points out, tagging along behind them through the shallow light, “it really only depends on—”

“Shut it, Sam,” Lisa orders her friend, glaring daggers his way. “This is not funny! The fucking Flash wants to talk to us about Barry! Do you have any damn idea how serious this is?” She turns back to Len, glaring reproachfully at him as if all of this was somehow his doing, and goes on, “If they know that he is in contact with us, it’s not only us I’m worried about, Len. This has to be a trap.”

Len pushes the door to their destination open, the room behind it lays in shadows for another moment before he switches the light on, bathing a handful of standing mirrors in bright light that causes Sam to grunt in discomfort.

Ignoring Lisa, Len steps closer to the mirrors that are similar to the one he got Barry a while back. They are their usual mean of exiting and entering this hideout during a heist, and while Sam can use any mirror around for the upcoming conversation, Len prefers them to the handheld ones, since they allow him to appear more imposing and threatening if necessary. He hopes that won’t be necessary.

“Barry’s fine,” Sam tells Lisa when they both follow him into the room. “I just talked to him, he’s at the Saloon and doesn’t know about anything—”

“You didn’t warn him?!” Lisa demands angered, and this time it is Len who interferes.

“He doesn’t need to know about it just yet,” Len tells her, the warning that is clear in his voice causing her to bristle.
“You’ve to be kidding me.” Lisa steps up to him, meeting his eyes with a harsh glare. “Why the hell wouldn’t he need to know about this? If Garrick knows, the Flash will know next, and do I have to remind you what happened the last time that jackass crossed Barry’s path in his righteous anger?”

“I don’t think that Garrick would go behind Barry’s back like that,” Len replies and turns back to the mirrors, deciding to use the one in the center to have the upcoming talk. He picks his shades from his parka pocket and puts them on, giving his reflection a brief once-over.

Garrick’s message reached him no twenty minutes ago, when Sam returned with it from the bar, leaving him hardly any time to make his mind up on what to think of it since it’s already getting close to six pm. A part of him very much dislikes the idea to follow the old hero’s orders, to do what he says since it is usually Len who determines when and where to talk to someone.

Len could let the hero wait, just out of spite, he doesn’t doubt that Jay will keep the mirror he wants them to contact him on close for a while longer. Unfortunately, this is about Barry, and while he tries to not let it on with Lisa and Sam around, it does genuinely trouble him that the old geezer knows about their relationship.

Lisa is right, this can mean a world of trouble for not only them but especially Barry, and if it were anybody else who wanted to contact them, Len would have decided to stay low and ignore them.

Garrick seems to have changed his stance towards Barry over the last year though according to what Len learned from the blonde, and while it had him skeptical at first, he no longer thinks that it is only an act to gain Barry’s trust back.

When Barry told Len a couple of days ago that Garrick is on to them, he briefly had a similar reaction to Lisa, but he quickly tried to keep his concern to himself when it became apparent that Barry was already upset and worried enough about it as it was.

He also decided to let the others out of the loop for now, since the mood among them has been tense enough as it is, and it is easy to guess that they won’t like the idea of Garrick attempting to contact them. It’s a good thing that most of them are still over at the Saloon, and Sam decided to come straight to him instead of spreading the news of Garrick’s message.

Len should have anticipated that the old-timer would want to learn more.

Whatever the old Flash wants, Len doubts that it is to cause Barry any trouble. Otherwise, things would have already escalated, he is sure of that, but that doesn’t mean that the geezer will have the same reservations regarding the rest of them.

“What do you mean?” Lisa asks, sounding more and more frustrated. “Barry knows that he knows?”

Len grunts dismissively and glances at her with a frown. “We can talk about that later, let’s focus on our little chat with Garrick for now.” He adds with a warning tone, “Or you can join the others back at the bar if you can’t keep a leveled head.”

“Fuck you.” Lisa glares at him before she turns to the mirror and exclaiming an annoyed huff. “I’ve to get my costume.” With that, she turns and heads out the door, but not without shooting a dark look over her shoulder to both men. “Don’t start without me.”

“Seriously?” Sam calls after her. “You do remember that the Flash knows what you look without your mask, right?” He then turns to Len, narrowing his eyes. “Don’t expect me to grab my outfit as well, I’m not going to make myself pretty for that old fuck.”

Len ignores him; he doesn’t care whether Sam wears his usual get-up or the jeans and plain blue shirt
he is right now.

Lisa returns no five minutes later, raking her finger through her hair, as if to puff them up some more, wearing her usual golden skating dress and mask. When she spots Sam, she arches an eyebrow, looking pissed. “You want to look like that in front of the Flash? Why don’t you get a fucking beer while you’re at it?” she groused.

“Bite me, princess,” Sam returns with a grin that looks a little too aggressive for Len’s liking.

“Enough,” Len tells them sharply. He turns to Sam and nods to the mirror in front of them. “Contact Garrick.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sam walks to the mirror and steps into it without hesitation.

“I can’t believe that you don’t deactivate those damn mirrors of yours after you lose them, anyway,” Lisa remarks, irritated. “What if one of the capes find a way to trace us that way?”

“They won’t,” Sam absentmindedly points out from somewhere inside the mirrorverse, still looking for the mirror in question. “They would have to understand how my system works first.”

“Because you’re such a mastermind.” Lisa snorts, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Sam ignores the quip, and Len is glad he does, he doesn’t need those two to start a quarrel when they are about to face the old Flash.

Still, he has to agree with Lisa on that one. He doesn’t like Sam’s habit of letting his mirror activated any more than she does, but the other man is fairly stubborn in that regard.

It is dumb luck that none of the capes seemed to have realized by now that Sam can trace all of his mirrors, no matter where they are. There has to be light so that he can operate them, but he can pinpoint their position regardless, which comes in handy in moments like right now, as he can pick Garrick’s location out from all the other reflective surfaces he has access to via this pocket dimension of is.

Jay knowing about Sam’s ability to use the discarded mirrors and asking them to contact him on one of those doesn’t sit well Len because of that.

The reflective surface of the standing mirror grows milky for a second before changing to a view of what has to be a plain white ceiling as well as a couple of green leaves belonging to some room plant.

“You’re good to go,” Sam calls out from within his domain.

“Move your ass,” Lisa tells him impatiently when he fails to return to them.

“Nope, I’ll stay put,” Sam explains, the smirk audible in his voice, “I’m totally underdressed, after all.”

Lisa is about to respond with what would undoubtedly have been a very biting remark when a hand appears in the reflection, and the mirror on the other side is picked up.

A moment late, they are face to face with Garrick.

“Cold,” Garrick greets him before his eyes move over to Lisa. “Golden Glider.”

While they can’t see much more than the man’s head, Len can make out that he is wearing his stupid
helmet, which means he is wearing his costume too. Len expected that thus his decision to wear his get-up, but a part of him hoped that it wouldn’t be the case.

Costumes and masks make it more likely that this is about superhero business after all.

“Thanks for contacting me,” Garrick proceeds, causing Lisa to scoff but thankfully stay quiet otherwise.

“How could we say no when you went out of your way to ask so nicely?” Len draws with his smile being all teeth and crosses his arms over his chest. “What is this about, Garrick? I doubt we’re here because you wanna exchange pleasantries.”

Garrick studies them for a long moment, his expression somewhat grim but thoughtful as if he was trying to read him.

“I think you know,” Garrick eventually settles on. “I doubt we would have this talk right now, otherwise.”

“Is that so?” Len cocks his head slightly, smirking. “Well, I think you’re full of shit, old man. I’m only curious why you’d go out of your way to contact us after we haven’t been a presence within the Germs for quite a while.”

Garrick frowns slightly, probably not agreeing with his tone, and Len knows that it is childish, but he can’t help but enjoy annoying that man even if just a little.

“This is not about any Rogue-business,” Garrick clarifies, and, once again, he studies them with a careful look, which gives Len pause as a thought occurs to him.

What if Garrick knows about Barry and them, but isn’t sure whether they know about Barry and his past?

“If this isn’t about business,” Lisa speaks, tone scornful and hostile, “why the hell did you want us to contact you?”

The frown on the older man’s face deepens as his eyes flicker from Lisa to Len and back again, and he considers her for a moment.

“I’m not here to cause you or Barry any trouble,” Garrick eventually explains, and just like that, the cards are on the table.

Neither of them responds, and Len feels anger wall up in him, because while Garrick read them right, he could very well have been wrong just as likely, and if they hadn’t known that Barry was somehow connected to the capes, they would undoubtedly be suspicious now.

It is a nonsensical thing to be concerned over since Barry would hardly be part of their group had Len not known who he was from the beginning, but it still bothers him that Garrick made that call so quickly.

“What do you want?” Len repeats, voice no longer light and mocking but low and threatening, and he is sure he makes it quite clear that he is done with beating around the bushes.

“I want to know why you keep Barry around,” Garrick merely replies, and his expression has turned a touch grimmer as well.

“Why we keep him around?” Lisa asks incredulously and barks a laugh. “What the fuck does it
matter to you, Flash? As far as I know, you haven’t given a fuck about what happens to him since you locked him behind bars with the rest of us.”

Garrick doesn’t respond right away, he keeps his features schooled in a calm expression, but Len knows that the words have hit a sore spot by the way he presses his lips into a thin line and the area around his eyes seems to tense up.

Good, the man should feel afflicted over this, he and all the other capes let Barry rot in that hellhole for over half a decade.

Len’s righteous anger dims a little as he remembers that he too could have interfered and helped Barry during that time, and the grim smirk drops off his lips.

“Barry is a dear friend,” Garrick explains, giving Lisa an irritated frown when she scoffs at that, but proceeds, “and while he seems to trust you, I have troubles to see why someone like you would choose to invite someone like him into your group. You usually prefer to stick to yourself.” He hesitates before adding, “Especially regarding your shared past.”

“We don’t have to explain or justify ourselves to you,” Lisa snaps, her hands on her hips, and a sharp glare in her eyes. “We aren’t the ones who stabbed Barry in the back and locked him away in the Heights.” A sneer settles over her face. “A former cop usually isn’t that popular among vermin like us, as you know, and you didn’t give a damn when you put him into that place, so don’t fucking tell me that you’re a concerned friend who is only looking out for him. If that were the case, you wouldn’t have turned up a decade too late.”

Garrick meets Lisa’s glare firmly, and Len has to give it to the man, he is good at keeping his emotions in check since he knows that the words have to affect him.

“I don’t have to justify myself to you, either,” Garrick points out. "I honestly don’t care what you think of me, but I can assure you that you will have to explain yourself to me if something happens to Barry or it turns out that you are using him to get to the rest of us.”

“Are you threatening us?” Len asks, dangerously, tensing up, and, damn, he suddenly itches for the opportunity to fire his Ice gun in the face of that old jackass.

“I’m telling you what will happen in case you betray Barry’s trust,” Jay clarifies.

“Isn’t that touching?” Len chuckles. “So you’re only watching out for Barry again? You won’t put him back into the Heights for sleeping with the enemy?” He gives the other man a grin that is all teeth. “That’s very gracious of you.”

Garrick meets his challenging look, and Len feels a certain satisfaction when he notices anger and even a certain amount of disdain in the other man’s eyes.

To Garrick, to the Flash and all the other capes, Len and the others are nothing more but lowlifes, criminals who won’t go down without a fight and certainly won’t stay down.

Barry was no different to Garrick not too long ago, and who the hell does he think that he can lecture Len on that.

Then, the older man says something that catches all of them off-guard, no matter how nonsensical it is considering that it’s a well-known fact by now.

“He was the Flash,” Garrick reminds them, and just like that, Len feels the aggression seethe out of him again.
A grim silence follows—

“Fuuuck.” Sam’s voice sounds from somewhere inside the mirror. “It makes it so much weirder if you actually say it outright.”

Jay frowns, while Lisa huffs an exasperated laugh, calling Sam an idiot under her breathe.

“Listen.” Len uncrosses his arms and makes a step closer to the mirror, even though he knows that the other man won’t let himself be intimidated by him. “We are not the ones who Allen has to worry about, and we are not going to use him or whatever else your self-righteous little mind comes up with, Garrick. He’s a friend, and the Rogues look out for their friends, so if I were you, I’d be more concerned with how you can keep yourself and the other capes from messing up his life any more than you already did.”

Again, Garrick keeps watching his for a long moment, his face a mask of grimness and sadness, but the anger has dimmed away. Like earlier, there is something searching to how he studies him, and Len meets it firmly from behind his shades, even though he knows the other man can’t make out his eyes.

Eventually, Garrick heaves a surprisingly tired sounding sigh, and it is then that Len notices how exhausted he looks. The older man reaches up to rub his eyes, and probably trying to make up his mind what to do or say next.

“I don’t trust you,” Garrick states, and he doesn’t sound particularly angry or even reproachful, it is just that, a statement. He turns his focus back to them, frowning deeply. “You are criminals, and you’ve done horrible things without showing any remorse—”

“Because you’re someone to judge—” Lisa interrupts, but Garrick presses on, fixing her with a grim look.

“But I trust Barry, and I start to understand that a lot happened I know nothing about yet. Something that has hurt him badly.” Garrick looks honestly distressed for a moment, the grief nearly palpable, and Len feels his anger vane a little at that because he knows what the other man must be feeling like that moment.

“If Barry thinks he can get the support he needs from you, I will trust him,” Garrick explains. He doesn’t seem particularly happy about it, though, and his expression darkens as he goes on, “I will keep an eye on him, and should I get the slightest inkling that you are playing a game with him or want to use him against us, you can be sure that I will put your asses back into Iron Heights within minutes.” Something dangerous, threatening crosses his face as he adds, “I’ll make sure you are locked away in its lowest level so that you can be happy if you’re ever going to see sunshine on a TV again.” He smiles grimly. “This is a promise.”

“Screw you,” Lisa replies darkly.

Len clenches his fists as a tightly coiled up anger settles into the pit of his stomach. He doesn’t doubt that Garrick means his threat and will make true on it if he sees it necessary, and the man’s fucking audacity nearly causes him to punch the mirror.

Instead, he takes a breath and relaxes his hands again, nodding, “We’ll keep your words in mind.”

Sam must have gauged from his tone that he is done with this call since the mirror suddenly turns milky again before Len sees his reflection looking back at him.

“What a miserable old fuck,” Lisa remarks, sounding still very much wired up and angry.
“Indeed,” Sam agrees as he steps out of the mirror, re-joining them. His smile seems a little forced as he points out, “He made it very clear that he’s going after us with vigor if we harm Barry.”

“Yeah, touching,” Lisa grouses, looking very much not impressed.

“At least we don’t have to worry that the old geezer will involve anybody else,” Sam says as he rubs his chin. “I mean, he seems to be honestly worried about him, and he has to know that the Flash will probably not take too kindly to him being all buddy-buddy with us.” He grimaces at that. “It’s still so weird to think that Barry was that red jackass once.”

“He was never as bad as the current Flash,” Lisa notes.

“And you know that how?” Sam inquires with an arched eyebrow. “You still were all about ice-skating and pretty dresses back then.”

“You said so yourself, dimwit,” Lisa reminds him and smirks, “and pretty dresses never really were my style.”

“Too much of a badass, hm?” Sam grins, but his good mood seems to fade when he turns back to Len, frowning. “So, what does that mean?”

Len, who has been studying the mirror absentmindedly, shrugs and glances to Sam. “It means Garrick is on to us, and that seems to be about it for now.”

“Great, as if it isn’t enough to have that old prick breathing down our neck whenever we pull a job,” Sam remarks drily.

“I’m pretty sure it’s mostly an empty threat,” Lisa points out. “He can’t go to the other capes. They are still convinced that Barry is a rapist and murderer, so he is pretty much on his own in this regard, and he can’t do much more than what he has done so far.” She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “Not that it really matters anyway, since we are no damn threat to him.” She glares darkly towards the mirror, probably imagining Garrick’s face there. “That guy has some nerves.”

“He’s worried about him.” Len doesn’t like Garrick, nor his holier than thou attitude, especially in this case, but it is also good to know that there is someone else out there who has Barry’s back in case something happens.

“He should have been worried about him ten years ago.” Lisa grunts in anger, though she sounds concerned when she turns to Len and asks, “So, are we going to tell Barry about this?”

“I will,” Len agrees and turns to leave the room. “We’ll tell the others later, after they’ve sobered up.”

“So, you mean sometime tomorrow?” Sam throws in, smirking as he turns the light off and pulls the door closed behind them since he makes up the rear of their little group.

“Great,” Lisa sounds weary and slows down as they are about to pass by the kitchen. “I’m making myself some snacks. You guys want something too?”

“Sure,” Sam says unsurprisingly, while Len declines. He is not hungry, and he doesn’t feel a lot like the other’s company right now either.

Barry will still be at work for a couple of hours longer, but he decides against going over to the Saloon seeing that the blonde undoubtedly would pick up on something going on and he doesn’t need to worry him just yet.
Thus, he decides to return to his room to work a little more on his latest upgrade of his Cold gun and use the time alone to think.

Chapter End Notes

So, we finally had Len and Jay come face to face, and… it did go okay-ish, I guess?

It was fun to have (some of) the Rogues meet up with Jay, even if it was just via a mirror, and see them react to each other. Both parties care for Barry and want to protect him, but they don't trust each other. Jay would prefer to see them behind bars than close to Barry, while the Rogues would prefer for the old Flash just to piss off again.

They have reasons to be wary of each other, and it will probably still take a while before they can start to look past their differences for Barry’s sake if ever.

It is still painful for Jay that Barry considers someone like the Rogues as his friends and will rather turn to them for help than him. He made it very clear that he will come after them with a vengeance if they decide to hurt Barry, not that he has to worry about that. It certainly didn't help to smooth things over between him and the Rogues, though. He means well, but he still knows so little about Barry and their relationship, or how important they are to him and why.

Sam is seriously one of my favorite Rogues; he so doesn't give a damn most of the time.

I'm thinking about posting the parts I've cut from Singularity separately since we've reached the part where I initially wrote more than I can use now, and I'm not happy about seeing that go to waste. Some of the writing is comparatively crude to how I write now, tho, and while I would go over to correct grammatical issues and such, I would not rewrite those sections as a whole. If you're interested, let me know.

Next chapter will be on the longer side again since I'm not able to split it without ruining the flow, it is also a big one for Barry and Len, so I'm looking forward to posting it! :D

Thank you all for the feedback you left me on the last chapter, and in general, your comments made these holidays even better for me! :) I hope you all had a great couple of weeks, whether you celebrated something or not! 2018 is here, and I hope it will be a good one.

See you in two weeks!
The Warmth of Someone Who Cares

Chapter Summary

Len pays Barry a surprise visit; they have Dim Sum, and things go from there.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my amazing beat Quintessennza and it is so much better for it! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Barry is dozing on his couch with a Mark Twain novel he borrowed from Marco resting on his chest. He is not exactly napping but merely lazing around, enjoying a calm, rainy Monday afternoon for once.

The faint smell of lavender is in the air, filling the whole room, originating from the candle Hartley got him as a present when he officially started at the Saloon. It is a pleasant scent, soothing, and Barry has already decided that he will purchase another one of that kind as soon as this one burns out, he just has to ask Hartley where he bought it.

Or maybe, he could order it on the Internet, as Bart suggested to him when they talked over the phone the other day.

The boy sounded quite indignant when Barry told him that he hadn’t used Amazon before, and he tried to convince him to change that as soon as possible.

“You can order anything there,” Bart assured him, excitedly, and Barry listened with amused fondness when the kid started to list all the pros of getting your things online instead of going to an actual store.

Barry yawns and flinches when he feels a faint pain shoot through his jaw joints. Frowning, he reaches up and rubs them.

It seems the improvement of his joints was only temporary since the dull aching started to return to his body a while ago. Thankfully not to such an extent as before he-

Barry grimaces and pushes that thought away.

He closes his eyes and listens to the sound of rain pattering against his kitchen window.

It’s nice, having some time to just lazy around on his couch with nothing urgent needing his immediate attention.

Tomorrow, he will open an account at a credit union; something James urged him to do after his friend learned that he stashes his savings at home. Initially, Barry protested, not liking the idea since
he would have to provide his status as a felon and probably have to talk with an attendee in more detail about it. James convinced him, that he wouldn’t have to worry about them asking anything too personal and that it would be a much more sensible thing to do since he isn’t exactly living in an area with a low break and entering rate.

The prospect of going there still causes Barry some unease, but he knows that his friend is right. Keeping his savings hidden in a box in the back of his sock drawer is probably not the most prudent thing to do, especially now that he can put aside more than five dollars at a time.

Barry feels a smile tug on his lips as he thinks of the fact that he has an income again that doesn’t only barely cover the most fundamental things but allows him to live comfortably. He doesn’t need much, other than for his rent, food, and buying a new sketchbook and other drawing utensils every once in a while. Because of that, he saved up nearly 400 dollars in the last two months alone, and it is ridiculously liberating not to have to count every penny and continuously worry whether he will have enough money left for food at the end of the month.

Rubbing his eyes, Barry yawns again but is more careful this time around to not upset his jaw.

His stomach grumbles softly, reminding him that he hasn’t had lunch yet, and the apple he ate for breakfast after getting up close to one p.m. wasn’t very filling in the first place.

Glancing back to his living room clock, he notices that it’s already past four, and he considers the idea of preparing himself a snack. He feels too groggy to cook, so a sandwich would have to do, which is fine, but the notion of leaving the couch isn’t very alluring.

Barry decides to wait for a little and maybe nap for an hour or so since the last night was crazy at the saloon, and he still feels exhausted despite getting nearly seven hours of sleep.

He picks up the book that is resting on his chest, closes it, and puts in on his couch table before rolling onto his side.

His limbs feel heavy, as does his mind, and he can feel how he starts to drift off.

The message notification sound of his phone cuts through the otherwise calm air and startles him back into full consciousness.

Blinking, he sits up with a soft sigh, and reaches for the small device, wondering who could have written him.

It’s from Len, reading “You’re up for some Dim Sum?”.

He smiles, leaning back into the cushion of his couch, and replies with a “Sounds good”.

After sending the short message, Barry gets up and makes his way over to his kitchenette to prepare some coffee for Len and tea for himself.

It’s just when he turns the electric kettle on that he hears his bedroom door open.

Barry smiles, amused; it seems that Len already got the Dim Sum before sending him the text.

Len appears a moment later in the doorway leading into the living area, wearing a plain grey shirt and dark jeans, a relaxed but somewhat tired looking expression on his face, and Barry is reminded once more that something is bothering his friend.

Something Len is unwilling to share with him, probably because he doesn’t want to worry him, and
Barry isn’t sure whether it is more frustrating or annoying that Len is so very convinced at times that he has to treat him like fine china.

The weariness seems to ease away from Len’s eyes the moment they spot him, a warm fondness taking its place instead, and Barry feels how his mood lifts in response, pushing away any uncomfortable thoughts, for now.

“Hi,” Len greets him, a smile tugging at his lips as he makes his way over to the kitchen table to put down the white plastic bag with the take-out.

“H-Hi, y-yours-self,” Barry replies, feeling a pleasant fluttering sensation settle in his stomach, and it is nearly as if an invisible force is tugging at him, urging him to step closer to Len who has stopped next to the table. He is hardly more than four feet away from Barry thanks to the small space between his kitchenette and the kitchen table, but even that seems too far, and Barry feels his cheeks grow warm as he realizes how silly he is behaving.

Like a love-struck teenager, he guesses, only he has never been one.

It’s similar to how he felt about Iris, but different all the same.

“You’ve not eaten yet, have you?” Len asks, and Barry shakes his head, inching a little closer to him.

“I-I w-was g-going t-to m-make m-mys-something a-after a-a n-nap,” Barry explains.

“I could have passed by later,” Len remarks, slightly frowning since he doesn’t seem to like the thought that he kept Barry from resting.

“I-It’s f-fine,” Barry assures him, and he means it. It would have been nice to doze for a little longer, but if he could pick between napping on his couch and having Len over, he will certainly go for the latter.

Barry makes his way over to the little cabinet placed next to his kitchen window and picks up two plates for their upcoming meal.

“Y-You h-have p-perf-fect t-timing, b-by th-the w-way,” Barry informs Len, shooting him a warm look. “I-I w-was j-just s-start-ting t-to g-get h-hungry.”

“Perfect timing is part of the job,” Len replies, amused, and starts to unpack the takeout he got them.

“You a-are g-good a-at t-time m-managm-ment,” Barry agrees readily, smiling, as he picks up the electric kettle and pours the boiling water over the ground coffee. The aromatic smell starts to fill the area around the kitchenette a moment later, adding another comforting quality to the pleasant mood that has settled over them.

“And you are good at making excellent coffee,” Len says as he steps closer to Barry so that he ends up standing behind him, glancing over his shoulder to the freshly brewed can of the warm beverage.

“I-I d-do h-have m-my s-strengths.” Barry chuckles and feels his cheeks grow hot because Len is close enough that he thinks he can sense the warmth radiating from him.

Len hums in agreement, causing a shiver to run through Barry’s body since the other man’s breath touches the side of his throat.

Barry grows still. His Adam’s apple slightly bops as he swallows, suddenly feeling apprehensive,
nearly scared of this unexpected intimacy. Then, he reminds himself that there is no reason to be afraid, and after exhaling a shaky breath, he forces himself to relax, though his heart keeps beating like crazy against his ribs.

They stay like this, and Barry waits, not sure for what, but a part of him, the one that is more curious than frightened, wants to see where this is going. Len usually is very mindful when it comes to initiating any contact and keeping space between them to make him feel safe.

A strong, big hand cups his right hip then, and Barry is glad he put the kettle aside because he is sure he would have spilled hot water all over his kitchenette otherwise with how the touch startled him.

The hand vanishes immediately, and Barry whirls around, his heart throbbing against his throat, eyes wide. He is pressing back against the edge of the counter, and while the rational side of him knows that there is no reason to panic, memories of situations very similar to this one flood his mind, not a single one ending well for him.

Len is meeting his gaze with a frown, though he doesn’t look angry, nor does he sound it as he apologizes in a low, soothing voice, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Barry swallows, his voice gone temporarily, and breathing becomes easier when Len makes a step back and gives him some additional space.

It takes Barry a minute, but, eventually, his heart starts to calm down, and the tension eases from his limbs. He shivers once more, and suddenly he feels like such a fool, enough so that he lowers his eyes to the ground and grimaces unhappily.

“Y-You c-caught m-me o-off-g-guard,” Barry murmurs, his cheeks still uncomfortably hot.

“I know,” Len agrees, quietly, and Barry feels a familiar, unwelcome guilt settle over him because Len should not feel bad about this. Barry wants contact, he was curious about what Len would do, but he overestimated his ability to deal with it.

“I-I’m s-sor-ry…”

“Don’t be,” Len tells him, before he asks, “Can I touch you?”

Barry glances up at him, unsure how well such contact will go over right now, but before his worry can get the upper hand, he nods.

Slowly, Len steps closer, and Barry watches him a little uneasily as he lifts his hands to either side of his hips.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Len reminds him, earnestly. “I’d never do that.”

The hands feel heavy, big, and strong as they settle on Barry’s hips. It is an odd feeling, frightening but grounding at the same time, and Barry focuses on breathing, on reminding himself who he is with now. Someone he can trust.

Len.

“I-I kn-know.” Barry licks his lips nervously and hesitantly cups Len’s hands with his own, shivering at the contact. He meets Len’s eyes and isn’t surprised to find his friend studying him tentatively, carefully as if to make sure that he isn’t overstepping another boundary by accident.

It is reassuring, seeing how serious Len is about it, how important this seems to be to him as well.
The thumbs that have been resting on the top of his hipbones start to move in small, soothing circles, and Barry jumps lightly in response.

Len makes a soft, soothing noise, and Barry holds still, afraid of spoiling this moment and things going south.

“You can tell me to back off if you don’t like something I do,” Len reminds him, apparently sensing his thoughts, and his thumbs still. “I don’t want you to let me touch you if you don’t like it.”

The uncertainty and nervousness are briefly pushed aside by annoyance, and Barry shoots Len a somewhat offended look. “I-I kn-know th-that, and I-I w-wouldn’t l-let y-you t-touch m-me i-if I-I d-didn’t l-like it.”

Their relationship is much too important to Barry, for him to let it be ruined in such a devastating way. Not that he believes that Len would ever try and pressure him like that, knowingly or unknowingly.

“Good.” Len nods, his expression serious, and the relief Barry can make out in his eyes is reassuring and helps him to relax once more.

Barry smiles slightly and squeezes Len’s hands. “I-I t-trust y-you, L-Lenny, e-even i-if I-I d-don’t a-alw-a-ways act l-like it.”

The tension that has settled over Len’s shoulders eases away somewhat, and the way he studies Barry, with warmth and fondness, is comforting and makes his closeness no longer feel like it is nearly too much for him, but something Barry wants to seek out.

Len steps closer, leaving only about an inch between their bodies, and Barry watches him a little nervously but doesn’t move or protest.

“It means a lot to me,” Len tells him as he locks eyes with him. “I’ll make sure to deserve it.” He leans in a little closer, and Barry holds his breath as he feels his partner’s lips touch his cheek lightly, briefly. When Len goes on, Barry can feel his warm breath on his skin. “I know this isn’t easy for you.” He kisses him again, just a soft graze of lips. “Thank you.”

Barry swallows and closes his eyes that are itching traitorously. His hands move, from cupping Len’s, to the other man’s back, and with a soft exhale, he leans into him, his cheek resting on the firm shoulder.

It is nice, being so close to Len, not only on a physical level but an emotional one as well, and Barry welcomes it wholeheartedly. It seems like it has been forever since he felt like this, this kind of connection to another person. Briefly, he is reminded of Iris and how things between them used to be before their closeness was replaced by distance, and their eagerness to be together by what he always thought must have been cold, wordless blame for his inability to be a real husband.

Exhaling softly, Barry presses his palms flat against Len’s back, pulling himself closer to him, and he dismisses that faint, sad memory. Instead, he focuses on the firm, warm presence of his friend. His partner.

A slight shiver runs down his back, followed by goosebumps when Barry feels Len’s lips touch the back of his head, though there is nothing sexual about it. It’s only a gesture that shows that Len cares, and Barry wishes he could get somehow even closer to him. He knows he is safe like this, in the other man’s arms, and he wants to be safe, much more than anything else, he wants to know that nothing will happen to him again.
He wishes they could stay like this forever.

It is a silly thought, Len won’t – *can’t* – always be close-by, nor will Len be able to protect him from every potential threat either. Barry has learned many times in the past, that some things, horrible things, can’t be stopped from happening, no matter how much you fight or hope, or pray.

That is neither here nor there, though. Right now, in Len’s arms, he is safe, and he will take it, even if it can’t last.

Len brushes his lips against the back of Barry’s head once more before pressing a firm kiss against it. When he pulls back, he asks, “What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing,” Barry murmurs, eyes still closed. “I just like being close to you.”

Len chuckles in response, sounding amused, pleased, and fond all at once, and Barry feels himself smile in return.

“I like that, too,” Len agrees as he rubs Barry’s back affectionately.

Barry hums, and he doesn’t question why Len’s words make him feel so giddy and happy even though he already knew that his friend likes his company. Being told so is still different, he guesses.

Another minute ticks by, before Len’s hand comes to rest on Barry’s neck, and he gives it a slight squeeze. “Do you want to move this to the couch?”

The words cause Barry’s stomach to flip, and even though he is sure that Len doesn’t mean to insinuate anything with his question, an odd mixture of fear and excitement overcomes him all the same.

Len, of course, takes note of it, probably due to how he has tensed up.

“Not the best choice of words, hm?” Len asks, loosening his embrace, and Barry doesn’t need to face him to know that he is grimacing.

“N-No, it’s f-fine,” Barry assures him and pulls back so that he can face his friend. He gives him a slightly embarrassed smile as he goes on, “I-I th-think we sh-should e-eat th-th dumplings i-if w-we w-want th-them t-to b-be s-still w-warm.”

Len seems a little disappointed at that suggestion, which causes the butterflies in Barry’s stomach to return, but he doesn’t argue.

While Barry finishes the coffee, which he hopes won’t be too strong due how long he let it brew, Len grabs a couple of plates and starts to distribute the different kinds of Dim-Sum he brought along evenly on them.

“Y-You’ve t-to b-be h-hungrier th-than y-you l-let on,” Barry remarks amused as he hands Len his cup of coffee while he eyes the number of dumplings that are now resting on both plates. It has to be at least twelve, and while they aren’t that big and he hasn’t eaten lunch so far, he is pretty sure he won’t be able to eat all of them.

“I didn’t know which one you’d like.” Len shrugs.

Barry smiles, and, feeling unusually brave, he cups Len’s neck fondly while he meets his eyes. “S-So y-you d-decided t-to b-buy h-half of th-th s-sortim-ment?”
“On the off chance that you find something you like?” Len smirks and grabs Barry’s hand by its wrist so that he can pull it closer and press a kiss against its palm. He seems quite satisfied by the surprised little gasp he gets in return, as Barry can feel him smile against his skin. Len’s eyes are dark and earnest when he locks them with his. “Sure.”

Ducking his head, Barry blushes deeply, and he isn’t sure how to reply other than for a soft Oh.

Len chuckles, warmly and with plain affection as he lets Barry’s hand go.

“I hope I got some you'll enjoy,” Len remarks as Barry sits down next to him. “I never had them before, and I just picked the ones that sounded interesting.”

“Wh-Where d-did y-you g-get th-them f-from?” Barry asks, his cheeks still warm, as he looks over the number of different looking dumplings.

“A small place in Chinatown Lisa recommended to me,” Len explains while he breaks the wooden set of cheap chopsticks apart that come with the food.

Barry arches his eyebrows at that in surprise. “Ch-Chinat-town a-as in N-New Y-York?”

“Yeah,” Len agrees and shoots him an amused look. “You do remember that traveling around the country doesn’t take much time when Sam decides to get his lazy ass up once in a while.”

“S-Sam t-took y-you t-to N-New Y-York t-to g-get t-take-out?” That seemed a little far-fetched, considering how strongly Sam usually opposes to be used as a way of transportation when it is not heist-related.

Well, that and getting them to the Saloon, but, even then, their friend is quick to remind the rest of them how bothersome it is for him to do so.

Len shrugs and picks up one of the dumplings. “He seems to be in a generous mood.”

“R-Really?” Barry has trouble believing that and is not at all surprised about what the other man says next.

“Yeah, he usually gets very agreeable when I catch him trying to screw me over at a game,” Len explains, and he looks quite satisfied with himself there for a moment. Whether it is due to having been able to prove that Sam cheated or that he has the other man do his bidding for a while, Barry isn’t sure.

“Y-You c-caught h-him?” Barry can’t help but sound a little surprised since everybody knows that Sam is cheating all the time, but it is hard to find any proof for it thanks to the techniques he uses.

“Idiot got reckless, and Hartley spotted his cards in the reflection of Sam’s glass.” Len snorts as a rather annoyed expression lies over his face. “He was sitting right next to that dumbass, so why Scudder didn’t choose to cheat like any normal person is beyond me.”

“H-How d-did h-he ch-cheat?” Barry asks, curious, since, while he knows that Sam always pulls it off to know what the hands of his co-players look like somehow, he has no idea how he does it.

There are mirrors somehow involved, or at least reflective surfaces, Barry is sure, since he has seen brief glimpses of such reflections himself, but to get those, Sam needs to have something to reflect the cards of the others in the first place, which seemed impossible in many of those cases. None of the Rogues carry necklaces with mirrors around, after all.
“Don’t know.” Len shrugs, but the way the corners of his lips turn down momentarily, tells Barry that he seems to have an inkling.

For a moment, Barry thinks about probing some more, but he has the feeling that this will put a damper on the other man’s mood that has been very good so far, so he lets it slip.

Instead, he breaks his chopsticks and picks up one of the dumplings, studying it curiously. He wishes he had some soy sauce at home, but Eddy borrowed his a few days back when the other man planned to binge on a stack of microwaveable spring rolls he got from who knows where. By now, Barry is pretty confident that he won’t get it back, something, he should have foreseen.

Taking a bite, he hums in pleasure, as his mouth is flooded with the subtle but delicious taste of shrimp. The dumpling is gone with the next mouthful, and he is not surprised when he glances over to Len to find him looking quite smug.

“You like it?” Len asks though it is evident that he already knows the answer.

Barry still nods readily, and he means it when he says, “Th-That one w-was am-mazing.”

Len picks the dumpling from his plate, which looks like the one Barry just ate and tries it. “It’s good,” he agrees, but adds a moment later, after eating the rest of it, “A little bland, but good. Do you have any soy sauce?”

“No, I r-run o-out of i-it.” Asking Eddie whether he still has some of the soy sauce left is out of the question as his friend isn’t home, and Barry briefly wonders whether he should try his luck with Mary, that is until he remembers that she is still in Europe.

A faint sadness clings to that realization, and Barry picks up another dumpling to try so that he could distract himself from the still ongoing absence of his friend.

“Tabasco?” Len’s inquiry causes Barry to pause for a second, the sad thoughts gone, and he shoots him an incredulous look.


“Th-That’s…” Barry can’t help but make a face of disgust at that. “N-No… j-just n-no.”

Len laughs outright, finding his reaction funny, which Barry can’t hold against him, seeing that he knows that he probably is somewhat of a food-snob. At least, when it comes to adding Tabasco to the food, it doesn’t go with.

“So, you’ll deny me adding any flavor to this?” Len’s grin is all teeth. “Just so you don’t feel uncomfortable?”

This time it’s Barry who huffs a laugh and shoots his partner an amused look. “I-I’m n-not unc-com-fortable b-by y-your l-lack o-of t-taste, j-just s-somewh-what r-repulsed.”

“Such harsh words.” Len rumbles, enjoying their little banter.

Barry rolls his eyes, smiling, and finally takes a bite of the dumpling he picked up earlier.

This one seems to be with pork filling and tastes just as good as the one before. It is also a little spicier, so Barry offers the other half to Len. “Y-You’ll l-like th-this one.”

Len briefly appears surprised, but the amused fondness in his hazel eyes stays as he takes the bite.
It is oddly pleasing to watch him do so, and Barry feels anew that sense of homeliness he hasn’t known in a long time, something that has started to sneak back into his life again these days whenever he and Len shared an intimate moment like this one.

Barry always wanted this, a partner, someone he can share his everyday life with, enjoy the mundanity of it all, far away from the awfulness he has been introduced to from a young age.

“It’s good,” Len agrees, causing Barry’s smile to return, but adds after a second, “It would still be better with some tabasco.”

Barry chuckles, rolling his eyes, and concludes, “Y-You’ve th-the w-worst s-sense of t-taste.”

“I don’t, I just like my food a little spicier,” Len disagrees and picks up another one of his dumplings and offers it to Barry.

They pretty much end up feeding the dish to each other, debating which kind of the Dim Sum tastes the best, and which would indeed benefit from some soy sauce to spice up the flavor. Barry, of course, thinks that all of them are fine by themselves, but Len keeps insisting that they do lack somewhat in taste.

It is a lovely, funny little endeavor, and Barry enjoys how relaxed and playful the whole thing feels, and how close it makes him feel to his partner, to a degree they only allow themselves to experience when they are alone.

Eight dumplings in, Barry calls it quits, since he doesn’t want the pleasant feeling of fullness to become uncomfortable, and Len finishes off the rest.

After Barry rinsed off the plates, they move on to the couch with their, by now cold, cups of coffee.

“I sh-should h-have m-made t-tea,” Barry remarks, grimacing slightly after taking a sip of the bitter beverage. “I-It w-would h-have g-gone n-nicer w-with th-the f-food.”

“Coffee is fine,” Len disagrees. “It only sucks because it’s cold.” He throws a glance over his shoulder to the small kitchenette, frowning. “You need a microwave, that’s all.”

“I-I c-can w-warm i-it u-up on th-the s-stove if y-you w-want,” Barry offers.

“It would go easier with a microwave,” Len points out, causing Barry to shoot him a slightly miffed look, since this is not a new topic for them to discuss, seeing that his friend has tried to convince him to get a microwave for a while now.

“I-I d-don’t n-need a m-microw-wave t-to h-heat th-things up.”

“You don’t, but it would be a hell lot more convenient if you had one.”

“Th-They are e-exp-pensive,” Barry reminds Len, “and wh-where a-am I s-sup-posed t-to p-put it a-anyw-way? M-My k-kitch-chen d-doesn’t of-fer a-a l-lot of e-extra s-space f-for s-someth-thing l-like th-that.”

“I could fix you a rack next to your stove,” Len offers. “There’s enough space for it.”

“M-Maybe,” Barry concedes, though he still doesn’t see why he would need a microwave in the first place. Things can be heated up on a stove just fine.

“You never owned a microwave?” Len suddenly asked out of the blue, causing Barry to turn to him
in surprise since this is a somewhat unusual question for him to ask.

They don’t talk about their lives before Barry started to become a part of the patchwork family the Rogues are made of, other than for small glimpses either of them is willing to share. This is new, though, and while it is an innocent enough question, it doesn’t sit well with Barry.

“O-of c-course I-I d-did.” Barry shifts and pulls his legs up, so that he can sling his free arm around them, making himself feel more at ease. He hesitates for a long moment, unsure whether he wants to elaborate or not. Len doesn’t pressure him, and, eventually, Barry exhales softly and goes on, “I-It… i-it w-was m-more c-conv-venient, b-bec-cause w-we… I-I-r-ris a-and I-I, w-we b-both w-w-wor-rked.” He shivers as goose bumps spread up his arms and neck, and he keeps his eyes focused on the cup in his hand.

“You didn’t cook?” Len sounds honestly surprised, which causes Barry to smile slightly and meet his gaze with an amused look.

“N-No, I-I d-didn’t h-have m-much f-free t-time t-to, b-back th-then.” Barry shrugs and moves slightly so that his body angles towards the man sitting next to him. He hesitates another moment, before he adds, “W-Work k-kept m-me b-busy m-most of th-the t-time.”

“I can imagine,” Len agrees, surprising Barry with how calm and nonchalant he sounds about it. There is even a playfulness to the way he goes on, “Having to go after brilliant and good-looking supervillains all the time must have been quite taxing on you.”

Barry is so caught off-guard by the statement that he ends up speechless, staring at Len with a slightly agape mouth, which causes his partner to grin smugly.

“I’ve heard that especially that Captain Cold fellow is quite a formidable criminal to watch out for,” Len points out and shrugs. “He supposedly even gave the Flash a hard time to keep up.”

The turn of direction in their conversation has taken is unexpected, to say the least, and the absurdity of the statement is enough to startle a laugh out of Barry. The uneasy coiled up ball of fear and worry that momentarily settled into the pit of his stomach eases away and is replaced by relief and amusement, though he still feels insecure about the sudden change in how they treat their shared past. Despite starting to feel relaxed once more, Barry needs a couple of seconds to regain his ability to speak, and he is glad that Len patiently waits for him to get there.

“I-I’m s-s-sure th-the F-Flash h-had n-no p-p-prob-b-blem d-dealing w-with a-any o-of h-his R-Rogues,” Barry argues, and while he is smiling slightly, he is attentively watching Len, careful to spot any sign that the other man’s mood could change for the worse over this.

“And I’m sure that you’ve never actually seen any of the Rogues’ run-ins with the speedster because that’s total bull,” Len claims, smirking. “The Rogues took it easy on that guy, that’s the only reason he was able to catch them, to begin with.”

“I-I th-think w-we m-must b-be t-t-talk-king ab-about t-two d-diifferent R-Rogues, h-here.” Barry grins. “A-And i-if th-there w-was s-someone wh-who t-took i-it e-easy on a-anyb-body, i-it w-was th-th-the F-Flash o-on th-them.”

“In his dreams maybe,” Len snarks, still relaxed, and still very obviously in a good mood. He moves so that his side is resting against the back of the couch with an arm slung over it, and he is facing Barry. “Since we can’t ask either, we’ll have to agree to disagree.”

Barry chuckles, ducking his head a little, so he is hiding the lower part of his face behind his knees,
and murmurs, “I-It s-seems s-so.”

This is odd, nearly bizarre, but not terrifying, not like Barry imagined it would be should they ever breach the topic of their past. Len is joking around, of course, but still, it is a relief that he can do so in the first place, and while he told Barry several times by now that he is not holding his past as the Flash against him, it has always been hard for him to believe so.

Silence settles between them, as they both go after their thoughts for a short while.

“We did keep you busy most of the time.” Len’s word startle Barry, and he looks up, meeting the other man’s eyes, that seem more somber and thoughtful than earlier.

It’s not a question, and Barry isn’t sure how to respond so that he ends up shrugging slightly. “I-I ch-chose m-my j-job a-and… y-you kn-know.”

Len hums, silently agreeing, and they both are aware that it isn’t either of their faults for how things turned out between Barry and Iris, or for how Barry’s life did in general.

At least, Barry knows that it isn’t on Len or the others.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you.” Len sounds earnest, and Barry doesn’t doubt him, but what he says next surprises him. “I’m sorry for how things were between us back then.”

There have been many times, especially over the last year, when Barry imagined things going differently. Sometimes, when he can’t fall asleep at night, he thinks about it, about how things could have been if he had had more time for Iris and Wally or hadn’t become the Flash in the first place.

Or how things could have been if he had met Len earlier and under different circumstances.

It is a hard thing to think about, something he doesn’t like to ponder over, since what if’s never get him anywhere. A part of him yearns for that alternative reality where Len and he could have led a happy, mundane life together, though, with regular jobs and dreams, like ordinary people. He doesn’t often indulge in that kind of thinking, though, not with how guilty it makes him feel. A life like that would have meant that he couldn’t have had a life with Iris, after all, and even now, years after her death, he feels like he is betraying her in some way when doing so.

“W-We c-can’t ch-change th-the p-past,” Barry points out, quietly, and reaches for Len’s hand. “W-We c-can o-only l-live i-in th-the n-now, and t-try t-to m-make th-the b-best of i-it.”

Len watches him, expression still dark, as he grasps Barry’s hand in return and holds it firmly.

“I want there to be a future for us,” Len says, voice low and earnest, and Barry finds himself at a loss for words again. Len doesn’t seem to mind as he lifts Barry’s hand to his lips and kisses his knuckles lightly.

“I want to be brave enough to face this future with you.” Len’s words are soft-spoken, and he sounds nearly wistful as he says them.

“L-Len…” Barry’s eyes, which are locked with Len’s, start to burn as he tears up, and the love and affection he feels for him are grounding, soothing, and painful all at once. He can understand just too clearly what his friend is talking about, the hope and fear that accompanies the mere idea of a relationship between them.

A relationship that has come true, by now, something, Barry is confident, neither of them ever thought possible.
Len’s hand lets go of Barry’s wrist and moves up his arm to his shoulder, around his back.

“I never thought I’d…” Len breaks off, hesitates, his hand resting warm and firm between Barry’s shoulder blades. He studies Barry’s face quietly for a long minute like he is searching for something. It causes Barry to tense up, since he doesn’t know what Len is looking for, and he doesn’t want him to break this delicate moment because he can’t find it.

“Barry,” Len starts again as his eyes lock with Barry’s once more, “I get that things between us will be different than with other couples and that there are things that we just can’t do.”

Barry averts his gaze, looking down at his lap with an unhappy frown, because his shortcomings appear nearly blindingly glaring to him just now, especially with how he wishes so badly he could be ready to give Len what he wants.

What he needs.

The same thing Iris needed, and like with Len, Barry was unable to provide her with it.

Because he is a broken shell of a man, who couldn't even get it up to save his marriage-

“It doesn’t matter,” Len tells him firmly and cups Barry’s face with his free hand, urging him lightly to look back at him. “I don’t want a… a relationship with you just to get sex from it. If that were all I wanted, I’d hire-” Again, Len stops, but this time a pained expression flickers across his face before he shoots Barry a worried look.

While Barry understands the pain that his partner experienced from bringing up something that likely reminds him of Izzy, he does not understand the concern with which he is watching him now.

The confusion goes away, when Len proceeds, “I’m not going to do that again.”

It is an assurance Barry did not anticipate.

It is one he wasn’t hoping for, anyway, because why would he expect Len to just give up on sex?

In all honesty, Barry doesn’t even think that something like that is possible. Ordinary people have sex; it is only natural. Iris left him…

No, that would be unfair towards her to simplify the reason for their failed marriage like that. Iris did not just go because he couldn’t give her satisfaction in bed or a child. It started with it, maybe, but he was unable to be there for her on top of everything else.

Secrets like his past of abuse make it difficult to connect to a person, which is something he only started to understand when the gap between them was already too wide to undo.

Iris loved him, till he forced her to let go of those feelings because he was unable to open up to her all the way.

Could it be different with Len?

Len is aware of the things that were done to him in his past, and while he doesn’t know much, especially about his childhood and teenage years, he is aware of the abuse in general.

Contrary to Iris, Len is a man, though, and while a logical part of Barry knows that it is an utterly nonsensical fear, he worries that his friend could end up hating him for not giving him the physical pleasure he has enjoyed a lot so far. His experience as a victim of rape distorted his view of what is
normal for men when it comes to sex since all his abusers were men, and there were so many of them.

Barry hates the notion. He feels ashamed for believing it in the first place as it is insulting to men in general, but a small part in him fears that Len would just not be able to live without having a partner who can satisfy him on such a fundamental level, no matter what his good intentions currently are.

And what would happen if Len grew frustrated over Barry’s lacking? What if he became fed up with him? Would he just leave him and look for someone more suitable? Someone normal?

Or would he become violent?

“Barry?” Len’s voice cuts through the thick veil of doubt and apprehension, and Barry realizes that he has started to cry when he focuses back on him and notices his blurry sight.

A shiver runs down Barry’s spine, and he quickly lowers his gaze, rubbing his hand over his eyes as his cheeks heat up in embarrassment.

“S-Sorry…” Barry murmurs, feeling stupid for letting his own emotions overthrow him.

Len is watching him silently, and Barry doesn’t need to look back at his partner to know that his reaction worries him. His concern is more than palpable.

“I-I’m f-f-fine,” Barry assures him, even though he doesn’t feel fine.

He feels scared.

He doesn’t want Len to get angry with him because they can’t have sex, and he knows what a stupid fear that is, in the first place, but that doesn’t stop it in its intensity.

They are already together, Barry tries to remind himself, and Len hasn’t had a problem with him so far. He even got him the ring and took him out to a romantic dinner. They watched an ice-hockey game and had a moonlight picnic, and Len came up with all of that, something he would not have done if he only wanted him physically.

They’ve been dating, even if neither of them has given it a name so far, and Barry knows that they are both aware of it.

Why, then, does he feel so intimidated and frightened by Len telling him so outright?

He doesn’t want to be scared of this!

This is something good, and good things hardly ever happen to him!

Barry grits his teeth and covers his eyes with his hand, fighting against a sob that tries to fight his way out of him.

He doesn’t want to lose this…

“Hey,” Len speaks in a low, comforting tone, “everything is alright, you’re okay.”

Barry whimpers when he feels how the hand on his back starts to urge him to move closer to the other man lightly, and the pressure immediately stops. Instead, the hand begins to rub his back soothingly, causing the tension that briefly settled over Barry to slowly ease away.

Hearing that, causes Barry to feel utterly miserable for how he was worried about just that not even a minute ago, despite him knowing better. Even without Len’s reassurance, he knows that he will never hurt him.

“I-I’m s-s-s-o-r-r-y…” Barry sobs, squeezing his eyes shut and hides his face in both of his hands as he bends over slightly, too ashamed to face Len.

He doesn’t understand why he is so miserable all of a sudden, but he is sorry that Len has to deal with him right now, seeing that his friend has been nothing but fantastic so far, and he doesn’t deserve to put up with his unexpected break-down.

Len makes a soft, soothing noise, and keeps rubbing his back, waiting for Barry to calm down.

They stay like this for a long while, Barry crying quietly, fighting to regain some control over his tumbling emotions while trying not to be squashed by the misery that has overcome him with an intensity he hasn’t experienced in a while. Len stays with him patiently during all of it, a silent but comforting presence that helps him to stay focused on the present and not let himself get lost in his mind.

Eventually, the tears stop, and the feeling of being overwhelmed and scared backs off, which leaves Barry with a weary heaviness clinging to him.

Shivering, Barry lets one hand drop into his lap while he rubs the other one over his face, knowing already that it’s probably a mess since his eyes feel swollen and sting lightly, and his nose is blocked as if he had a cold.

Len moves next to him, and the contact between them vanishes, causing Barry to make a small, involuntary noise of protest. His cheeks heat up when he realizes how needy he must sound, and what a ridiculous picture as a whole he must make.

Despite his embarrassment, he is grateful when Len’s hand returns a moment later, cupping his neck.

“Here,” Len says, and Barry glances up, spotting the tissue he is offered. He accepts it with a small nod and bows his head as he wipes his face before blowing his nose.

His head is starting to ache, but he already feels a little better.

“Th-Thanks.” His voice sounds hoarse as he speaks, and a part of him wishes he could just ask Len to leave and hide away in his bedroom for the rest of the day.

Instead, Barry swallows, takes a deep breath, and straightens back up, flinching slightly as this causes a pang behind his right temple.

Somewhat reluctantly, he lifts his eyes and meets Len’s, who is watching him with a calm expression, though Barry can make out his worry by how firmly his lips are pressed together and the tensed line of his shoulders.

“I-I…” Barry shifts nervously, glancing to the side before forcing his gaze back to face the other man. “I-I’m s-s-o-r-r-y, I-I… m-my r-r-e-a-c-t-ion h-h-as n-no-thing t-to d-d-o w-w-with…” He grimaces unhappily, not sure how to express that it is not Len’s fault that he just broke down again.

“Was it because of Izzy?” Len asks him, sounding slightly gruff, but there is visible guilt in his eyes.

“N-No,” Barry assures him and rubs his eyes as he exhales a tired sigh. Izzy is dead, and her memory doesn’t trouble him any more. He visits her grave sporadically to bring her flowers, and it is
not an act that causes him grief. In a way, it is even a somewhat calming experience, being at the woman’s grave he never really got to know, amid the silence and tranquility that comes with cemeteries.

“You think I lie about not hiring prostitutes again,” Len says decidedly, not a question this time, and Barry can’t outright deny that he finds that promise hard to believe.

“Th-That’s n-not wh-why…” Barry frowns unhappily, unsure how to convey that this is part of the problem, but not the problem itself. He isn’t even sure whether he wants to let Len know what he is afraid of because of how messed up he is.

“I won’t do it,” Len insists, looking a little disgruntled by Barry doubting him there, but not angry. “I’m able to be in a relationship without sex and still be faithful.”

“Y-You’re u-used t-to s-sex,” Barry points out, quietly. “Y-You l-like i-it, a-and I-I…” He huffs an unhappy laugh and turns his head, so he is facing his couch table. “I-I w-want u-us t-to… I-I w-want t-to b-be w-with y-you l-like th-that, b-but I’ll p-prob-bably n-never b-be a-able t-to s-sleep w-with y-you… a-and y-you’ll g-get f-fed u-up w-w-with m-me e-ev-ventual-ly.”

Barry shivers and doesn’t notice how he winds his arms around his chest, unconsciously offering himself some comfort.

“I-I d-don’t w-want y-you t-to l-leave o-or…” Barry licks his lips nervously and shrugs.

“Or what?” Len asks, and he sounds a little on edge now, but it is only just there. He puts effort into staying patient and calm, and when he goes on, any trace of irritation is gone, “You are afraid that I will hurt you?”

Tears return in Barry’s eyes, and he feels himself choke up once more.

“I-I kn-know y-y… y-you w-w-won’t,” Barry assures him as he digs his fingers into his back. “I-I kn-know, b-b-but I-I… th-th-th-th-thoughts j-just c-c-come, a-and I-I kn-know y-you w-w-wou-w-would n-n-never d-do th-th-that, b-b-but…”

Squeezing his eyes shut, a couple of tears start to roll down his cheeks, and Barry lowers his head.

“It’s okay,” Len inches a little closer, Barry can feel it, and he expects the hand that tentatively cups his neck just a moment later. “I get it, and it’s okay.” His thumb starts to draw small, soothing circles, causing Barry to shiver and slightly press into the comforting touch in response. “I won’t hurt you, Barry, ever, and I won’t have sex with prostitutes again.”

Len grabs Barry’s chin with his other hand lightly and tentatively urges him to face him. His eyes are somber when their looks meet, but he looks calm, there is no trace of blame or disappointment anywhere on his face or in the way he holds himself.

“It’s okay if you can’t believe me yet.” Len moves his hand from Barry’s chin to cup his cheek, causing him to shiver in response. “I’ll keep proving it to you till you’re able to.”

Fresh tears run down Barry’s cheeks as he stares at Len, unable to speak, too deeply moved by his promise to be patient and not to give up on him.

To be faithful to him.

To never hurt him.
Barry lifts his hand and grasps Len’s lower arm, giving it a tight squeeze. He closes his eyes and leans forward, till his forehead comes to rest against his partner’s shoulder, while his other arm moves around his back.

“Th-Thank y-you…” Barry’s voice is hardly more than a whisper, and he wishes he could convey the gratitude he feels just then, let Len know how much this means to him. Not only his promise but also his understanding.

“I-I l-love y-you s-so m-much…” Feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, Barry doesn’t immediately pick up on what he just said out loud. Then, he freezes and feels his breath catch in his throat as he realizes what his groggy mind let slip.

There is a moment of pause, Len has grown still too, and Barry, with his heart beating up his throat, waits how he will react to this unplanned confession.

A familiar, nasty voice in the back of his mind starts whispering to him, telling him how he just ruined everything for them, because Len is not the type to settle down, not the kind of guy to exchange _love-yous_ with others-

And Barry pushes against it, angrily tries to get it to shut up, because if Len was not the type to have meaningful relationships, why did he bother with someone like him in the first place? There are so many easier partners to have out there, but he seems to have genuinely chosen him despite his many-

Len loops his arms around Barry’s back and pulls him close, pressing a kiss to his right temple.

“How you too.” Len’s warm breath tickles against Barry’s skin, and he sounds so confident and earnest.

Barry closes his eyes, hardly noticing the hot tears that are still slipping down his cheeks, and marvels over the warmth that has settled over him, stemming from the knowledge of being loved, and the intense love he feels in return for the other man.

For his partner.

His love.

Suddenly, it is as if every nook in his body is illuminated in soft, soothing light, and the sadness and worries from earlier are gone, like a past, long forgotten shadow.

Right now, Barry feels whole, in the arms of the man he loves, and while this sensation could not last forever, he is aware that things have changed once again. This time, he doesn’t look with worry towards what this change could mean for his future, though. Not with Len at his side.

Right now, he is happy.

Chapter End Notes

I truly like this chapter, it was pleasant to write, quite easy, actually, as if both Len and Barry knew where I was going and wanted to get there. ;)

To be honest, I did not plan for both of them to finally touch upon the L word, but it is usually like that when I write, I have a vague idea of what I want to have in the chapter,
the rest the character decide. I'm happy that they finally gave their feelings a nice, they both knew for a while now what the other means to them, but for various reasons, they shied away from addressing it outright. Now they have, and it can only be beneficial for them.

We have a very nice example of miscommunication in this chapter, as well. Len believes Barry is upset because of Izzy and his past with seeking out paid sex, something he still feels subconsciously guilty about, while Barry is afraid of what his inability to have sex with Len will lead to eventually. They both focus on their worries while trying to understand each other, which I think is a widespread thing to happen with people in relationships.

This chapter came a little early again, mostly because I'm currently busy with my master's thesis, and I wanna be able to fully concentrate on working on it tomorrow. I still intend for Sunday to stay my regular uploading day, but as the last couple of weeks have shown, it can happen that I post on Saturday as well if it is more convenient for me.

Next chapter will probably be something of a surprise for you guys, and we will have a new POV character which I'm quite excited about. :)

Thank you so much for reading and taking the time to comment, your kind words mean a lot to me, and they help me to stay positive despite things being rather stressful right now. I'm happy I have Singularity, it is a constant in my life, and being able to share it with you is just amazing.

Next chapter will be up in two weeks time, see you then! :)
Bruce knows that spying on Barry is not exactly legal, but he has been operating outside the law for a long time now.

This chapter was edited by my amazing editor Quintessenza, who did a great job as usual, and so many thanks to you my dear friend for finding the time to go over my writings despite how busy your life is keeping you. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I-I l-love y-you s-so m-much...”

“Pause.”

Bruce leans back into the chair and folds his gloved hands, his mouth a line as he replays in his mind what he has just heard.

“What the hell are you doing, Barry?” Bruce asks under his breath into the silence of the Batcave. His grim expression only darkens when he recalls who the blonde was talking to on the recording.

Leonard Snart of all people.

One of the Rogues.

Being knowingly in contact with a mere pocket thief would already be a violation against Barry’s parole requirements, but it has to be the Rogues.

The Flash’s villains.

Barry’s former villains.

Bruce stares at the console in front of him without taking it in and ponders once again on how to act in this situation.

He knows of course what he should do. Make sure that Barry is put back into prison for not only what happened last afternoon, but every single time he interacted with the Rogues in the past two months since Bruce bugged his apartment.

In a way, it feels like Barry is trying to mock them, even though it is a nonsensical notion as Bruce has started to realize by now. Barry is too damn afraid of them and of the possible consequences of
doing something petty like that.

A by now familiar guilt tries to rise in Bruce, but he stomps down on it, not allowing it to surface. At least not yet.

Still, despite how worried Barry is about having to return to Iron Heights – or the Heights as most people who had the actual misfortunate to end up within its walls call it – he keeps in regular contact with the likes of Snart, wanted criminals, people he should avoid.

On top of that, Barry got himself a job at the Saloon, and there is no way for him to play ignorant about what kind of clientele is visiting his new working place. A location the Flash and other heroes still fail to find to this day.

Bruce’s frown deepens as he considers how Wally would react to this if he should learn of it.

There is no doubt in his mind that the young man would not be able to deal rationally with that kind of information. His hatred for his uncle is still so intense that Bruce won’t put it past him to snap over this and try to go after Barry.

This is one messy situation Barry got himself in, and it seems he did so knowingly, with both eyes wide open.

Why, though?

Barry knows the Rogues; he knows who they are and that it would cost him dearly if anybody found out about their little friendship.

Though, it seems to be about more than that, at least in Snart’s case.

All of this shows a reckless side of Barry Bruce is not familiar with, and a part of him wonders how little he really knows the man. He would have never thought that the former Flash could fall for someone from his own rogues’ gallery, while another part, one Bruce would much rather not have to listen to, reminds him that desperate people do a lot of unlikely things to survive.

And there is no doubt in Bruce’s mind that Barry must have been desperate during his time in prison.

Barry’s reaction to Jay bringing up the possibility of him having to go back to Iron Heights when the older man visited him a few days ago did speak of severe trauma.

The footage was hard to watch, and Bruce nearly regrets going to the length to go over the video material after the audio files left it unclear what exactly left Jay distraught enough for him to promise Barry that he would lie to the rest of them to keep his secret safe.

It is not like Bruce is surprised that Jay reacted the way he did, though. The older hero’s stance towards Barry’s guilt has changed quite drastically over the last year, enough so that he has sought out Clark, Diana, and him a couple of times so far to try and convince them to look into the whole tragic affair of Iris Allen’s death and Wally’s abuse again. He has become quite persistent in his effort to get them to reopen that already solved case, enough so, that Wally has started to pick up on something going on, even though everybody tries to keep him out of this messy matter.

All of them strongly refused Jay’s suggestion to reevaluate Barry’s case towards the beginning of the year, and Bruce knows that he is not the only one who thought that the former close bond Jay shared with Barry is what causes the man to act so irrationally. Diana assumed that this unexpected fluke in Jay’s judgment was likely due to Joan’s illness and that Jay merely is seeking comfort in the lost relationship he had with the man who once was akin to a son to him and his wife. It made sense, and both Clark and Bruce readily agreed, neither of them interested in taking a more in-depth look at that
case, since they had other things to worry about.

Now, months later, Bruce is not sure how he feels about his decision back then, anymore. There is a nagging suspicion keeping him up in the early morning hours these days, like an annoying itch at the back of his mind he can’t reach, doubt that persists even though the proof against the former Flash still leaves no place for questioning his guilt.

Then…

Then, Wally’s children were kidnapped, and things shifted from being clear and certain to hazy and confusing.

Bruce still does not understand how, but meeting Barry again at the infirmary on the Watchtower changed things. It was not like someone flipped a switch in his head. It happened more gradually than that, but eventually, the two-dimensional idea of who Barry Allen is, the one Bruce carried around with him for nearly a decade, was replaced by an actual person, by the man who he called his friend once.

It took him nearly a week till he realized that he actually forgot all about Barry Allen.

Of course, he still remembered Barry and who he was, that he was out there, an ex-inmate, a criminal of the worst kind, someone who betrayed all of their trust, but...

But he was also someone who had no meaning to him.

Barry Allen could as well have been a stranger to him; he hardly paid him any mind.

At all.

It was like Barry was not even real but more like a fleeting thought that hardly ever came into focus, and he knows he wasn't the only one who magically forgotten about their former friend.

They actively avoided thinking about him, and then Wally started to become more aggressive, more violent in how he handles the criminals in his cities, and the topic of his uncle eventually had to be brought up among the league members.

Even then, it was like Bruce was thinking of a person he had never met before altogether, with all of their former ties removed from his mind.

Bruce is no fool, he is aware that something is not right, that something is going on and had been messing with his head, probably still is with the others’, and that realization is horrifying in what it implies. On the one hand, it would be advisable to inform the rest of the league about this, but there is a variety of reasons that makes him hesitate about taking that step.

He is no stranger to having his head messed with by people he trusted, and a bitter part of him wonders whether the rest of the JLA could be in on this.

It's unlikely, though. The self-righteous anger and hurt of Bruce's colleagues are real whenever Barry is brought up.

Still, he can’t be sure, at least not yet.

There is also the fact that, whatever is messing with them, or Barry, to be more precise, has to be very powerful to be able to get to such lengths to make the blonde’s life that miserable. Bruce’s research has him believe that the foreign influence started to mess with their perception of the
previous Flash months, maybe even over a year, before tragedy eventually struck the Allens.

Revisiting old log entries of the JLA and of his own shows that a pattern of slowly increasing distrust and animosity towards Barry grew over time instead of suddenly appearing. Though, it is hard for Bruce to recall that period very well when he tries to think back to it, which is another worrisome red flag in itself.

The possible causes for what is happening are numerous, magic, for example, or someone with incredibly strong mind controlling powers. Considering Barry’s life, though, Bruce has started to wonder whether there is not something far bigger going on than that.

Whoever is responsible for this seems to be out to destroy Barry Allen on a personal and mental level, not only to discredit him but also to make his existence as miserable as possible.

When Bruce first started to allow Barry in his life, he was very thorough in researching his background, to satisfy the paranoid voice in the back of his mind that lost some of its intensity over the years but never really went away.

And he remembers, thinking even back then, how odd the case of Barry Allen seemed to him. The man had ridiculously bad luck, to a degree it would have been comical if it weren’t for the horrible things that happened to him from an early age on.

His parents vanishing, him being put into an orphanage he would return many times while being shoved around between foster homes, of which not one, not a single one, ended up not abusing the boy in one way or another.

Bruce kept looking into this behind Barry’s back when they were still friends, though Barry eventually caught on to what he was doing and asked him to stop.

The discomfort and pain the whole thing caused his former friend was apparent in his pleading gaze as he confronted him about his secret investigations, and Bruce agreed.

Now, nearly two decades later, he regrets that he did so.

Maybe, if he kept digging, found out more, it would have made him pause that fateful night when they decided on whether Barry was guilty of murder and raping his underage nephew.

There is always a chance of the victim becoming the abuser, of course, but no matter from what angle Bruce looks at it, that just doesn’t seem to fit when it comes to Barry Allen.

Not after Bruce talked to some of the people who lived with Barry during his time in foster care, other foster children. He recognized a curious pattern there as well. People, who were older than Barry was at that time, seem indifferent towards him or have a somewhat unfavorable view of him. They described him as a troubled child they did not like to be around, while those who were around Barry’s age or younger always seemed to ease up a little when talking about him. Those belonging to the latter group informed him of how Barry was a kind, caring child who looked out for them, even though he barely managed to get by himself.

It is strange, to say the least, to have such different views of the same person recounted by over two dozen different people, especially when their opposite opinions seem to mostly depend on the age they were when they lived with Barry.

Younger children can be annoying to older siblings, while the ones around their age or younger seem to bound well with them, of course. Any parent can confirm that.
There was hostility to some of those men and women who once were Barry’s older foster siblings, that made Bruce pause, though, since those people were unable to point out the actual reason for disliking the boy when they still lived with him.

The more puzzle pieces he collects of the mystery that is Barry Allen’s life, the more he gets the feeling that he keeps treading water, that something is going on, but there is no factual proof for any of it.

Jay tried to talk to them about Barry again, after the latter’s visit to the Watchtower, an act on their side that still bothers Bruce seeing that it became glaringly obvious to him since then how illegal their handling of that issue back then was. Barry was a civilian, no matter his status as an ex-con, they had no right to pick him up like that and interrogate him without any legal aid. It is worrisome to think that not even one of them thought of that when it happened, most of all that he didn’t.

The old speedster had no more luck than before with convincing Clark or Diana, who both denied Jay’s request outright, and while Bruce did side with them as well, it was mostly because he was concerned about making them suspicions about his stance towards Barry’s innocence for the time being.

Even with what he knows now, the evidence for Barry possibly being the victim of some foul play is circumstantial at best, since he lacks any actual proof he can offer which will hold up against J’onn’s mind reading abilities and Diana’s lasso. That aside, Bruce is unwilling to try and make a big deal out of it as long as he does not know what exactly is going on and who or what is behind all of this.

Considering what he has learned so far, it is very likely that trying to aid Barry publicly might only worsen the situation for the other man. He may not be utterly convinced that Barry is innocent of all charges just yet, but that doesn’t mean that he wants to make his life harder once more by accident.

It’s not like Barry isn’t doing a great job on that on his own, as it is.

Bruce reaches up to rub his eyes, exhaling a slow, weary-sounding sigh.

If Barry isn’t careful, his current choice of company and occupation will get him a one-way ticket back to the Heights, one that will be permanent this time around.

Bruce can’t deny that a part of him is irked by how blatantly Barry is disregarding his parole restrictions, and it tries to tell him that he should get Barry back behind bars himself.

Like he did last time...

A beeping stemming from his console pulls Bruce’s attention back to the present, and he glances over his shoulders up to where Alfred just entered the cave.

His butler is carrying a tray with some refreshments on it, and Bruce realizes that he probably spent the majority of the morning down here again, going over audio files and other collected data regarding Barry.

It seems he will have to skip catching up on sleep before heading out to Wayne Tower for the meeting at nine.

“Good morning, Master Bruce,” Alfred greets him drily as he puts the tray down next to Bruce, and the silent reproach over missing out on getting some much-needed rest is very explicit in the old man’s eyes, even if his demeanor does not say so.

“Good morning, Alfred,” Bruce returns and reaches for the smoothie his butler prepared for him.
Absentmindedly, he notices that Alfred seemed to have stocked up on the nougat flavored protein powder again, which is just fine with him as he wasn’t particularly fond of the strawberry one he had to make do with the last couple of days.

“I hope things have been quiet last night,” Bruce asks as he lowers the shake and turns to meet Alfred’s eyes.

“If you ask whether Master Tim and Master Damian succeeded in killing each other during your absence, I’m very pleased to inform you that for now, we have avoided that looming tragedy, sir.”

Bruce feels the left corner of his lip twitch and nearly rolls his eyes over how dramatic his old friend likes to be at times.

Then again, considering how things currently are between his two Robins, it is possible that Alfred is utterly serious with his statement.

He has to come up with a way to make those two work together in a better way. They need to be able to rely on each other when they are out on Gotham’s streets at night, even though Tim is pretty much working on his own by now and only joins them when they need backup.

Not for the first time, Bruce wonders whether that could be part of the problem.

Tim is clearly at a point where he is a capable hero on his own, not only in his physical or detective skills but also when it comes to decision-making capabilities. He is more level-headed than Dick or Jason ever were and has an eye for detail Bruce knows rivals his own.

Maybe it was time for Tim to find an identity of his own like Dick once did.

On second thought, maybe that won’t be the best course of action. He does not need a repetition of how brittle things got between him and his first son.

“Are you still working on your little side project, sir?”

Alfred’s question causes Bruce to pull out of his thoughts and address him with an annoyed look. His butler returns his gaze coolly, making it very clear where he stands when it comes to Bruce’s current surveillance of Barry.

“I think I have worked enough for tonight,” Bruce answers without actually getting into the question and gets up.

“Very good, sir,” Alfred agrees, though his misgivings over him spying on his former friend are still easy to make out in his tone.

Alfred always liked Barry, and he kept his doubts over the man’s guilt through the years, though like with Bruce, Barry eventually seemed to have become nothing but a faint memory to the older man. That was, till he accidentally learned of Bruce’s renewed interest in the case, and with that, the older man’s stance on the whole issue returned as well.

It is bothersome, to say the least, to have Alfred shoot him disapproving looks whenever they touch upon the topic of Barry Allen, especially since Bruce refuses to inform him of the reason for why he is suddenly so interested in the former Flash once more.

There is nothing he can do about it for now. Eventually, should things clear up, he will inform Alfred about what he is working on, but for now, he deems it safer not to tell anybody of his suspicions.
Though, he is considering contacting Jay to have a private talk about the matter, seeing that the old speedster is probably the most familiar one with Barry when it comes to his former friends and will not make a ruckus if he learned of Bruce’s current research. Not to mention, he has some explaining to do regarding his willingness to cover for Barry despite knowing that he is breaking a number of his parole restrictions.

“I will stay in tonight,” Bruce informs Alfred, surprising them both by his sudden decision. “Please ask Dick whether he has time to come over and cover for me.”

A big drug deal is supposed to go down at the docks in a couple of days, and Bruce would feel better if he knew that his first protégé is out there keeping an eye on it for him. Damian will likely demand to finally get out on parole since he promised the boy he could return to his work as Robin after resting for a week to give his injuries sufficient time to heal. Which is tonight, and despite Damian’s claims that Dick is a complete nuisance, both of them can work together quite efficiently.

Much better than Damian and Tim, anyway.

“Are we expecting a guest tonight, sir?” Alfred inquires, studying him curiously.

“Yes, I think of inviting Jay Garrick over for a talk,” Bruce informs him and starts to head towards the stairs leading up to the elevator embedded in the walls of the cave.

“Ah,” Alfred remarks, and his displeasure with that revelation is more than audible. “Will he be attending dinner as well or is it a business call?”

Bruce crosses his arms in front of his chest, watching his reflection in the closed elevator doors, and frowns.

“I’m not sure yet.”

There is a pause.

“Very well, Master Bruce.”

Chapter End Notes

Tadaaa, the new POV character is Bruce! Yay! :D

It’s been a while since we’ve seen our favorite caped crusader of Gotham, and it was fun having him around. Good thing that he will make another appearance rather soon again!

I hope this chapter shone a little more light on why the people Barry considered close friends once deserted him so easily. There is a lot more to it than was implied here, of course, and we are getting there, but for now, I hope this can answer some of the questions... while probably bringing up new ones at the same time.

Also, who doesn’t just love Alfred? I’m always happy to have him around, he is just such a great adoptive dad to Bruce, and the best thing is that he doesn’t take any of his nonsense. That’ probably why Bruce holds him in such high regard. :)

I announced at the beginning of December that I’m currently very busy and this won’t change any time soon it seems. I got hired for another project in our department for
which I have to bury myself in papers over the next couple of months. That, finishing my master thesis (which is nearly done… finally!) and needing to get a couple of bigger exams done until June/July will probably keep my work level up for a while.

Because of that, I hardly have any time to spare, and I'm lucky when I'm able to go over my already finished chapters to prepare them for being edited, which is why I will probably have to keep posting shorter ones for a while longer. I don’t want to run out of them, but I am positive that things will calm down around July/August, so I think we won't run into the danger of a hiatus. There are only another handful chapters for me to write before the first part of Singularity is done, as it is, which keeps me motivated as well. ;)

Thank all of you for giving me so much feedback, I repeat myself, but I really want to emphasize how much reading your comments brighten my days, especially now with how busy everything seems. :) You're the best readers one can hope for!

Next chapter will finally have Hal make an appearance, and we will learn why he hasn't passed by so far. Eddy will also be there... whether this is a good thing will have to be seen.

See you all in two weeks!
“I know that will cripple your dainty little soul to hear, Allen, but…” Eddy glances over the rim of his cards, his eyes slightly crinkled from his broad grin. “… it’s Royal Flush time!” He slams his cards down, gets up and spreads his hands in a come-at-me-bro fashion. “Booyah motherfocker! You’re done!”

Barry watches the other man amused as he starts to collect their cards to shuffle them for the next round. “W-Well d-done, Eddy,” he tells him in a calm, pleasant tone, causing his friend to throw his head back and groan.

“No!” Eddy protest, glaring at him accusingly, though it is obviously all in good humor. “You’re supposed to be distraught over this epic loss! Don’t congratulate me, Allen! Despise me!”

This time Barry can’t but huff a laugh over his friend’s silly antics and shakes his head. “Th-That’s i-it, n-no m-more c-cafein-nated d-drinks f-for y-you t-ton-night.”

“Like hell, I’m no toddler; you can’t keep me from my one true love.” Eddy picks the bottle of coke up and presses it lovingly against his cheek, telling it in a fake whisper, “Don’t listen to that horrible, heartless man, my dear. He does not know what love is.”

Barry shakes his head but is very much amused by his friend’s silly antics.

They are both in a good mood, and he is certainly not going to try and dampen it.

Mary told him last night during their weekly call that she had finally pinned down a date for her return, and that they could expect her to come back in not even three weeks.

Her initial plan to return after one month did not work out, much to Barry’s chagrin, though he tried not to let his disappointment or worry show when she explained that she would probably stay with her family for a little longer. He can’t hold it against her, since she hasn’t seen them for years, and it will probably be a long while till she can afford another trip like this one.
Being told a fixed date for her to return was a relief, though, since he was worried about her possibly deciding to stay with her family for good once more. It is selfish of him, and he is well aware of it, but he doesn’t want Mary to leave Eddy and him behind, she is a part of their lives now, an important one, and he knows that neither of them wanted to lose her.

To celebrate their friend’s upcoming return, Eddy suggested having a guys’ evening, which turned out to mean that they are sitting around playing poker and snacking on chips and peanuts.

“Y-You’re i-in f-for an-nother r-round?” Barry asks as he finished shuffling the cards, and, to no one’s surprise, Eddy agrees readily, seeing that he is on a winning streak and plans on riding it out.

Unlike with the Rogues, they don’t play for any wagers; it is something Eddy suggested a while ago, much to Barry’s surprise, since his friend seems to enjoy the money betting aspect of poker quite a lot. Barry welcomes it, though, as he doesn’t like playing for money, even if it’s only cents. To him, it is a little of a waste, but he keeps that piece of mind to himself around his friends, who very much enjoy the additional thrill that comes with possibly losing or winning a lot of cash.

“As if you have to ask.” Eddy grins and sits back down, grabbing another handful of peanuts to eat.

“Y-You’re s-so c-confid- dent,” Barry points out, a little snarky, as he starts to deal the cards, “l-let’s h-hope th-that is-sn’t c-coming b-back t-to b-bite y-you.”

“You worry about my well-being is as sweet as honey, Bar, but we both know that this is like taking a lollipop from a baby for-”

A knock cuts his friend off, and they both turn their eyes to the door at the unexpected interruption.

It is Monday evening, close to seven, and Barry has no idea who could have decided to visit him at this time. He grabs his phone to look whether Jay maybe wrote him and he didn’t notice, but there is no message left from the older man nor from Max.

Unease starts to build up in his stomach, and Barry hesitates for a moment before getting up while signing Eddy to stay put as his friend must have noticed his worry and was about to do the same.

Barry’s curiosity and slight concern over this late visitor come to an abrupt, grating halt when he looks through the door spy and finds Hal standing on the other side.

Hal, whom he has nearly given up hope to see again by now.

A smile spreads across Barry’s lips as he enthusiastically opens the door, a natural reaction to seeing his dear friend again after such a long time; after he thought he had died and was gone for sure!

But the joy over Hal finally finding the time to pass by is only short-lived, because then Barry notices the grim expression on the other man’s face, and how uncomfortable he seems about being here in the first place.

The delight and joy over this reunion slip away, and a painful, daunting understanding replaces them.

Hal is not here for a reunion.

He doesn’t even look like he wants to be here.

The realization is like a punch and the words with which Barry wanted to welcome his friend crumble, leaving him numb and silent.
They watch each other for a long, uncomfortable moment, and Barry notices that Hal doesn’t only seem unhappy about being here but also reluctant to speak.

Whatever reason brought Hal here, Barry knows that there is little hope that their friendship will still be intact at the end of his visit.

... and maybe, he is not the only one who is reluctant of this to happen.

It is of little comfort, though, because Hal has decided to leave him behind, like all the others. Barry can already tell even without the other man needing to spell it out for him.

He feels sick.

Someone steps up behind Barry, and he is startled out of his thoughts, turning slightly to recognize that it is just Eddy, whose presence he has momentarily forgotten.

“Everything alright, Bar?” Eddy asks, studying Hal briefly with a curious frown. Then, he turns to Barry, and whatever he sees on his face causes him to turn back to Hal with a somewhat hostile glint in his eyes.

“You’re lost, dude?” Eddy’s tone of voice is sharp, aggressive, and Hal’s unhappy expression is replaced by one of anger in response, causing Barry to quickly interfere since he doesn’t want either of them ending up in a fight.

The upcoming conversation with Hal is going to be painful enough as it is.

“N-No, h-he’s a-a…” Barry falters there for a second, shooting Hal an uncertain look.

“You guys are a funny bunch,” Eddy points out, his smile all teeth. “You don’t seem to be able to decide whether you wanna give a fuck about him or not, and when you finally deign yourself to visit him, you are hellbent on making him feel like shit. Here’s an idea, why not skip it all and just piss right off again instead?”

“P-Plea-...” Barry interjects in a warning tone before Hal can reply, who doesn't look averse to the idea of starting something with Eddy. “C-Could y-you p-please g-give u-us s-some t-time a-alone?” He shoots his friend a pleading look when Eddy is about to protest. “I-I’ll c-come o-over t-to y-your p-place w-when w-we’re d-done h-here, o-ok-kay?”

Eddy gives him a look like he is a monumental idiot, and briefly, Barry is sure that he is going to put up a fight, but, to his surprise and relief, he ends up giving him a grim nod instead. “Fine, I’ll be in my apartment while you have a chat with your friend.” At the last word, Eddy scowls at Hal, making his dislike for him very palpable. He keeps his eyes locked with Hal’s for another long, tense minute, before he eventually leaves, sending Barry one last exasperated look, which tells him very openly what he thinks of him for doing this.

Hal steps aside to let Eddy pass, exchanging another dark, hostile look with him, and it is evident that their brief encounter caused the pilot's mood to sour even further.

“P-Plea-ase, c-come i-in,” Barry says quietly, and it is daunting to think how much he looked forward to finally see his friend again because now he wishes Hal hadn’t turned up here in the first
Hal looks back to him, and a grim frown replaces the anger on his face. He clearly doesn’t want to but nods and enters despite that after another moment of hesitation.

Barry closes the door behind him and notices with a sinking feeling that Hal is glancing around, taking his living area in with an unreadable expression.

There is not a lot his apartment has to offer, it is still a rather sparse place, but after Barry living in it for years now, it has become his home, and he feels comfortable in it.

To others, the flaking paint job of his walls and the handful of furniture, that had already looked old and used when Barry moved in, must give off a rather poor impression, and for the first time in a long while he feels ashamed of where he is living.

“T-Take a-a s-seat,” Barry tells Hal and tries not to let on how anxious he feels just now. “Y-You w-want c-coffee o-or t-tea? I-I a-also h-have c-coke.” It is coke he bought for Axel, but Eddy already drank two of the four cans this evening, so Barry decided to buy another couple tomorrow anyway.

“No.” Hal awkwardly shifts after he stopped next to the couch and briefly hesitates before he locks eyes with Barry. “I want to get this over with quickly.”

It is like a slap, and Barry feels himself choke up in response because even though he already expected that the talk would head in this direction, he still hoped he was wrong.

He averts his eyes to the ground and presses his palms flatly against the outside of his thighs, fighting the urge to hug himself.

“I’m here because Jay asked me to,” Hal goes on, voice quiet but firm. “I’m not here because of you.”

Barry can feel his eyes start to itch and squeezes them shut, inhaling sharply.

“I thought you’ve gotten the hint that I’m not interested in seeing you again.” Barry can hear Hal shift and cross his arms in front of his chest, the leather of his bomber jacket making a familiar sound. “But you’ve always been stubborn.”

Another uncomfortable silence settles between them, and Barry feels like the inside of his chest is on fire, like Hal’s words have cut it open and rubbed salt into the wound.

“Wh-Why?” Barry eventually croaks, his voice shaky and weak, and it is a monumental effort to open his eyes again and look back at the other man.

Hal frowns and glances to the side, the unease over being here nearly oozing off him.

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Hal frowns and glances to the side, the unease over being here nearly oozing off him.

“Do you really have to ask me that?”

“You kn-know I d-did-dn’t.”

“Stop it, we both know that’s a lie,” Hal cuts him off harshly and glares back at him. “You think Wally made that horrible stuff up? J’onn read his mind; he saw what you did to the boy!”

“I d-d-d.”

“Barry, I don’t want to listen to your lies!” Hal nearly bellows, startling Barry into silence as he watches his former best friend with wide, panicked eyes. “There is proof that you did it, proof that is
irrefutable! You confessed under Diana’s damn lasso, for fuck’s sake!”

“I-I… I d-don’t kn-know h-how th-that w-was p-p-pos-sible, b-but I-I d-didn’t d-do th-those a-aw-wful th-things, H-Hal!” Barry feels tears run down his cheeks, but he hardly takes notices of them as he shoots Hal a pleading look. “Y-You kn-kn-know th-that! Y-You b-bel-lieved m-mo…”

“I was wrong,” Hal interrupts him, uncrossing his arms while clenching his fists, his gaze once again somewhere to the side of Barry’s face. “I just couldn’t believe that you’d do something like that-”

“I-I d-d-didn’t!” Barry cries desperately, and he feels sick by the thought that Hal could think him to be such a monster. “Y-You kn-kn-know m-mo, H-Hal! Wh-Why w-would y-y-you b-bel-lieve th-that I-I’d d-do s-someth-thing l-l-like th-that t-to W-Wally o-or I-I… I-Iris?!” His voice breaks. “Th-They w-were m-my f-f-fam-mily…”

It takes Hal a moment to reply this time. His lips are pressed into a thin, angry line as he eventually meets Barry’s eyes and studies him with a mixture of blame and hurt that causes Barry to feel faint.

“I knew nothing back then,” Hal explains, with anger simmering just below the calm quality of his words. “I thought that someone like you, my best friend, could never turn out to be such a heinous man, but I know now that things are not working like that, this world isn’t a good place, and there is evil in everybody. I’ve seen that time and time again after…” He breaks off and grits his teeth in rage that doesn’t seem to be directed towards Barry this time.

“H-Hal…” Barry makes a small step towards his friend, watching him with open concern. He is suddenly certain that Hal’s change of heart has something to do with his death, and he realizes that there has to be more to it than what is public knowledge. “Wh-What h-h-hap-pened t-to y-you?”

Hal tenses up, whether it is due to the question or the worry with which Barry spoke is hard to tell, but when he turns back to face him once more, the anger has left his eyes. In its stead, there is just disappointment and weariness.

“I don’t want you to try and contact me again,” Hal tells him, “and I don’t want you to pester Jay or anybody else about it either.” He huffs a bitter chuckle at that and shakes his head. “You have no idea how much you hurt Wally by trying to get on Jay’s good side again. The man is like a grandfather to him, like actual family. Jay was there next to Dinah and Ollie to help the boy back on his feet and move on with his life, and you can’t imagine how wrecking it is to Wally that Jay is now starting to doubt the legitimacy of what was done to him.” A scowl briefly overcomes Hal’s features as he glares accusingly at Barry, but he keeps his tone low. “What you did to him.”

The need to protest wells up in Barry, but he suddenly feels too drained to keep fighting.

It would be of no use, anyway.

Hal is not going to believe him.

Whatever happened to Hal after he was publicly announced dead, it changed him, and now he is convinced that Barry is that monster everybody else thought him to be from the very beginning.

His friend is gone. He slipped through his fingers like water.

He lost Hal all over again without getting him back in the first place.

Barry stays quiet and waits for whatever Hal still feels the need to say.

“Just stay away from us,” Hal eventually settles on after he watched him with silent reproach for a
long minute. “You’ve done enough damage, Barry, just let Wally and the rest of us move on in peace.”

Without another word, Hal walks past Barry and exits his apartment, shutting the door firmly behind him and leaving an oppressive silence behind.

There is a heaviness to his limbs that make it impossible for Barry to move for a long moment after Hal left so that he only keeps standing there, staring at the ground with a dull throbbing pain in his chest.

It is hard to think, his head feels light with his thoughts fluttering around like startled birds, making it nearly impossible for him to decide what to do now, and a part of him prefers it like that.

He doesn’t want to move or do anything.

He is tired, so very tired.

Just being there feels like a chore, right now, and he wishes it all could just stop, all the pain and disappointment, and the certainty that he always will end up alone eventually.

Barry closes his eyes, hardly noticing the stream of hot tears running down his pale skin, and wonder why he even bothers-

A sharp knock rips through the silence, through Barry’s thoughts, and startles him back to the now.

“Barry?” Eddy’s muffled voice reaches him through the door. “I know that the jackass left already. Can you let me back in so I can see for myself that you’re not a total mess again?”

A short, breathless laugh is past Barry’s lips before he realizes it, and then he feels like he is falling apart, and his legs buckle under him so that his knees land painfully hard on the ground.

Hal is back, but to him, he is still gone.

“O-Oh g-g-god…” Barry whimpers and hides his face behind his hands.

Hal is gone.

He is gone because he can’t stand to be around him anymore.

Like all the others…

A sob rips from Barry before another soft whimper escapes him as he suddenly feels utterly alone.

Hal gave up on him too.

His best friend believes those horrible things about him, believes that he is capable of being such a horrid person.

It feels like something is trying to crawl its way out of his chest, it hurts so much.

“Damn it,” Eddy curses, who has suddenly appeared out of nowhere, kneeling next to him. He probably heard Barry breaking down and decided to skip politeness and just vibrate through the door.

There has to be a lot Eddy wants to say to Barry about allowing Hal into his apartment in the first place, but he refrains from it. Instead, he slowly lays his arms around Barry, as not to scare him, and
pulls him closer, so that he is resting against him.

“It’s okay, Bar,” Eddy assures him quietly, soothingly rubbing his back. “Whatever that guy said, it doesn’t matter, we both know that you’re nothing like what those jackasses think. You’re a great guy, one of the best, and if those idiots from your past can’t see that, then screw them.”

Barry sobs painfully, shaking his head in protest, but he is unable to speak with how distraught he is currently feeling, and thus unable to express that it is his fault, that it has been his fault all along. He is somehow wrong, has always been, from his early childhood on, and sometimes it takes people a while to realize that, but they still do in the end.

The fear of losing them too, his friends, Eddy, Mary, the Rogues – Len – is nearly stealing his breath away by how awful it is, and he knows that he won’t be able to live through something like that again. He just can’t.

His fingers must dig painfully hard into Eddy’s sides, but the other man doesn’t protest, and instead keep rubbing his back to offer comfort.

“They don’t matter,” Eddy reminds him firmly, “they stopped doing so when they decided to turn on you, so don’t mourn their loss. They decided to leave, but you’re still here, and you’re not alone—”

Barry shakes his head in protest against the other man’s chest, still unable to get any words out in between his sobs.

“You aren’t alone, Bar,” Eddy insists with a sudden sadness clinging to his tone, “You’ve got Mary and me, and there are the others too. We’ll stick to you, because we know what an amazing friend you are, and that we’re lucky to have you.” Eddy sighs softly, wearily, and adds, “Even if you can’t believe it yourself, we’ll stay with you till it eventually goes through your thick skull.”

It helps to hear those words, to be told that he won’t end up all alone again, that this time will be different, and Barry wants to believe him so badly. He concentrates on his friend, how solid he feels against him, his voice, and it makes it easier to ignore the lingering doubt in his head that try to tear his mind apart.

Barry swallows, slightly out of breath from crying, and tries to thank Eddy for his kindness, for being there, but it comes out sounding just like another whimper. Eddy still seems to understand, since he chuckles and murmurs, “You’re such a dunce for such a smart man, Bar, but that’s part of your charm, I guess.”

Barry smiles weakly and is relieved when he notices that he is starting to feel more like himself again. The tears are still coming, but the sobs have stopped to wreck his body like a leaf in the wind, and the feelings of utter hopelessness and loneliness have started to retreat as well.

They stay like this for another five minutes or so before Eddy helps him onto the couch and gets him some tissues.

“It’ll make you some tea,” Eddy decides, and Barry only nods wordless in agreement, feeling too exhausted to put up a protest or do anything else after his crying fit. He can’t even find it in himself to be embarrassed and instead curls up, his legs pulled up to his chest, arms loosely around his shins, and cheek resting on his knees.

It always makes him feel safer if he makes himself smaller, and as he tiredly stares at the coffee table in front of him, he thinks that Len would probably do an even better job at that. He hasn’t had the opportunity to pass by the hideout this week so far, though, since Len informed him that they are
planning another job, and Barry tends to stay away when his friends do that these days.

Like when Len told him about it last Friday, Barry feels an odd sensation of doubt and worry rise in his guts again, even though he has no idea where it originates from. Len wouldn’t lie to him about something like that. By now, at this point in their relationship, Barry has accepted that his friends as who they are, and that they would not change anymore, and the Rogues…

Well, they accepted who he once was, and are okay with it too.

At least, Barry has started to believe so, but Sam has been behaving oddly quiet around him for a few days now whenever he picked him up to get him over to their place. His friends seemed generally tensed around him the last time he was over, enough so, that he only spent a little time with them before retreating to Len's and his room.

Did something happen he is not aware of? Did he do something to anger them?

Sighing tiredly, Barry decides that it will do him no good pondering over what ifs, right now he is in a mood that will make him see the worst in any situation, and that just won’t do.

A faint blush spreads over his cheeks, and he feels a familiar warmth bloom in his belly as his thought trail off to Len’s last visit despite his attempt to clear his mind.

He told Barry he loves him.

Len loves him.

The thought alone is so absurdly reassuring and wonderful that Barry has found it hard not to replay this moment in his head time and time again over the last few days. He did so enough times that even Charlie commented on his good mood, before telling him to get his head out of the clouds and focus on his damn job.

It made it all the harder not to be able to be over at the Rogues’ current hideout, where Len is.

Barry presses his forehead against his knee and sighs softly as a soft blush spreads across his cheeks. It is silly, but he feels a little like a besotted teenager, and being apart from Len, the man he loves and who loves him is ridiculously hard.

Maybe that was why the others behaved so strangely around him? Did they learn from Len that they finally opened up to each other?

That is a nonsensical leap of logic, not only because Len would never speak to them about it, seeing what a private person he is and that he would probably prefer to have his molars pulled before telling the others any details about their relationship, but his friends also seemed fine with it so far.

Another thought crosses Barry's mind then, and he feels an icy, painful coldness settle in his guts in response.

What if they are getting fed up with him too? What if they start to believe those horrible things about him like Hal does now?

Hal, of whom he had been sure believed in his innocence.

Tears well up in Barry’s eyes again as his thoughts are brought back to what has just happened.

Shivering, Barry pulls his legs closer and curls up a little more, wishing once again that Len was
He doesn’t want to lose the Rogues as well, they mean so much to him.

Barry has no idea what he would do if they decided to turn their back on him too. Just half an hour ago, he wouldn’t have worried about it too much, despite how this fear always lingers in the back of his mind, but Len was able to put his worry to rest with telling him about his feelings for him. Now, the idea appears sickeningly real once more.

“Hey.” Eddy stops next to him, causing Barry to tense up briefly since he has been so deep in his thoughts that he nearly forgot his friend is still there. He glances up to the other man, who is studying him with a concerned frown that quickly is replaced by a much more relaxed smile as he hands him a steaming mug. “Here, chamomile tea.”

“Th-Th-Thank-ks, E-Ed-dy.” Barry accepts the warm beverage with a faint smile, noticing just as his fingers touch the warm ceramic how cold he feels.

“Sure thing.” Eddy takes a seat next to him, and Barry realizes that he did not prepare tea for himself, which is not surprising since his friend tends to compare it to reheated dishwater.

“You’re doing okay again?” Eddy asks while studying, the concern very palpable on his face even though he tries not to show it.

“Y-Yes,” Barry lies, since he doesn’t want Eddy to worry. There is nothing his friend can do to change any of what just happened, Barry knows that he will feel better eventually, but it will take time. Having Hal break their friendship like this is something he has to digest before he can move on, and it probably will be a while.

Hal was one of his closest friends, probably his best friend, and having him believe those awful things hurts in a way that is hard for Barry to put in words even in his head.

Eddy hums, and Barry doesn't need to look at him to know that his friend is not believing him, which is not that surprising since Eddy can be much more observative than he lets on most of the time. Thankfully, Eddy does not point it out to Barry, likely understanding that it won't do him any good.

“You do know that you can trust me, right?” Eddy says instead, surprising Barry with the question.

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees, a little unsure why his friend would ask him that just now.

“Then you should know that I mean it when I’m telling you that neither I nor Mary, nor one of your pro-crime friends will just get up and vanish like that.” Eddy gives him a meaningful look, and Barry feels his face heat up because of course, Eddy would know that he doubts the validity of his earlier claim.

Barry ducks his head, hiding the lower half of his face behind his knees, and murmurs, “I-I kn-kn-know.”

“Good.” Eddy nods, but the smile on his lips looks sad as he goes on, “Now you only have to believe it too.”

Barry closes his eyes as they start to itch again and bows his head, chuckling softly, “Y-Yeah…”

Imagining how he would have felt right now if Eddy hadn’t been around, is daunting, and he knows
that he can be lucky he has such a good friend in the other man.

“I’m g-glad y-you’re h-here,” Barry tells Eddy and moves his head so his cheek can rest on his knees while he looks at him, a tired but honest smile on his lips. “I’m th-the o-one wh-who c-c-can b-be r-real-ly l-lucky t-to h-have y-you a-as m-my f-friend.”

Eddy smiles back. “Let’s settle on we’re both being lucky to have such extraordinarily smart, good-looking, and amazing friends, okay?”

Barry fondly chuckles as he watches Eddy and feels the tension slowly starts to seep out of him again.

He is not alone, Barry has to believe that.

He has to believe in his friends; they deserve that much.

There will always be the possibility that Eddy and the others will eventually leave too, there are no certainties in life, but Barry wants to believe that it will be different with them.

Len and the others know about the dark parts of his life he never shared with any of his former friends, they also know his past as the Flash, and despite all of that they are still okay with him being around.

Eddy and Mary are also aware that he was abused in the past, and they still stand by him, despite his stammer and nervous demeanor. They are still his friends.

There are many things he hasn’t shared with either of them, though, details about what was done to him, all those horrible nights and punishments he had to live through, at first in his youth and then, later during his time in the Heights, as an adult.

They don’t know how wrong he feels most of the time like he is a twisted version of someone else. How the world around him often feels that way to him as well.

It is hard to share those things, mostly because he doesn’t want to think about them.

There is something else he hasn’t shared with Eddy and Mary, yet, though, something he has been thinking about opening up about, especially to the former.

Eddy, who is a speedster himself.

Initially, Barry was held back by the fear that Eddy would tell someone else about his past, someone like Elias, and the idea was terrifying, but by now he knows that this won’t happen.

As Eddy said, he can trust him; Barry does not doubt it anymore.

Feeling tired, with his limbs heavy as if they were made of stone, Barry takes a deep breath and exhales it slowly.

“I’m g-going t-to t-tell y-you s-someth-thing n-now, y-you c-can’t t-tell a-any o-other l-living s-soul, o-okay?”

Eddy aches his eyebrows, clearly surprised by the sudden change of topic. He frowns, and asks hesitantly, “Not even Mary?”

“N-No…” Barry licks his lips nervously. “N-Not y-yet, a-at l-l-least.”
He is going to talk with Mary about it, she does have a right to know, especially now that he is going to share this part of his past with Eddy, but she has to come back first. He has been thinking about sharing this secret with them once Mary is here again, but he doesn’t want Eddy to feel pressured into giving away his secret in response.

“Okay,” Eddy agrees earnestly after a moment. “Shoot, I’m all ears.”

Barry closes his eyes and smiles wearily as a shiver runs down his spine. “I-w-was th-the s-sec-cond F-Flash.”

A loaded pause is the only response he gets, and he curls up tighter around himself, his grip on his back becoming hard enough that his hands start to shake.

“What?” Eddy’s voice is low but on edge, and he sounds truly taken aback like he was expecting anything but that.

“I-w-was th-the F-F-Flash,” Barry repeats quietly and somewhat reluctantly turns back to his friend. “Th-The o-one a-after J-Jay G-Gar-rick.”

“That’s why you know that old geezer?” Eddy asks, sounding slightly out of breath and like he has no idea what to make of what he has just learned. “You were a speedster too?” There is a tense pause, and then Eddy huffs a laugh. “Of fucking course, you’d turn out to be a former superhero.” He rubs a hand over his face, laughing once more before he locks eyes with Barry, a look of awe in his eyes.

“You’re the Flash,” Eddy repeats, grinning. “Fucking hell…”

“I’m n-not a-anym-m-more,” Barry corrects him and shifts uneasily. “I-h-haven’t b-been f-for o-over a-a d-decade.”

The grin slips off Eddy’s face, and a rather concerned expression takes its place. “You were in prison. Why? How did you land in such a place?”

Barry averts his eyes and hesitates for a long minute.

Then, he starts to tell his story.

Chapter End Notes

... I have the feeling that I probably should dive behind a wall or hide someplace else right now to avoid your wrath. ;)

This chapter probably did not go as many of you hoped it would. There was no happy reunion between Barry and Hal, and I feel honestly bad about it since most of you seemed to look forward to this chapter, and it turned out to be a downer in that regard.

Don’t be too hard on Hal for how he treated Barry in this chapter, though. He is suffering from a severe case of PTSD since he came back from the death and has a lot of other stuff in his personal life and as a GL to deal with which is wearing him down. He just is not in the right state of mind to be there for Barry and support him, and if he was in his right mind, he would have handled things very differently.
We don't get a lot of information on what is going on with Hal, but his situation will clear up eventually, and I can assure that things will become better between him and Barry once more. Hal and Barry are like bffs in my book, I can see both of them in a platonic and romantic relationship, and their friendship will play into the plot of this story. We are just not there yet.

I was happy that this chapter allowed Eddy to step in and show how much Barry means to him and that he intends to stay. It is important for Barry to realize that his fear of eventually ending up alone is unfounded, even if it is understandable that he is scared of that. It seems like life pretty much continues to kick Barry while he is already on the ground, but he does have a supportive network he can count on when he needs them.

I hope you guys are not too sad about the turn of events, I promise next chapter will be a more uplifting, and we may see a familiar caped crusader again. ;)

Thank you all for reading and sharing your thoughts with me, your comments always succeed in brightening my day. :)

I will be back with the next chapter in two weeks!
The Trouble with Trusting People

Chapter Summary

Bruce invites Jay over to Wayne Manor to talk about Barry.

Chapter Notes

My friend Quintessenzza edited this chapter. Thank you so much for your great work! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The study of Wayne Manor is as old as the building itself, something you can feel when you step into it.

There is something noble and classic looking to the big room that many new mansions try to emulate, something that speaks of a long history and old money. Someone who is invited to visit it will be greeted by dark marble tiles covered by thick, hand-knotted carpets in Eastern designs, and paneled walls of which one is nearly entirely covered by tall mahogany bookshelves that are filled with rows of rare, expensive looking books. A handful of oil paintings adorn the other walls and introduce some color in the otherwise rather dark room, the biggest, a family portrait, hangs above an imposing looking fireplace, in front of which four very antique looking Victorian armchairs rest around a large coffee table of the same style.

The room speaks of power and old riches, something that can all too easily impress most people.

To Bruce, it is home, just as mundane as a normal living room is to the average person.

He grew up here, before and after the tragedy that befell his family, and he feels comfortable surrounded by the memories of his late parents. He is not at peace, he knows by now that he will likely never be at peace. Still, sometimes he can nearly feel them when he sits here in the study, in front of a crackling fire, among the old and rare tomes his father tended to read and the paintings his mother loved to collect.

It is as if they were there with him, his mother looking at him with warm, soft eyes, her smile tender and loving, her hair bathed in the faint glow of the fire, his father tall and strong, a stern expression on his face, but the love unmistakable in his gaze whenever he looked at him.

Bruce misses them to this day, and while their absence is no longer a devastating pain inside him as it started to ease away somewhat with time, a part of it still lingers inside him even now, decades later.

It probably is like this for all people who lost a loved one, especially in a violent, traumatizing way like he did. He never got the opportunity to say goodbye to them as a child, and now, as an adult, he isn’t sure whether he wants to let go of them all the way.

They are the main reason why he became who he is these days, after all. Maybe it would be more
honest to say that it was their death, though, and Bruce isn’t sure where it will leave him if he allows their ghosts to move on.

Can there be a Batman without his loss?

Can there be Bruce Wayne without Batman?

That is something he never really discusses with people, he knows what the majority would say and that his family especially would find it worrisome. Understandably so, but Bruce realized a long time ago, that he fits among the crazy much better than among the sane, with the most significant difference between him and them being his self-control.

Sane people don’t dress up as bats to beat thugs into bloody heaps of broken bones; they don’t use fear to try and protect innocent people from the growing amount of lowlife Gotham is creating more of every single day.

The innocent people.

At times, Bruce has trouble believing that those even still exist in his city.

Can a crazy person protect people from other crazies?

Or does the Batman only make things worse in the end?

It feels like he is trying to extinguish fire by fire at times, and it can be exhausting.

Things seem to have grown darker over the last decade, and while Bruce didn’t realize why this cold unease slowly started to seep into his life, he has an idea now.

His youth had been filled with anger, hate, pain, sadness, and determination for the longest time.

Having his parents shot in front of his eyes, experiencing that intense feeling of hopelessness and fear, broke something in him that has never been able to heal.

For a time, it got better, though…

Bruce still hates thinking back to that night, but even with how awful it was to lose his parents in such a way when he was but a child, he is grateful that he was old enough to be still able to remember them even now, after such a long time.

The sound of their voices, the feeling of their touches, their smells, they are still alive in his memory, something all the paintings and photos that can be found all over the manor can never provide him with.

Not everybody is this lucky.

“Would you like a snack to the tea, Mr. Garrick?” Alfred inquires, and Bruce averts his eyes from the family painting above the fireplace to his current guest.

“You know that I can’t say no to anything you prepare, Alfred,” Jay remarks, grinning bashfully, and Bruce recalls that the old speedster has been busy today, seeing that the Justice Society took care of a threat in New York, involving hostile, mind-controlling aliens from another dimension.

Bruce hates those, he is not fond of anybody who can mess with another person’s mind, especially these days, and he gets the impression that more and more criminals with that power set keep turning up. Thankfully, the JSA was more than able to handle the whole situation on their own, so the JLA
didn’t need to get involved.

“Very well, sir.” Alfred turns to Bruce after giving Jay a small nod. “Anything for you, Master Bruce?”

“I’m good, Alfred.” Bruce waves him off and intentionally keeps his eyes on Jay as he tries not to notice the subtle but very much present reproachful look his butler is giving him, seeing that he still doesn’t think much of how Bruce is currently handling the Allen case.

“Very well.” There is an understated disapproval to his words, and Bruce nearly frowns in annoyance because Alfred isn’t letting this go anytime soon.

Jay watches him with a mixture of curiosity and slight amusement when Bruce focuses his attention back on him since he hasn’t missed Alfred’s behavior either.

The humor vanishes off Jay’s face soon enough, though, and a more serious emotion takes its place.

“I have to say,” Jay starts, “I’m surprised about this invitation. You seemed quite busy the last couple of times I tried to talk to you.”

Bruce doesn’t exactly feel bad about brushing off Jay’s attempts to talk to him over the past months, but he does regret it a little in hindsight.

The way Diana, Clark, and he dealt with Jay was not forthcoming, and considering that the older hero was longer in this business than anybody of them, they probably should have given his words more weight than they did.

Now, looking back, Bruce wonders whether this was due to their own free will or whether they were manipulated there as well.

The thought is chilling, and it sets his nerves on edge.

“It seems my stance towards some matters has changed over the last months,” Bruce tells him, cryptically, which causes Jay to ache an eyebrow, looking somewhat skeptical.

“And what matters would those be?” Jay asks.

Bruce doesn’t immediately answer but turns his gaze to the fireplace, where the flames are currently eating away at the fresh log he put in about half an hour ago.

He watches the flames flicker and dance, as he considers how to proceed.

“You know that covering for Barry can get you both in trouble,” Bruce eventually settles on and looks back at Jay, who seems genuinely taken aback for a second.

Then, the surprise yields to anger, as Jay realizes what is going on.

“You’re spying on Barry,” Jay says, and it isn’t a question. It is hard to miss what he thinks of that.

“Considering that he is in league with some of the Gems most notorious criminals, I think you will agree that it is hard to hold that against me,” Bruce replies, frowning.

“That’s illegal, Bruce,” Jay reminds him, anger slowly creeping into his voice. “Barry is not one of your criminals here in Gotham. You can’t simply come over to our cities and start wiretapping people. Without mine or Wally’s permission, the Twins are off limits to you.” Concern flickers across the older man’s face as soon as he has finished that sentence, and he eyes Bruce with care as
he asks, “Is Wally aware of this?”

It is interesting that Jay would come to this conclusion, which means that things have to run much less smoothly between the two Flashes than Bruce has assumed this far. The worry with which the other man is now watching him does not sit well with Bruce either, and he wonders whether Wally sought out his uncle more times than he or the others are aware of.

“No,” Bruce explains, “nobody knows about my research right now.”

“Your research?” Jay demands, disapprovingly, and Bruce is glad that Alfred is not in the room with them right now because he is sure he would have been ganged up on otherwise.

“I think you shouldn’t be pointing fingers here since you’re covering for Barry while he is in contact with Wally’s rogues,” Bruce points out, and he tries not to think of the fact that being in contact doesn’t even cover half of it. After what he saw on the tapes, it has become clear Jay does not know about Barry’s relationship with Snart. It would be interesting to find out what the man has to say to that, and whether this would change his stance toward the whole situation, but Bruce recognizes that it is not his place to tell him anything about it.

Not that he really believes Jay would turn his back on Barry again, even with him being in a romantic relationship with the notorious Captain Cold.

“No, Bruce thinks somewhat begrudgingly, they really didn’t.

Alfred chooses that moment to return, a tray with snacks for Jay in hands, and Bruce uses the break to mull over what he has learned over the past months once more.

There has been no evidence that Barry provided the Rogues with any valuable information concerning Wally or any of them so far. Neither Barry nor Snart brought up anything related to superhero business, at least not in a way that would imply that Barry is willing to offer anything personal about them, like their secret identities, weaknesses, or such.

It can be that they talked about it already in the past seeing that Barry seems to have been in contact with them from pretty early on in his parole, maybe even back in prison, but if that was the case, Bruce is confident that they would have noticed by now. Considering how the heroes whom Barry has once been close to didn’t have to deal with their rogues using any delicate personal information to try and go after them so far, it seems unlikely that Barry tattled on them.

It won’t make a difference should Diana or any of the others find out about it, as a parole violation is a parole violation, but it still strikes Bruce as odd that Barry has not once brought any of them up to Snart since he has been listening in on them.

“Will that be all?” Alfred asks, snapping Bruce out of his thoughts.

“Yes, Alfred, thank you,” Bruce agrees and watches the older man retreat with another slightly cool Very well, sir.

After Alfred has left the room, Jay waits a moment longer to make sure the butler is out of earshot, before he turns his gaze back to Bruce.
“Barry is doing nothing wrong,” Jay insists. “He is not harming anybody, and you know by now that I don’t think he is guilty of any of the charges that were brought against him.”

“He is breaking his parole requirements by being in active contact with criminals, and that is only one of his missteps since he has been lying about where he is working to his parole officer as well.” Bruce gives the other man a hard look, which Jay easily returns, and he is not surprised that this doesn’t get the older man to back off. Jay made up his mind about Barry some time ago, and the man can be stubborn to a fault if he thinks he is in the right.

“I know that you believe in Barry, but you have to consider the evidence that is still standing against him. You can’t simply ignore facts, Jay,” Bruce reminds him.

“You think I forgot about that?” Jay frowns down at the plate of food that is now resting on the table between them. “Every time I face Barry, I’m reminded of the confession he made when he was under the effect of Diana’s lasso, or what J’onn saw in Wally’s mind…” He presses his lips into a thin, angry line, looking torn.

Eventually, Jay lifts his eyes back to Bruce and goes on, “You know Barry, you’ve known him longer than I have. Do you really think that he could have done those things to Iris or Wally?”

No, Bruce doesn’t. Not now, not anymore.

But…

“People are hardly predictable,” Bruce states quietly, “and it wouldn’t have been the first time that a victim of abuse turns into an abuser themselves.”

Jay freezes at that, and Bruce is suddenly no longer sure whether he was right with his previous assessment of how much the old speedster knows, how much Barry let him know about his youth.

“What are you talking about?” Jay asks, and there is a tense unease to the way he is now watching Bruce like he doesn’t want to know but has to all the same.

A crack cuts through the following silence when the log in the fireplace shifts as the flames keep licking away at it, and Bruce realizes that he would rather have been right about his initial assumption that Jay knows at least as much as he does when it comes to Barry’s past.

This is something Barry should tell him, it is Barry’s secret, and while Bruce isn’t sure how he feels about the man right now, there is no question about it that it won’t be right of him to give this away without his consent.

It is hypocritical, of course, since Bruce himself got that knowledge without talking to Barry about it beforehand or asking him for permission to nose around.

Still.

“You should ask Barry about it-”

“He was abused?” Jay presses on, and there is open horror in his eyes as what this has to mean sinks in. “How? Like Wally?” He pulls himself up so that he is sitting up straight, his face suddenly pale. “As a child?” Bruce doesn’t answer but whatever Jay sees on his face seems to tell him enough.

“Bruce, are you telling me that you knew he was a victim of abuse himself, and you didn’t think it necessary to bring that up when we were sentencing him for being a rapist and a murderer?”

There is open disbelief in the other man’s voice, disbelief and an unspoken accusation.
It irks Bruce because he has been pondering over that very fact for a while now, and there is a certain amount of guilt connected to him failing to bring Barry’s past up since it could have made them pause before deciding what to do with him.

The truth is, he hadn’t thought of it. No matter how ridiculous it sounds, Barry’s past as a victim of abuse never once crossed his mind that night, nor the ones following, not until a few years later, when Barry’s lawyer sought him out, and even then, the memory didn’t stick around.

Someone messed with his head, someone caused him to forget things, and the more he thinks about it, the more confident he is that it was because someone wanted Barry to be put in prison.

But why?

And who had that kind of power?

“I wasn’t able to recall that part about Barry’s past at that time,” Bruce informs Jay, deciding to go with the truth, seeing that he would not have asked him to come here if he wasn’t planning on trusting him.

“What?” Jay regards him incredulously like he doesn’t believe him, but then his expression changes, and he looks much more troubled. “You think there is more behind this.” Again, not a question.

“Yes,” Bruce agrees and leans back into his chair, directing his gaze to the fireplace. “I think we have been played for a long time.”

“Someone did this to Barry,” Jay points out quietly, wearily, “but they used us to do their dirty work.”

Bruce nods. “From what I was able to gather so far, it does seem so.”

“Why haven’t you gone to the others yet if you know that Barry is innocent,” Jay demands, and the accusing quality returns to his voice. “I’ve been trying to get you all to reconsider your stance on this for months now, why have you never told any of this to Diana or Clark?”

That is a question Bruce has expected, and while he knows that he is handling this the right way, he would have rather liked to avoid bringing up the others in the first place. Not that there was any hope for Jay not to inquire about why he hasn’t gotten Clark or Diana involved in this by now.

“There is no way of telling who is responsible for this, nor whom they are still using,” Bruce points out.

“You think someone is still manipulating them?” Jay clarifies though he sounds less convinced.

“It seems likely, considering how strongly both spoke out against reopening Barry’s case.”

“You spoke out against that too,” Jay reminds him, frowning. “What changed your mind?”

“I’m not sure.” Bruce clasps his hands as he considers how to respond. “I think it was due to me coming face to face with Barry at the Watchtower. That somehow made him…” He breaks off, not sure whether he wants to lay all of his cards on the table just yet.

Jay seems to know exactly what he is talking about, though, since he offers, “It made him become a real person again?” At Bruce’s surprised frown, he gives a faint, sad smile. “Yeah, it was the same for me, though it took me a while longer to remember who Barry actually is than it seems to be the case for you.” He averts his eyes then, looking older than just a moment earlier, like the guilt he feels
is eating away at him before Bruce’s very eyes.

“I should have known something wasn’t right,” Jay tells him, voice low and tired, “I should have known that he would never be able to do something like that.” Jay closes his eyes and puts his head in his hand, sighing deeply. “He was family to Joan and me, he was like our-” He grits his teeth, looking as if talking about this is putting him through actual pain, and Bruce wishes there were some comfort he could offer to the older man. He knows there is nothing he can do or say to ease the guilt and self-reproach Jay is feeling, though.

“I let him rot in that horrible place without giving it a thought.” Jay eventually proceeds. “I knew he was in there, but it… it just wasn’t important.” He gives a hollow laugh at that and turns back to Bruce, locking eyes with him. “I forgot about who he was to me, Bruce. I just forgot.”

Jay sinks back into his chair, looking worn-out and like the weight of the guilt is feeling is actually wearing him down. “Who could have done this to him?”

“I don’t know,” Bruce answers truthfully.

This question has been gnawing away at him for weeks now, and he can understand Jay’s frustration.

There is still the possibility that Barry actually committed those crimes, but the likelihood of it appears slimmer every passing day, not only because of his research but due to how it gets harder and harder to connect the man he once knew with the criminal he believed him to be for over a decade.

“So, you believe now that he is innocent?” Jay inquires after a stretched silence between them for a long couple of minutes while they both went after their thoughts.

“I consider it as a possibility,” Bruce says, and while Jay is not outright scowling at him, it comes close.

“Why have you not asked any of the others for help yet?” Jay is clearly irked by his earlier words, but he knows Bruce well enough by now not to pressure him, something Bruce very much appreciates. He doesn’t really appreciate him returning to his earlier question, though, since he already knows what the older hero’s stance on the whole issue will be.

“I think it will be more sensible not to include them into this until we can be sure that they are no longer influenced by whatever manipulated us,” Bruce explains.

“We should inform them about what is going on,” Jay disagrees firmly. “We can’t let Barry keep living like this if we can do something about it.”

“We have no idea who or what could have caused any of this to begin with,” Bruce reminds him. “What we know is that, if Barry is innocent, and an outer force influenced us, the culprit has to be powerful. Powerful enough to not only interfere with J’onn’s power or Diana’s lasso, but to mess with the minds of dozens of people, some of the strongest telepaths among those, and keep this up for years.”

Not to mention that Bruce believes that this has been going on far longer than Jay thinks.

Jay studies him with a grim, thoughtful look, and Bruce realizes that he is seeing right through him.

Thus, the older man’s next words are no surprise.
“You still can’t trust them again,” Jay states, eyeing Bruce with sympathy, since he does know about the Dr. Light incident from eight years ago.

“I have learned that it is better to be cautious when it comes to my colleagues,” Bruce says, and that is the only admission he is going to give to Jay.

“Clark and Diana were not part of that,” Jay reminds him, though he doesn’t sound like he is holding Bruce’s ongoing suspicion against him.

“No,” Bruce agrees and picks up his glass of soda to take a sip. His expression is grim as he watches the flames dance just a few feet away from them, continuingly eating away at the piece of wood that is slowly getting smaller. “They weren’t.”

That doesn’t mean that they didn’t know what happened back then.

He doesn’t fault his friends for their selective perception, but for their unwillingness to stand for what is right.

They did turn their back on him, and Bruce has never been quick to forgive.

He hopes, should their assumptions turn out to be true, that Barry is unlike him in that case.

“I have something I want to show you.” Bruce turns back to Jay and gets up.

The other man understands that they have to move to the Batcave for the rest of their conversation on that matter, and gets up as well.

They don’t talk on their way to the secret entrance, and Bruce hopes that it was not a mistake to let Jay in on this.

“You can’t live a life without trusting anyone, Bruce. We humans are not meant to be loners,” Barry once told him, sometime towards the beginning of their superhero carriers.

Barry certainly wasn’t the only one who did so, especially in recent times, but it meant something different coming from him, and now that he remembers it again...

Bruce decides to take him on his word and make an effort to open up again, at least a little.

Chapter End Notes

Bruce involving Jay in his investigations is quite a big step for your favorite dark knight. I'm alluding to what happened in the limited-series Identity Crisis from 2004, where Bruce got his mind wiped by Zatanna with most of the then JLA members allowing it to happen. That incident affected him profoundly, and it took him forever to get over it and build up a new trusting relationship with the other heroes. It's a good read, though I'm not happy about Sue Dibney's part in the story or what they did to Jean Loring's character. The repercussions of that story strongly affected the DC universe and the relationships between the heroes for a very long time afterward.

This is also why Bruce is reluctant to involve any of the other JLA members, or why the other heroes are so unwilling to consider the possibility of Barry being innocent. They are still trying to get over the whole fiasco with Dr. Light and Jean, and whatever is
manipulating them regarding Barry is not helping either.

Jay probably has a point in trying to urge Bruce to open up to the other JLA members, or at least Clark and Diana, but Bruce is not wrong about that possibly not being the smartest move just now with the limited information he has.

Having them both finally getting on Barry's case is pretty awesome, though, even if they are still pretty much fumbling around in the dark. Bruce is pretty much going on an inkling, he has no concrete proof that he is right when it comes to Barry, but two heads are better than one, so maybe that will change soon.

We will be back with Barry in the next chapter, who will have to deal with a customer he knows from his time in the Heights, and who is a rather nasty fellow.

Thank you all so much for reading and giving me feedback, I treasure every comment I get from you guys! :)

I will be back with the next chapter in two weeks’ time!
Having the Past Catch Up with You

Chapter Summary

Barry is confronted with one of his former tormentors during a shift at the Saloon. Things don't go so well.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is unedited since my friend and editor Quintessenzza got sick (which, of course, has to happen when the poor guys gets a couple days off), so I apologize for any mistakes you may come across. I went over this chapter a few times, but due to a shortage of time on my part I wasn’t able to give it as much attention as I would have needed to. Still, I hope you guys will enjoy it regardless. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“W-We’ve been a-little sh-short on c-cust-tomers th-the l-last t-two w-weeks,” Barry remarks to Charlie as he wipes down the bar while looking over to the four men who are currently the only people around next to him and his boss.

Charlie’s grunt is the only response he gets, and the man doesn’t bother to look up from where he is taking count of the bottles of hard liquor they have stashed behind the bar.

Barry shoots him a frown, though it is somewhat of a relief how unconcerned the other man seems about the current state of their business, or lack thereof.

Apart from the Rogues, the bar has gotten very few visitors for the last few weeks, even on the weekends, and he can’t help but think of what Roy told him a couple of days ago, about criminals being picked up from the streets, and how that has everybody's nerves on edge.

He hasn’t had the opportunity to talk with Len about it, yet, since his friends have been busy planning another job, but he would ask Sam to bring him over to the hideout instead of his apartment, tonight, even though things between them still feel somewhat odd.

It isn’t as if Barry wasn’t welcoming the slower pace, for once. It is nice that he doesn't have to look after a crowded bar, but he knows that this isn’t good for business, and there is the possibility that Charlie would lay him off should this lull last.

The thought alone causes something in his guts to twist painfully, and he hopes that the current situation will only be temporary. He can’t even imagine what he will do should he lose this job, especially so soon after finding it in the first place. He would be in so much trouble-

“Mother Mary's tits, Allen, you look like someone killed your favorite kitten. Stop worrying yourself
sick,” Charlie tells him in a sharp tone that makes Barry jump since he didn’t expect his boss to stop ignoring him any time soon. He quickly turns to the other man, eyes wide, and stammers an apology.

Charlie glares at him, before he rolls his eyes and gets up from his crouch with a huff. “Seriously, you’ll end up giving me an ulcer if you keep going like that.” He puts the pad aside he is using to keep track of their current amount of liquor and grabs himself a coke from one of the two fridges behind the bar.

“You’re such a damn worrywart,” Charlie continues grumbling as he opens the bottle lid with his lighter. “It’s just part of owning a damn bar to deal with downtimes like this one, that doesn’t mean you’ll run out of business.” He takes a sip and glares towards the general direction of their few customers. “Not that I wouldn’t welcome closing this shithole for a week or so to take a break.”

Barry thinks about pointing out that he can take over for a few days so that Charlie can take off for once, but he immediately pushes that idea away.

He has gotten used to this job enough that it doesn’t terrify him anymore to come to work, but he knows that he isn’t able to handle the bar on his own for more than an hour or so at a time. Not yet, at least, and Charlie certainly knows so too.

“I swear…” Charlie grunts and leans forward, so that his lower arms are resting against the top of the bar, frowning darkly. “If my da hadn’t always made sure to keep this damn place open as long as even just one soul showed up, I’d have kicked that handful of jackasses out by now and were on my way to Cuba.”

“Y-You think it has something to do with R-Roy?” Barry asks hesitantly and shoots the other man a wary look. Charlie has been around when Roy told him about the rumor of criminals vanishing off the streets, but he didn’t say anything to it.

Charlie’s expression darkens, and he shrugs. “Can be, but you shouldn’t take everything people tell you all that serious, especially when it comes to the bunch that frequents our noble establishment.” He scoffs and shakes his head. “Criminals are a paranoid bunch; they see the boogieman lurking in every shadow.”

Barry frowns and is about to protest on behalf of his friends when the entrance to the bar opens and the person that enters causes him to freeze.

Jeremy Tell, who is better known as Double Down, looks very much like Barry remembers him from his time in the Heights, tall, slim, and with an air of danger surrounding him.

The man became an addition to the Flash’s rogues’ gallery when Wally was already wearing the mask, and Barry got the unfortunate pleasure to meet him while in prison.

It has been years since he saw Tell the last time, and it still feels too soon. He has been worried about meeting people like him while working here, men who knew him from prison, who enjoyed going after him whenever the guards had enough of him and the Rogues weren’t around. The last two months seemed to prove his fear unfound, though, since none of the Flash’s rogues’ gallery other than the actual Rogues and Rainbow Raider have sought the bar out.

Till now, that is, and as his heart starts to drum against his rib like crazy as he can’t help but curse himself for being stupid enough to believe that something like this won’t happen.

A shiver runs through Barry, and he fights the sudden intense urge to turn and scram before Tell can spot him.
Of course, Tell has already noticed him, and a familiar mean glint flickers to life in the man’s eyes as he makes his way over to the bar, where Barry suddenly feels trapped, like a rabbit driven into a corner by a rabid dog.

“Well, who do we’ve got here?” Tell grins broadly as he takes a seat at the bar and gives Barry a nod that seems absurdly amiable as if the man didn’t force his cock down Barry’s throat the last time he has seen him. “Allen! You fox, I didn’t expect to meet you here!”

Tell is loud, too loud for Barry’s liking. It causes unwanted memories to stir up in his mind, and he flinches involuntarily.

“You finally found yourself a wench to help you with this sinkhole, Charlie?” Tell turns to Charlie, whom Barry has momentarily completely forgotten. He glances back to Barry, winking at him. “Is he still so good with his dirty little mouth-”

“You remember what happened the last time you harassed one of my employees?” Charlie cuts him off, and while he doesn’t raise his voice, it still causes Tell to break off. It only lasts for a second, though, before the criminal clicks his tongue, pointing at Barry. “Allen and I are old friends, Charlie, no need to get all defensive on his behalf.” He turns to Barry, his grin widening till it is all teeth. “Right, Allen?”

“W-We’re n-n-no f-f-friends,” Barry disagrees, and while he tries to sound calm, he fails spectacularly.

“Ouch, that hurts.” Tell puts a hand over his heart, feigning pain, and Barry shivers as he sees the open malice and mockery in the other man’s eyes. “And I thought there was something special between us.”

“Th-Th… Th-There i-i-is n-noth-thing b-bet-tw-wen-ee u-u,” Barry replies furiously, and he tries not to show how unsettled he is by having to face one of his former abusers after such a long time. “Y-Y-You’re a-a t-t-twist-ted m-ma-n wh-wh-who e-e-nj-j-joys m-mak-k-king o-o-th-thers s-s-suf-f-f-fer b-bec-cause y-y-you c-c-can’t m-make y-yours-self f-feel l-l-less i-ins-sign-i-nig-fic-cant a-any o-o-th-er w-way.”

Tell’s expression changes briefly as anger crosses his face, and Barry nearly shrinks back, because he remembers all too well what the other man is able and willing to do when angered.

“You’ve gotten quite a big mouth,” Tell remarks with a contemptuous smile and looks over to Charlie, arching his eyebrows. “You’re okay with your waiter insulting your paying customers like that?”

Barry feels his stomach make a lurch as he realizes that he probably went too far, seeing that Tell has a point there, but to his surprise and relief Charlie only snorts and shrugs. “He’s pretty spot on, isn’t he?”

“No wonder nobody is around in this shithole.” Tell leans back and clasps his hand on top of the bar in front of him, smiling pleasantly. “You hire a former cop who can’t get a straight word out, and let that little bitch insult your paying customers. Is he really that good on his knees?”

Barry’s face heats up in mortification over what Tell just insinuated, and he suddenly would rather be anywhere but here. It is when he realizes what else the man let slip that his hands start to shake, and he glances nervously at his boss.

Charlie is meeting his eyes with an unreadable look, but even so, Barry understands that he will have to answer some uncomfortable questions later since he never got around to tell his current employer
about his time as a forensic scientist at the CCPD. He should have done so by now, but he has been worried that Charlie would not take it well and just kept putting it off.

“He is?” Tell guffaws, interpreting Charlie’s silence the wrong way, and points his finger at the man, winking. “Wouldn’t have thought that you go for bros-”

Charlie is damn quick for a man of his size, and he lifts Tell out of his chair nearly effortlessly by a firm grip on his collar.

The air in the bar shifts immediately, and everything grows quiet as the other men pick up on what is going on.

“Listen to me, you little fuck,” Charlie speaks in a low, dangerous tone that causes a shiver to run down Barry’s spine, “you’re not funny, and you really start to get on my nerves, so if you don’t want me to haul your scrawny little ass out of here and ban you for good, you keep your mouth shut and stop harassing my barman. Capiche?”

Tell is still grinning at Charlie, though there is also fear visible on his face that makes it clear that he is not willing to start a fight with the bar owner. Once again, Barry is surprised by this, since people like Tell do have powers, quite dangerous ones at that, and while Charlie is intimidating, he still is just an ordinary man.

“Of course, Charlie,” Tell agrees, talking with some difficulties due to the tight grip on his collar, and glances over to Barry, his grin getting a little sharper. “Sorry, Allen, didn’t mean anything by it. Just happy to see your gorgeous mug again.” He winks at him, causing his skin to crawl. Charlie seems to take Tell on his word as he lets him go once more, which causes the thug to drop back on his barstool with a thud.

Charlie grabs his coke, takes a pull, and turns to Barry. “I’m in the back, I have still some orders to take care of.” He narrows his eyes and adds in a low voice, “We’re going to have a talk after we’re done for tonight.”

Barry swallows uneasily and nods.

The glare Charlie leveled him with intensifies somewhat as he looks back to Tell while his words are still directed at Barry. “Get me if there’s trouble.”

With that, he makes his way to the back of the bar, leaving Barry alone with Tell.

Barry wishes he could just follow Charlie, hide away in his office till Tell is gone again.

That’s not possible, though, and he knew from the moment he considered taking this job that something like this can and likely will happen.

“So,” Tell starts, and Barry reluctantly directs his attention back to him. “You wanna ask for my order or do you just wanna stand there and look pretty?” The leering way with which the criminals is eying him as he says that, causes Barry to feel ridiculously vulnerable, and he regrets having not put another layer over the long-sleeved shirt he is wearing.

“Wh-What’s d-do y-”

“You’re still sound like such a mentally challenged idiot whenever you open your mouth. You know that?” Tell interrupts him, chuckling. “How the fuck are people standing that?”

Barry scowls at him but stays quiet.
“You were asking?” Tell smirks, leaning a little closer to him over the bar.


“My what?” Tell is clearly very much enjoying himself. “What’s an o-ord-der? Something on your menu?”

Barry presses his lips into a thin, angry line, and doesn’t deign him with a response, which Tell seems to find quite amusing.

“You’re in a cranky mood tonight, aren’t you?” Tell drums his fingers on the top of the bar, and nods to one of the two beer tabs. “One beer, tits.” He grins once again when Barry palpably tenses up at the humiliating nickname and watches him expectantly.

Barry glares at him, though he is pretty sure that he looks more scared than intimidating and decides to ignore it. Instead, he goes to work and prepares the order, hoping that the annoying bastard will just keep quiet.

Which he doesn’t, of course.

“You’re still that loud when someone pinches your nipples?” Tell inquires, and Barry can’t but shoots him another scowl, because that man is apparently putting effort into talking louder than necessary so that the other customers can hear what he is saying.

“Y-You h-h-heard, Ch-Cha-Charlie, i-i-i-f y-you-

“Fuck’s sake, Allen, lighten up! I’m just having some conversation with an old friend-

“W-We a-a-a-re-nt-

“God, aren’t you a sensitive little bitch tonight?” Tell cuts him off, looking like he is enjoying this way too much.

Barry doesn’t respond, reminding himself once more that this won’t get him anywhere with that man. Thus, he puts the full mug in front of him, and says, “Th-That’s f-four d-d-dol-lars.”

“Sorry, what was that?” Tell tilts his head slightly in questing and squints his eyes, studying Barry as if he just spoke in some foreign language. “You’ve got to speak actual words if you want me to understand you.”

Barry feels his face heat up and grabs the little notepad he has resting close-by for situations like this, when someone tries to get funny with him, and writes the price down.

“Oh, I see. You’re asking for money,” Tell exclaims and shoots Barry a frown. “You could have said so, tits.”

Thankfully, Tell offers him a five-dollar bill, but asks for the change back, and explains, even though Barry couldn’t care less for any tip from him, “I don’t wanna support horrible service like this one, tits. You can’t even take my order without making a spectacle out of it.”

Wordlessly, Barry hands him his change back and returns to cleaning the working area behind the bar, wishing that Tell would just leave him alone, which he doesn’t, of course.

Instead, Barry has to listen to that jackass keeping a very one-sided but enthusiastic conversation up, bringing up incidents from their shared time in Iron Heights, especially those towards the beginning
of Barry’s imprisonment, when he was still on his own, without anybody’s protection.

It is a daunting, humiliating experience, and Barry wonders whether this counts as Tell causing him trouble to Charlie. The man didn’t kick Tell out when he made those ugly insinuations before, though, which causes him to hesitate, since he doesn’t want Charlie to think that he can’t handle himself. He could possibly come over as unfit for this job because he can’t deal with a bastard like Tell, especially now that the bar is going through a lull and putting a paying customer off certainly won’t help.

That aside, Barry has been the target for verbal cruelty before, and he knows he shouldn’t let it close to him and just ignore whatever Tell is saying.

The trouble is, the mere presence of the man causes memories to stir up in Barry’s mind he would rather not have to face again, and his taunting is not making it any easier to bear.

About half an hour goes by like that, and Barry keeps his head down and looking for tasks he can do behind the bar that would distract him from his unwelcome company, who isn’t dissuaded by Barry giving him the cold shoulder. It even seems like Tell finds it funny, and the predatory glint Barry spot when briefly meeting his eyes by accident tells him that this harassment won’t end anytime soon.

“You know, I’m no poof, but you’ve probably been the tightest ride I’ve ever had,” Tell remarks conversationally to Barry, just as he hands one of the other three remaining customers a fresh mug of beer. The thug shoots Tell a disgusted, annoyed look, but otherwise ignores him and returns to his table.

“My pants still get tight when I think back to it,” Tell goes on, that ugly smirk persisting on his face.

Barry doesn’t say anything and goes back to dusting the glass shelves in front of the mirror that makes up the wall behind the bar, where they exhibit part of their hard liquor. There is not a speck left, by now, but he has nothing else to do, and he is confident he will start screaming if he doesn't have anything to focus his mind on.

His eyes are itching, and the back of his throat hurts from emotional toll Tell’s words are taking on him. He wishes Charlie would come back again, so he doesn’t have to face this man on his own, and with him around, he doubts Tell would keep this up.

Swallowing thickly, Barry tries to ignore the feeling of misery that has settled over him, along with that awful helplessness, because there is nothing he can do, and it is so much like being back in prison, even though he knows that Tell isn’t able to harm him. There is no reason to be afraid-

The door to the men’s restroom is pushed open, and Barry is flooded by a nearly smothering relief when he spots Mick and Sam enter the bar. He unconsciously makes a couple of steps towards them before he stops himself when realizing what he is doing. His cheeks heat up, but Barry doesn’t care. His friends are here, and he doesn’t feel so alone or small anymore.

“Hey, Barry,” Sam greets him as they make their way over to the bar, smirking as he nods towards the many empty tables, “How are you able to keep up with how crammed it is?”

Barry laughs, probably too loud, but he can’t help it, it’s not that he finds the joke particularly funny, but the joy of having his friends here with him is nearly elevating. He immediately feels stupid, but neither of Mick nor Sam seem to have noticed anyway as their eyes are on Tell, who suddenly looks much less at ease than just a minute ago.
“I think he probably was busy enough with this little fellow around.” Mick grunts as he stops next to the other criminal, looking down at him with a grin that shows too many teeth to be anything but aggressive.

“You’re right! Look what the cat dragged in,” Sam exclaims, as if he had just now spotted the man, and slips into the chair next to him. “Double Down, long time no see!”

Tell watches Sam carefully, but the smirk is not leaving his face. “Hey, Scudder, it’s been a while.”

“Not long enough,” Mick decides as he takes a seat on Tell’s other side. He looks to Barry, giving him a brief once-over, and what he sees doesn’t seem to pick his mood up. He still gives him a slightly forced smile. “Two beers, buddy.”

Barry nods and goes to grab two mugs, hardly noticing how his hand are trembling again now that all the tension has started to let off him.

“Make three out of it, tits.” Tell’s words cause him to freeze, and briefly, he feels like someone kicked him hard into his guts, causing him to grow nauseated. He forces himself to move on, a moment later, ignoring how hot his face suddenly feels, and keeping his eyes down as he taps the beers.

“You really can’t keep your trap shut to save your own life, can you, Tell?” Sam asks, and the fake pleasantries from earlier is gone.

“So, Cold is still keeping the little bitch around?” Tell ignores Sam’s question, and while he sounds slightly on edge, he doesn’t seem outright worried, which doesn’t sit well with Barry at all.

It is then, that Barry realizes that he couldn’t spot his friend’s weapons as they came over, which can turn out to be very dangerous should they start something with Tell, seeing that he doesn’t need a gun to be deadly. Barry glances worriedly to his friends, and he wonders whether he was wrong with his assumption they are here because Sam checked up on him and saw that Tell is around. Wouldn’t they have taken their guns with them in that case?

The idea of a fight between them breaking out is unsettling, and he doesn’t want anybody to be killed or get harmed, not even Tell, but especially not his friends.

“The only bitch I can see around is you,” Mick sneers. “You always hide behind your fancy powers, but without them, you aren’t so tough.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, “you did cry and beg like a little girl when Cold broke your femur for running your mouth, remember?”

“Of course,” Tell agrees, his grin growing tense and forced. “Though it was five against one, so I wouldn’t be too proud of myself if I were you.”

Barry hands them their beers, and Tell fixes him with a stare, his smirk turning into a grin. “How much is it again, tit-”

The man is cut off when Mick’s fist collides with the side of his face, lifting him out of the chair.

Barry jumps back, caught off-guard by the sudden turn of events, and his heart is beating up his throat as he sees how Tell’s skin starts to peel off, forming the razor-sharp cards that can easily cut through skin and flesh.

“You fuckers really wanna mess with me here?! Outside the heights and without your silly gadgets at
hands?!” Tell cackles, sounding both incredulous but also furious as he gets back up on his feet. His face is already partly free of skin, showing blood vessels and wet muscle tissue. He looks still slightly stunned from the punch, which doesn’t surprise Barry seeing that Mick is strong as an ox, but he doesn’t need to focus his mind to send his cards out.

Barry throws himself to the ground as the cards swish through the air, and out of the corner of his eyes, as he ducks his head, covering it with his hands, he can make out how Sam jumps behind the bar for cover as well.

The bottles of hard liquor and the mirror break into hundreds of pieces that rain down on them, and the piercing smell of alcohol starts to surround him like a thick cloud. There is also the sound of sharp objects burying themselves at top speed into wood, and Barry quickly realizes that it stems from one of the tables, who Mick is likely using for coverage.

Charlie will be livid.

“You cocksuckers really should have learned by now that it’s a stupid idea to fuck with me!” Tell laughs, sounding oddly unhinged and dangerous, like he did back in prison. Barry can’t fight a whimper, as he is assaulted by the memories of being beaten badly enough by Tell and the other inmates that he couldn’t get up from the ground, and that maniac standing over him, watching him with a nasty sort of hunger in his brown eyes.

“Oh, shut up!” Sam calls from his spot next to Barry, looking and sounding very much annoyed. “You’ve never been one of the big boys, Jeremy, and the little hissy fit you're throwing right now is the exact reason why we can’t take you seriously! You’re a damn bully, a fucked-up one at that, and you always relying on intimidating people with your dumbass powers whenever things don’t go your way won’t change that!”

“Let’s see whether you’ll still talk that big once I’ve slit your throat,” Tell snarls, and Barry tenses up as he notices that the man sounds closer again. He glances up to Sam, who notices his movement and meets his gaze. To Barry’s surprise, his friend signalizes him to stand down.

“W-We’ve t-to g-get a-aw-way f-from h-here,” Barry hisses, nodding to the doorway on Sam’s other side that leads to the back.

“Stay put,” Sam tells him in a low tone, and Barry has no idea why he is not already moving since it is evident that Tell means business with his threats.

His confusion over his friend’s plan vanishes when the sound of a shotgun being pumped cuts through the air, causing everybody to pause.

“The hell is going on here?!” Charlie demands, pointing a very mean and also very illegal looking RMb-93 towards where Tell must be standing. He glances over to the now demolished bar and then down to where Barry and Sam are still hiding. His nostrils flare in anger, and he glares at Sam for a second before turning his attention back to the man responsible for the whole destruction.

“You fucking little jackass,” Charlie starts and looks about ready to pull the trigger, “do I look like a damn bitch to you!? Do I look like you can fuck with me?!”

“I didn’t start-”

The nearly deafening sound of the gun being fired indoors drones any other noise out, and Barry grits his teeth, biting down on a gasp.

Did Charlie just-
“I don’t care who the fuck started it, you monumental moron!” Charlie yells, sounding utterly livid. “You’re the asshole who broke my fucking bar! That’s at least 15 grand, you stupid fuck!”

“I—"

“Shut up!” Charlie pumps the shotgun once more and sets aim at what is likely Tell’s head. “You’ll pay for this mess, Tell, for every single drop of liquor you just ruined! And you can be sure that your damn ass is banned for the foreseeable future!”

Even though Barry is still lying behind the bar, he is pretty sure he can imagine that it is hard for Tell not to protest.

Having a shotgun pointed at you which is only used by the Russian military is probably a very persuading argument to stay quiet, though, and the criminal does just that, despite how he must be seething.

“You got that??!” Charlie demands, and if it’s possible, he sounds even more furious.

“Right, I got it,” Tell agrees, his anger hardly suppressed in his voice.

“Good.” Charly nods, and snarls. “Then get the hell out of here, and if you’re not back with the money by Friday, I’ll make sure you’re never going to bother another fucking bar on this planet with your ugly mug!”

There is a moment of tense silence during which Charlie and Tell are probably glaring each other down. Then, Barry can hear Tell shuffle back a few steps, before he hisses a thread that is meant for him and the other two Rogues. “I’ll get you for this.”

“Don’t forget to use your moisturizer in the morning, Jeremy,” Sam calls, still from his position behind the bar, “You skin probably won’t stay this forgiving forever, old chump.”

Tell doesn’t respond but instead, his steps can be heard, leading up to the entrance of the bar, before he exits it.

Barry exhales a breath he hasn’t realized he was holding until now, and slowly, gingerly as not to cut himself on the broken glass, gets up on his knees.

“Well, that was a fun intermezzo from the boring meeting,” Sam remarks and grins when Barry shoots him an incredulous look. It is then when Barry picks up on how very pleased his friend seems to be with himself that he realizes that what just happened did so on purpose.

“I should blast your fucking head off,” Charlie tells Sam, looking still too pissed for Barry’s liking. “Yours and Rory’s.”

“Tell is a lying jackass, we didn’t start anything,” Sam complains as he gets up, but swiftly concedes when Charlie lifts his gun again. “Well, maybe we fooled around a little, but the guy went completely overboard with his trying to kill us reaction.” He makes a swiping gesture towards the chaos. “You think I was planning on ending up stinking like a bar and being nearly sliced into pieces by some dude’s creepy skin mutation?”

“You’re really not funny, Scudder.” Charlie grunts but puts his gun down. “You’ll pay for the damage as well.”

“The fuck? Tell is already compensating you for this-—”
“Sure, but if I let you little shiteads get away scot-free, you’ll end up pulling such a stupid stunt again when my barman is not able to stand up for himself.” Charlie turns his glare on to Barry, who just now got up. “And who seems unable to get me when he sees that a situation is about to escalate.”

“That’s not fair,” Sam protests, annoyed. “That’s not on Barry, we started shit with Tell, he couldn’t have known about it.”

“Will you shut up?” Charlie doesn’t take his eyes off Barry despite addressing Sam. His next words are meant for Barry, though. “I cannot use someone who needs to be babied by his friends because he isn’t able to put up with the scum that frequents this damn place.” He points an accusing finger at Barry, reminding him, “I warned you about this, Allen.”

“I-I kn-know,” Barry agrees, voice faint, and he hates himself for how he isn’t able to keep his eyes from tearing up. He averts his gaze to the ground, shoulders slumped, and starts to feel sick as he realizes that Charlie is likely going to kick him out over this.

“The fucker was harassing him,” Mick cuts in, sounding just as pissed off by Charlie going after Barry for this as Sam did before.

“Yeah, I mean, you wouldn’t have put up with that bullshit either,” Sam points out.

“The bar is closed,” Charlie says, “scram, I need to have a brief chat with my employee.”

“It’s not even midnight~”

“Just piss off, already, Scudder!” Charlie bellows, angry. “For fuck’s sake, Allen is a grown man. I’m pretty sure he can have a damn conversation with me without you two bozos around.”

Sam looks about ready to fight Charlie on this, as does Mick, and Barry, who just felt like the biggest failure for letting Charlie and himself down, doesn’t feel as bad anymore.

“I-I-It’s f-fine,” Barry tells his friends, giving them a faint smile. “I-I’ll c-call y-you wh-when I-I’m d-done h-here.”

Neither Mick nor Sam seem particularly fond of that suggestion, but they reluctantly agree, likely because they have to get back to whatever meeting they scrammed from as it is. Barry was not aware that they’re planning something with another party involved, but he guesses that it’s likely Gael and one of his business acquaintances again, which is probably also the reason why Len hasn’t turned up along with Mick and Sam. It is odd to think how spending less time at the hideout for about a week causes him to be pretty much out of the loop when it comes to what his friends are up to.

Barry watches how Sam and Mick eventually retreat into the men’s restroom, and he notices that the tension he has carried around with himself for the last couple of days eases somewhat. Maybe, he was just imagining his friends behaving oddly towards him; he guesses that he can be a little paranoid in that regard.

Well, as one thing gets better, another one will get worse.

Reluctantly, Barry turns to Charlie and shifts uneasily when he notices that the other man has been watching him with a dark, still somewhat angry expression.

“Go back to the office, I’m going to lock up,” Charlie tells him, and it is then than Barry realizes that they are the only two people around anymore. Their other customers probably scrammed the moment they realized that things were about to get dangerous with Tell. Most criminals are pretty smart when
it comes to not getting themselves involved in situations that don’t concern them, especially if they involve people with powers.

On his way to Charlie’s office, which is really only a room with a desk and a PC that seems to stem from the time when Barry still worked in forensics, he grabs his backpack to fish the clean extra shirt out he usually has around in case he spills something on himself by accident, which has happened a few times since they took a few cocktails into their menu.

Barry swiftly changes shirts, so that he is not reeking that strongly of alcohol anymore, and briefly thinks about rinsing the soaked shirt out, but doesn’t want to ask Charlie for the minute to do so and thus pushes it back into his backpack.

Charlie appears a moment later at the entrance, their cash box in hand, and closes the door behind himself.

Barry stays quiet as the other man makes his way around the desk and sits down on the office chair, all the while eying him thoughtfully.

“How much time did you and Tell spent in the Heights together?”

It is not the question Barry expected, not that Barry expected any questions. He considered something more along the line of You’re fired or I can’t use someone like you followed by You’re fired.

This doesn’t sit much better with him, either, though, since he really would rather not talk about his time in that place.

He shrugs, pressing his hands firmly onto his thighs, feeling the still damp material of his jeans as he keeps his eyes on the desk in front of him.

“A-A wh-while…”

Charlie doesn’t say anything but keeps observing him for what feels like an eternity to Barry.

“You’ve been raped in that place. What Tell’s said wasn’t just to rile you up, was it?”

Barry inhales sharply through his nose, his lips pressed firmly into a line, and he feels like someone emptied a bucket of cold water over him.

His lack of response seems to be answer enough for Charlie, who heaves a very weary-sounding sigh and leans back in his chair.

“Why the hell would you want to work at a place like this, Allen? You know what kind of people come here to have a good time.” Charlie doesn’t sound reproachful, more confused, and Barry wants to coil up again then and there.

He feels naked and nasty.

“I-I’m… I-I n-n-need th-this j-job,” Barry explains and hates how much his voice is trembling. He is pretty confident by now that Charlie is going to kick him out, most likely because his boss thinks he is doing him a favor that way considering what he just learned, but Barry doesn’t want to look any weaker in front of the man than he already does.

He is not weak.
Not like that.

“There’re other jobs out there,” Charlie points out. “One’s that don’t require you to work with people who do shit like what was done to you and are still able to look themselves in the mirror afterward.”

Barry swallows, and nods. “O-Ok-kay…”

“For fuck’s sake, I’m not trying to be an asshole here,” Charlie exclaims, and Barry is surprised to see the concerned, slightly guilty way with which he is studying him when he looks up. “Why don’t you try to work in a coffee shop? Or a bar that has actual decent human beings as customers?”

“I-I… I t-t-r-ried… I-I… n-nob-body w-w-want-ted….” Barry squeezes his eyes shut and lowers his head while reaching up to brush the tears away before they could fall.

He is such an idiot for believing that this could work out, that Charlie could want someone like him as an employee.

“How many interviews did you have?” Charlie asks in a slightly exasperated tone, and he is audible that he is out of his comfort zone.

Barry swallows again around the lump in his throat and shrugs, not lifting his eyes. “T-T-Twenty-sev-en.”

“Twenty-seven?” Charlie has clearly trouble believing that number. “You told me you were looking only since the beginning of the year.”

“I-I w-w-was…”

“What were you looking for?”

It isn’t an accusation, but Barry still feels somewhat irked by the question, because what does the man think he had been looking for? Another position at the CCPD?

“A-An-ny j-jobs th-th-that w-w-woul-lld t-take a-a f-felon,” Barry explains and crosses his arms in front of his chest, hoping it looks more like he is frustrated than him hugging himself. “D-Dock l-labor-rer, h-help o-on c-cons-struction s-sites, d-dish w-w-wash-sher i-in r-reast-taur-rants…” He huffs an unhappy laugh and tries not to sound too miserable as he points out, “I-I’m n-not e-ex-xactly wh-what p-people s-seem t-to l-look f-for i-in t-tod-day’s e-econ-om-my.”

“You didn’t get offered a single one of those jobs?” Charlie sounds truly baffled by that. “Not even for the dishwasher job?”

“Th-Th-They s-say I-I’m o-o-overqu-qualif-fied,” Barry explains and chuckles bitterly at the absurdity of that.

“You’re an academic?”

“M-Mas-ster… i-in Ch-Chemistry.”

“And you worked as a cop too?” Now Charlie sounds slightly incredulous, causing Barry to smile slightly and shake his head.

“N-Not a-a c-c-cop, I-I w-w-was a-a f-forens-sic s-scient-tist. A-A C-CSI.” Barry shoots Charlie an unhappy frown. “I-I’m s-s-sor-ry a-ab-bout n-not t-tel-ling y-you a-about th-this e-earl-lier, b-but y-y-you d-d-didn’t a-a-ask a-a-and I-I w-w-was w-w-worried, y-you…” He breaks off and shrugs helplessly.
“Yeah, I get it.” Charlie studies him a moment before asking, “I take it I won’t have to worry about you trying to cause me trouble with the police?”

“N-No,” Barry agrees. He doesn’t point out that the wrong people learning about him working here could cause him to be put back into prison within hours. Charlie knows so, after all.

His boss hums in understanding and doesn’t inquire any further, but studies Barry once again quietly, probably thinking of how to let him off in an easy way.

“I take it there are more people like Tell you have to look out for?” Charlie observes him and doesn’t seem surprised when Barry shakes his head.

“Most of them will probably end up here eventually,” Charlie point out further. “How will you handle them? You think your buddies can be around every time to pull a stunt like tonight.” His face darkens at that, and he scowls. “I hope for them they don’t.”

Barry doesn’t know an answer to Charlie’s question and stays quiet; eyes lowered to the ground as a feeling of failure slowly seeps through him.

“Look, I’m not firing you tonight,” Charlie clarifies, and Barry’s head snaps up so quickly that he feels briefly dizzy. “You’re a good employee, you are reliable and a quick learner, I can appreciate that. Because of that, I really would rather not have to let you go, okay?”

Not sure how to respond, Barry nods mutely.

“If I feel like you can’t do your job anymore because dealing with those guys gets too much for you, I won’t keep you. Not because you aren’t doing a good job, but because I need someone I know I can trust with the bar when I can’t be around. Do you understand?” Charlie’s grim expression relaxes a little when Barry immediately agrees, sounding more than heartfelt.

“Y-Y-Yes, I-I… I-u-und-ers-tand, r-r-r-really! Th-Thank y-you! Th-Thank y-you, I-I w-won’t d-dis-sap-point y-you, I-I s-s-swear.” Barry feels like the weight of a truck was lifted off him, and he sinks back into his chair, the exhaustion he hasn’t noticed so far hitting him like a brick wall.

“Good, then we’re done here,” Charlie says before his face darkens again. “Now we can take care of the mess you idiot friends caused.”

“R-Right,” Barry a-agrees, sounding not much more excited about the prospect to clean up all the damage than his boss. He grimaces slightly at the memory of what happened and shoots Charlie an apologetic look. “S-S-Sor-ry a-ab-bout th-that.”

“Get me the next time you think something like this is about to happen,” Charlie returns somewhat gruffly and gets up. “Even if it’s just an inkling.”

“I-I-I w-w-will,” Barry assures him as he gets up too.

“And get me when Tell or another one of those guys who troubled you in the past turn up,” Charlie adds after a moment. “I’ll take over the bar when that happens or give you a hand.”

“Y-You d-d-don’t h-have t-to,” Barry protests weakly, seeing that he very much likes that offer. Charlie has hired him to have some more time to get done with the business part of owning a bar, though, something he has been forced to neglect for a while now. “Y-You’ve g-got e-enough o-other th-things t-to d-do.”

“If you really worried about that, I’ll show you how to do the damn paperwork and stuff.” Charlie
shrugs and heads towards the door. “I think a bookworm with a master’s degree like you probably gets more joy from accounting than average people like me.”

Barry is caught off-guard by that offer, and as he follows Charlie back to the bar, he stammers, “I-I’ve n-never d-d-done a-ac-counting.”

“It isn’t magic, don’t worry,” Charlie assures him with a snort, making clear that he doesn’t think too highly of that part of his job. He then stops next to the mess of broken glass and spilled alcohol, grunting. “Get the brooms and the fucking mop.” Heaving a sigh, he mutters, “We’ll probably be here for the next couple of hours because of those jackasses of friends you have.”

Barry does as he is told, and while he is not looking forward to the impending cleanup, he will take it as long as it means that he still has a job.

Chapter End Notes

That was one tough shift for our dear Bear, but at least it did end on a (mostly) good note. It probably was about time that something of this kind happened considering where Barry works and what he had to live through while staying in the Heights.

Tell is a particular kind of nasty, I never liked that guy, and I have no troubles picturing his equivalent in the comics doing such messed up stuff. He is one of the newer rogues gallery additions of the Flash (of Wally's Flash), and while I like Geoff Johns run on the Flash, I'm not the biggest fans of the rogues he came up with. He did a splendid job with the original Rogues, though.

A lot of horrible things happened to Barry during his stay in prison, and while we all pretty much can picture what it was like for the poor guy, I enjoyed writing a chapter that confronts him with one of the demons of his past. It shows how scarred he still is from what was done to him, but that he is still able to stand his ground and do his job, at least for a time. I think Mick and Sam proved perfect timing to turn up when they did; I don't know how much longer Barry would have been able to listen to Tell's taunts before snapping and either breaking down or throwing a mug into the psychopath's face.

I guess Charlie doesn't get away so well here, at least in the first part of the story since he leaves Barry to deal alone with Tell. Charlie did not think Tell was serious about what he said, otherwise he would not have put Barry in such a horrible situation. The Saloon's clientele is made up of a lot of rather nasty people, with a lot of them possessing a somewhat twisted kind of humor.

In the end, it wasn't all horrible, though. Charlie now knows what is going on, and he offered to have Barry's back. What that means for the long run has to be seen, since Charlie did hire Barry not only as a help but as someone who can take the bar over for maybe even days at a time. Right now, at least, Barry is not able to do so.

This chapter was a rather heavy one again, but the next one will be on the lighter, sweeter side, and Len will return with some news of change for his Rogues. :)

Thank you all for reading and taking the time to leave me feedback. I love reading your comments; they are just the best way to keep my spirit up even when I think I'm drowning in all the stuff I've to do at the moment. I have an amazing readers community
with you guys. :)

I'll be back with the next chapter in two weeks time!
"That's pretty cool," Axel exclaims, and Barry has to smile since that is high praise coming from the boy who usually prides himself on not being easily impressed by anything since, as he says, there are no things he hasn't already seen on TV or in video games.

The wax cupcake has nearly entirely melted inside the foot-high flames of the campfire which they've lit in one of the yards the deserted industrial complex has to offer, causing the green coloration of the flickering flames to slowly give way to its former yellow one.

It is a new hideout, or at least one Barry hasn’t been aware of before. His friends are only using the basement of the big complex as their living quarters, which consists of a mazelike structure below ground Barry has not grown familiar enough with yet to explore it alone far beyond the area his friends are currently occupying.

Mick grunts in agreement to Axel's earlier statement, shifting next to Barry where he is standing with his arms crossed, his mesmerized gaze fixed on the open flames. The man is taken by the little experiment Barry came up with to explain how the change of energy causes the electrons in atoms to move from one electron orbit to a different one, and how those electrons emit energy in the form of light particles once they drop back to their initial place.

The idea to tutor Axel a little in subjects like Chemistry and Physics came to Barry a couple of weeks ago, and despite the boy's apparent aversion to the notion of giving up his valuable time in favor of something like studying, he did humor Barry and went along with it. To their surprise, it turned out that Axel does not only possess quite an interest in science the teen himself hadn't been aware of thus far but that he is also an avid student once he finds something he deems worthy of his time.

"Can we use the potassium chloride ones next?" Axel turns to the tray Barry is holding. There, six similar looking small wax cupcakes are resting. They made them just before starting with their little
endeavor.

"Of c-curse," Barry agrees, happy that Axel is so taken by this experiment, and offers him the small wax muffin that contains the chemical in question.

Axel peels off the cheap paper cup they used to give the molten wax-chemical mixture its form and throws it into the still strong going campfire Mick offered to create for them when he learned of their plans.

It takes a few seconds before the wax is molten enough to allow the chemicals to interact with the flames, but once it does, the reaction becomes immediately visible as the color of the fire slowly changes to an intense growing purple.

"Nice," Axel remarks, smirking, and looks quite pleased with himself.

Again, Mick only grunts but makes a step closer to the flames, his gaze fixed on it with such avid intensity that Barry briefly worries about whether the man will get too close, possibly burning himself. It is not a big campfire, just large enough for the experiment to work nicely, but Mick’s fascination with fire can cause the man to throw any common sense away, and Barry doesn't want him to reach into the flames while he isn't thinking clearly or something of that kind. For someone who is such an expert when it comes to handling and working with open fire, Mick can be ridiculously reckless when it comes to his safety, as his numerous scars prove.

"Watch it, Mick, we've got a job tomorrow night, and I don't want you to drop out because you are an idiot and end up burning yourself to a crisp again." Len's voice cuts through the otherwise quiet of the cool evening air, causing Barry to turn in surprise since he hasn't heard the other man enter the courtyard.

The words, or maybe the sharp tone, are enough to snap Mick out of his trance-like state. He blinks a couple of times, looking a little dazed, before he turns to face Len as well, an annoyed expression on his face.

"Fuck off, Cold." Mick grunts. "I've just been looking, no harm in that."

"No, no harm in that," Len agrees with a snort and arches an eyebrow. "At least, as long as you don’t stick your damn hands into the flames."

Mick scowls, and he looks like he wants to protest, but he also seems very aware of the fact that Len has a point.

Of course, Mick is not someone who shies away from locking horns with people, and Barry feels his stomach sink as he realizes a confrontation between both men is about to happen. The mood among his friends has been tense, nearly hostile, for a while now, and that has led to them fighting more than once over the last couple of weeks.

It is to Barry's surprise, then, when Mick glances to him briefly, his lips pressed into a thin, unhappy line, and instead of telling Len off, he only settles on another somewhat sullen sounding grunt.

"Chill out," Axel interjects, shooting Len an irritated frown, "Rory was just helping us with setting up the campfire. No need to get all pissy about it."

Len turns his attention to Axel, narrowing his eyes. "You shouldn't have set up any damn campfire in the first place. The idea behind a hideout is to avoid attention, not to draw it in because you wanna see what happens when you throw a couple of chemicals into a fire." At that, his gaze moves on to Barry, who feels his cheeks heat up in response.
They are in one of the inner courtyards, and it would be difficult for anybody to take notice of their little experiment, but they are still taking a chance.

"Back off, who the hell would spot us out here?" Axel grumbles, defiantly crossing his arms, and glowers at Len.

"We're still inside the city borders," Len points out with a humorless smirk. "You think you'd notice if the Flash decides to pass by on his nightly patrol?"

"If that's the case, you suck at choosing hideouts," Axel remarks, stubbornly, causing Mick to chuckle, though the bigger man does look tenser all of a sudden now that the Twins' protector has been brought up.

"W-We'll p-put out th-the f-fire," Barry decides and shoots Axel an apologetic look since the boy has been enjoying this little experiment of theirs. Len is right, though, and he suddenly feels like an idiot for not taking the danger of Wally or Jay stumbling across them into consideration.

Mick had overheard his idea of showing Axel how different chemicals give flames different colorations when they were talking about it in the kitchen earlier, and the boy greeted his suggestion of the campfire with such enthusiasm that Barry pretty much agreed to it despite his better judgment. He shouldn't have.

"You can show him how the different chemicals color the flames with one of James' Bunsen burners inside," Len suggests, and the irked, annoyed quality is gone from his voice once more now that he is addressing Barry.

"We already made the wax muffins," Axel grouchily protests as he shoots the rest of said wax muffins a nearly mournful look. "They turned out amazingly well, and now they're going to waste because of your stupid paranoia."

"You'll have to live with it," Len tells him simply before he nods to the fire and addresses Mick. "Put it out; I don't need a speedster breathing down my neck tonight."

Mick gives him a dirty look in response but keeps it at that before moving to get the fire extinguisher that is resting next to the entrance to the little courtyard.


"You wanna join me for a little walk before continuing your lesson with the brat?" Len asks Barry and nods up to the clear night sky, which is filled up with stars that are only this visible out here, close to Central City borders, in the deserted industrial area that lacks any artificial light. "It's a rather nice night."

"Ugh." Axel makes a disgusted face and glares accusingly at Barry. "You're not seriously going to leave me, so you can go stargazing with your grumpy-ass boyfriend? You see his ugly mug enough as it is."

"Axel," Barry reprimands him with a sigh, knowing that the boy is intentionally insufferable because he is angry at Len for interrupting them.

"You better watch your mouth, brat, or I'll have Sam plant your ass back onto the streets next to Barry's apartment complex," Len warns Axel, though his tone lacks any real harshness, and he seems more amused by the teen’s attempt to get under his skin.
It catches Barry by surprise how unaffected Len is by Axel pointing out their relationship this bluntly, something he would have grown quite angry over just a few months ago. This change is a welcome one, one that causes a by now familiar warmth to settle in his belly as he realizes that Len is not ashamed of him or his feelings for him anymore.

"Right, because Barry would let you do that." Axel snorts and rolls his eyes, but waves Len off when his words cause an annoyed expression to cross his face. "Fine, have your stupid moonlight walk, Mick and me will be just waiting in the kitchen till you two are done being all sappy and lovey-dovey."

Mick snorts and meets Len's gaze with a smirk that isn't nasty but comes close. "Maybe some stargazing will even help you with the pissy mood you've been in the last couple of days, Cold."

"Don't worry about my mood, Mick," Len replies snidely and nods to the still flickering flames that lick away at the cool evening air, "as long as you don't set yourself on fire by accident, I'll be happy as a lark."

Mick looks ruffled by that insult, seeing that he prides himself on his skill to work with fire, and Barry takes this as their cue to leave their two friends for now.

"W-We won't take too long," Barry promises, cutting Mick off from whatever he was about to throw at Len's head.

"No problem." Axel shrugs, taking the tray of wax muffins from him. "Take your sweet time being grossly romantic; we'll just watch TV in the meantime."

Barry gives him a fond smile and follows Len back into the dark building, to get to the front entrance that would let them out of the big complex.

Spring is in full season, and the weather has finally started to feel accordingly, with the last lingering touches of winter vanishing just about a week ago. Thus, tonight's breeze may still be cool, but the air itself is no longer cold, and Barry inhales it deeply as they step out of the building, enjoying its freshness, and how it helps him to feel more awake.

Barry's steps slow down and come to a stop as he looks up to the sky and takes in the beautiful view of the milky way you can only see out here.

He loves the stars, the sight of them, and the sheer number causes a calm to overcome him as he studies them quietly, taking in the sea of tiny shining dots that make up the universe they all are part of.

"They're pretty bright tonight," Len remarks as he looks up to the night sky. Barry hums in agreement and steps closer to Len, reaching for his hand that feels warm and callouses to his touch. Len takes hold of his hand in return, giving it a slight, affectionate squeeze.

"Ax-xel's r-right, y-you kn-know," Barry says then, chuckling when Len suspiciously narrows his eyes in response. "W-W-Walking b-below th-the s-stars is p-pret-ty r-romantic."

Len huffs a laugh, giving his hand another squeeze, and smirks. "Yeah, I'm going all out for you."

Grinning slightly, Barry bumps his partner's shoulder, and they both start to move, taking a slow stroll outside the walls of the big, empty complex that lies in complete darkness.

They walk in silence for a little while through the quiet night, and Barry enjoys how it is only the
two of them out here, and how far away from everything else they seem, how small and insignificant his worries appear in moments like this one.

Things felt a little off between him and his friends for a while, not like they were upset or angry with him, but Barry noticed an odd sort of tension settle over the room whenever he joined them. It caused a paranoia to latch onto him, and the fear that they could be fed up with him, that they finally had enough of him, like all the others before them, made him nearly sick with worry.

It had been bad enough that he started to avoid being around them, hiding away in his or Eddy's apartment, as he didn't want to give them the opportunity to cut ties with him. It was a cowardly thing to do, and he feels ashamed of it, but it also led to Len finally filling him in on the little talk Jay had had with them.

It still causes an intense unease to overcome Barry whenever he thinks about it, the fact that Jay did contact the Rogues, that Jay knows for sure now that they are in contact, and that they are his friends. He has no idea what he should do about it.

Jay paid him a brief visit a couple of days ago, shortly after Barry learned of the older man contacting his friends, but he didn't bring up either the Rogues nor his relationship to them at all. Jay was pleasant and nice, like usual, and instead of acting suspicious, he invited Barry over to have dinner with Joan and him.

That is not at all how Barry imagined things would go if his friendship with the Rogues ever came to light, and a part of him doesn't want to trust it.

Jay now knows more about him than he ever wanted him to. He knows about the abuse inside the prison and the Rogues, and Barry can't say which unsettles him more. In a way, he feels as if he must feel ashamed for both, but Jay hasn't blamed him for any of it so far, nor did he go to the League or contacted the authorities himself.

It would be an understatement to say that this keeps Barry's nerves on edge, but there is nothing he can do about it. If he were more honest with himself, though, there is nothing he wants to do about it since he is too much of a chicken to talk to Jay about contacting the Rogues behind his back.

At least, things with his friends feel normal once more. After they learned that Len told him about Jay's little chat with them, they seemed to relax and be more at ease with him. Their behavior is still strange to Barry since he doesn't understand why they behaved the way they did in the first place.

Was it because of Jay or him? Like with so many other things, they haven't talked about it so far. It is mostly because Barry doesn't want to touch upon his past as the Flash or anything that has to do with it, but he also quite confident that the Rogues don't want to discuss any of it any more than he does.

A friendship like theirs can be difficult due to their shared past and all those things they would rather not bring up. It is exhausting, and Barry has started to consider just sitting down with them to talk about everything.

They won't abandon him, he is sure of it by now, but there is still an irrational part of him that fears just that, even though he knows better.

Barry doesn't like how he is running away from this, like he has been doing so for a long time now, and it is very likely that a conversation like that, laying things out in the open, can benefit their friendship.

*What if they take it the wrong way, though?* The familiar voice of doubt whispers to him traitorously,
urgently, as if it was afraid of his intentions.

*What if they think you're bragging or criticizing them, or-

"What's on your mind?" Len asks.

Barry blinks, his mind retreating from the mess of what-ifs and unspoken fears, and he looks over to his partner, who is meeting his gaze with curious, slightly concerned eyes since he has probably picked up on the change in his mood.

"J-Jay," Barry answers truthfully, though there is so much more to it he doesn't want to touch upon right now. He turns back to the dark path ahead of them which is faintly lit by the light of the stars above them.

Len hums, not sounding surprised, and gives his hand he is still holding a comforting squeeze.

Their steps slow down, and Barry isn't sure who initiated it, but it doesn't matter. They end up standing close to one of the empty security booths at one of the entries leading to the parking lot they are currently in. Its windows are broken, probably by some teenagers who visited this area sometime in the past, likely the same who left the graffiti you can find all over the place.

"Is he giving you trouble because of us?" Len sounds calm, a little weary, but even he has accepted by now that it is unlikely that they have to worry about Jay.

Barry shakes his head. "N-No, i-it's j-just…” He shrugs helplessly and sighs softly, rubbing his eyes with his free hand.

It is hard to put into words what is gnawing away at him when he isn't even sure about what exactly it is.

"H-He h-hasn't b-brought y-you up a-at all," Barry finally settles on and shoots Len a worried glance.

"He still hasn't told you about contacting us?" Len inquiries but doesn't sound surprised.

"N-No." Barry shakes his head and huffs another soft, frustrated sigh. He shifts his weight, suddenly feeling nervous, and looks up to the night sky, frowning. "H-He i-is… h-he b-behaves l-like n-noth-
thing h-happened, l-like h-he d-doesn't kn-know…”

"And that worries you?"

Barry shrugs, pursing his lips unhappily.

"Garrick seemed honest enough when he told us that he would come after us if we hurt you," Len remarks after a brief silence settled between them, causing Barry to turn back to him. His friend gives him a faint smile, though it is still evident that he is not exactly happy about what he is going to say, or maybe not entirely sure whether he believes it himself.

"He seems to be looking out for you," Len observes.

"Y-You th-think h-he w-won't c-cause m-me any m-more t-trouble?" Barry asks, and he feels a little silly for how hopeful he sounds.

Len doesn't reply right away but studies him silently with a thoughtful gaze.

"I think we would know by now if Garrick wanted to give you grief over this,” Len eventually
No, he certainly isn’t, Barry thinks and feels guilty when he realizes that he was unintentionally implying such a thing.

“I don’t get that guy,” Len proceeds with a frown, looking like this fact bothers him quite a bit. It isn’t surprising, Len doesn’t like people or situations he can’t entirely figure out, something like that can be more than dangerous for a man in his line of work.

Barry can understand the sentiment. He doesn’t get Jay either, or his unexpected change of heart when it comes to his innocence. That Jay has still not come up with a real explanation why he is suddenly no longer believing that Barry did those horrible things doesn’t help to quench his unease either.

“What if I do something that causes him to change his mind again?” Barry asks quietly, speaking more to himself than to Len.

He can answer this question for himself. He would end up back in prison.

Back with Michael and the other guards.

Shivering, Barry lets go of Len’s hand to cross his arms without noticing it and absentmindedly studies the dark, dirty ground they are currently standing on.

How can he avoid doing or saying something that could cause Jay to believe once more that he is a murderer and rapist if he doesn’t know why the man changed his mind in the first place?

“Hey.” Len steps closer to him, his voice is low and soothing, and he meets Barry’s worried, scared look calmly. “I told you that I won’t let you end up in that hellhole again.” He reaches up and cups Barry’s shoulders lightly. “Nothing like that will happen to you again.”

With some difficulty Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and nods wordlessly, trusting Len that he means it, but also very much aware that Wally and the others won’t make it easy for the other man to keep his word in such a case.

When Len pulls Barry closer, he doesn’t resist but goes with it, welcoming the embrace and offered comfort. He rests his forehead on his partner’s shoulder and sighs quietly, tiredly, suddenly feeling the late hour.

Len’s hand caresses his back lightly, comfortingly, and Barry wishes once more that he could pause time in moments like this one.

“I’m sorry for being such a Jonny Raincloud,” Barry murmurs and slides his arms around Len’s back, returning the hug readily.

“You’re not.” Len protests with a chuckle and presses his lips on Barry’s temple, causing him to shiver slightly. “You’re just worried, which is understandable considering the circumstances.”

“I wish I wouldn’t worry so much.” Barry confesses and pulls himself closer to Len. “It’s exhausting.”

Len hums in agreement and cups the back of Barry’s head with one hand, while his other one keeps caressing his back.

They stay like this for a long couple of minutes, until Barry starts to feel drowsy thanks to how safe
and warm he feels this close to Len, despite the slight chill of the night air surrounding them.

“Gael made us an interesting offer,” Len says suddenly, and it is so out of the blue that Barry’s tired mind needs a moment to make sure he didn’t just imagine it.

Pulling back, Barry meets Len’s gaze with a frown. “An o-offer?”

Gael is the go-to person when it comes to jobs for his friends right now, and Barry likes the man, despite his not so law-abiding way of getting new pieces of art for his collection, but the way Len said this makes something in Barry tense up in apprehension.

“Yeah,” Len agrees and watches him attentively but somewhat guarded. “To mix things up a little.”

“Wh-What d-do y-you m-mean?” Barry inquires and realizes that this probably was the reason why Len wanted to go for a brief walk below the night sky, to begin with.

“He knows someone who needs a crew to track down people and haul them in,” Len explains.

“L-Like b-bounty h-hunters?” Barry’s frown deepens, and he steps back, away from the embrace.

Len’s frown returns, as he doesn’t like the sudden loss of contact, but he doesn’t protest and instead shrugs. “Yes.”

“Y-You w-want t-to t-try o-out b-bounty h-hunting?” Barry can’t help but laugh at that in disbelief. Neither Len or the others ever mentioned any possible interest of that kind before. It sounds ludicrous and dangerous.

There is a vast difference between avoiding getting caught when stealing stuff and actively going after people who are more than likely not inclined to follow along peacefully.

“Wh-Why?” Barry asks, shaking his head. “Th-That’s w-way m-more d-dangerous th-than s-stealing th-things, e-even w-with th-the F-Flash’s c-current m-mood.”

Wally can be violent, but he won’t kill them, which is something that can’t be said for anybody his friends might run into while doing a bounty hunting job.

“It’s not illegal,” Len points out, catching Barry off-guard, who would have expected any reason for his partner’s newfound interest but this.

“Wh-What h-has th-that t-t-to d-do w-with a-anyth-thing?” Barry watches Len in confusion, not sure whether he is serious or pulling his leg. He hopes that his partner is joking.

“I think it would be wise to avoid any heat from the capes for now,” Len explains, meeting Barry’s incredulous, confused gaze firmly, before averting his eyes to the night sky, pushing his hands into the pocket of the dark leather jacket he is wearing. “If Garrick knows about us, it’s better not to give the man any reason to use you as an excuse to come after us.”

“H-He w-wouldn’t d-do th-that,” Barry protests and means it. At least, right now, Jay wouldn’t, not when he believes in his innocence.

“Maybe,” Len allows, but his expression grows grimmer as he goes on while glaring up at the stars. “But I doubt that he'll only sit around and let you waste away in the Keys if he's certain that you're innocent.” Len turns back to him, a mixture of worry and annoyance on his face. “He will likely try and convince the rest of those better-than-thou jackasses as well, and I doubt that it won’t eventually come up that you’re all buddy-buddy with part of your former rogue gallery.” He exhales a sigh,
briefly lowering his gaze to the ground, scowling, before he looks back up and gives Barry a pinched smile. “I think it’s better to try and look for something we can do that won’t end with our asses being hauled back in a shithole like the Heights.”

“Th-The ch-charges a-against y-you w-won’t d-disap-pear j-just b-because y-you d-decide t-to n-no l-longer s-steal,” Barry reminds him. “Th-That’s n-not h-how c-criminal r-rec-cords w-work.”

Len shoots him an irritated look at that. “You don’t say.”

They stare at each other darkly for a tense minute, until Barry has to break eye contact and avert his gaze.

An unease settles over him, making him feel restless, and he can still feel Len’s eyes on him, watching. The sensation suddenly feels very uncomfortable.

A low, frustrated huff escapes Len a moment later, and Barry freezes when he hears him step closer, the comfort his presence offered before replaced by anxiety. He shivers and fights the urge to move back, away from Len. It would be mean and unfair, Len didn’t do anything that warrants such a reaction, and Barry can’t let himself be intimidated like that by an exchange of a couple sharp words.

This can’t even count as an argument; there is no reason to feel so upset.

The sudden urge to tear at his hair in frustration overcomes Barry. He hates how overly scared he reacts to the most inconsequential things at times.

How scared he is to make the other man leave.

“Hey,” Len says, calmly, and makes a soft, shushing sound when Barry jumps in response to him touching his arm. “It’s okay; we’re okay.” He starts to rub Barry’s upper arm soothingly, and it is then that Barry notices that he is hugging himself once more, which causes his cheeks to grow hot in embarrassment.

“I think it would be wise to not add anything new to our criminal record for now,” Len tells him, quietly. “I know that this won’t really make a difference in the end, but it won’t hurt to be careful.”

“Y-You l-like wh-wha-what y-you're d-doing,” Barry points out in a murmur and glances up to meet Len’s gaze with an unhappy, guilty one.

“We’ve hardly been doing jobs for the last year and a half as it is, especially inside the Gems,” Len reminds him with a crooked smile. “It’s too risky with how alert the capes are.” His smile drops and is replaced by a sneer. “And if Alvares wins the upcoming election, we can add trigger happy cops to our list on top of that.”

Barry’s stomach drops at the mention of the politician. He hasn’t been actively keeping up with what is going on regarding the upcoming mayoral elections, they were still a couple of months away, but they were a hot topic of discussion at the Saloon. Nobody who visits the bar is a fan of that man, his somewhat radical views on how to make Central City a safer place have every criminal’s teeth on edge, especially with Luthor backing him and his ideas.

“No,” Len agrees, “but it’s not strictly illegal either, and Gael assured me that his friend would make sure only to hand us jobs that won’t cause us any additional trouble with the law.”
Which means no dead on sight bounties; Barry realizes and feels a little bit relaxed.

The Rogues have killed in the past, Barry is acutely aware of that, but he doesn’t want them to make a habit of it because the job calls for it.

“We’re not even sure whether we’ll switch professions,” Len remarks and lifts his hand to cup Barry’s cheek, lightly tracing his cheekbone with his thumb as he meets his worried gaze. “It’s just an offer, and we agreed to listen to Gael’s friend and possibly try a job out before making a real decision.”

“Th-The o-others are ok-kay w-with th-this?” Barry inquires, a little surprised to learn so.

Len snorts and shoots him an amused look, arching an eyebrow. “You think we’d have this conversation if they weren’t?”

“Th-They l-like s-stealing,” Barry points out.

“They like the money and the thrill that comes with the way we’re getting it,” Len corrects him, “and we haven’t had much of either for a while now.” He slips his hand from Barry’s cheek to his neck and squeezes it lightly, reassuringly. “We’ve been talking about this, and we’ve decided to give it a chance. If it turns out that it’s not for us or too risky, I’ll call it off, and we’ll go back to being good old thieves.”

“Wh-When are y-you g-going t-to m-meet w-with G-Gael’s f-friend?”

“This Sunday.”

In six days. That isn’t long off, but Barry is sure he is going to worry about it for the rest of the week.

Len seems to guess so since he lightly urges Barry closer while lifting his other hand to cup his face. “We’re going to be fine, baby. We haven’t decided anything yet, and if I think that it’s too dangerous, we’re not going to do it.” He kisses Barry on the bridge of his nose, coaxing a smile from him, before pulling back and continuing with a serious expression, “I won’t risk leaving you behind like this just to get cheap thrills or money.”

It is reassuring to hear him say so, and Barry feels the lump in his throat grow a little bigger, and his eyes start to itch. He gives Len a small, grateful smile and cups the hand on his cheek with his own.

“You’re not clingy,” Len argues, and while Barry still has his eyes closed, he can feel the other man’s frown with which he is now studying him.

Sighing softly, Barry leans forward, so that he can rest with his cheek on Len’s shoulder.

You mean the world to me, I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you , Barry thinks but doesn’t dare to say so out loud.

The fear of losing Len is daunting. Even more so is the notion that it could happen because of something he does.

People tend not to stick around once he establishes a real connection to them. It happened with Al, later Simon, and eventually Iris, Wally, and all the rest. He would count his parents too if he could
muster up an actual memory of them that goes beyond murky figures he connects with certain smells or touches.

Sometimes, he feels like he is cursed.

You’re being silly, Barry tells himself while staring absentmindedly at the dark building complex that is nearly swallowed by the shadows surrounding them.

Sometimes things just don’t work out between people, it happens.

It is just frustrating that it seems to be the case every single time Barry allowed himself to get close to a person, to connect with them.

Barry enjoys the warmth that seeps from Len’s body to his. It is a stark contrast to the chill of the night air surrounding them. He listens to Len’s breathing, can feel the hot air against the back of his head as his partner exhales, his lips so close that they touch his hair.

“D-Do y-you th-think th-this n-new j-job c-could h-have b-been p-part of th-the r-reason wh-why th-things b-bew-tween m-me a-and th-the o-others w-were s-so t-tense the l-last c-couple o-of w-weeks?” Barry asks quietly, allowing himself to lean heavily on the other man, who doesn’t seem to mind and instead tightens his arms he has securely around him.

Maybe the Rogues didn’t behave so odd around him because of him but because of the prospect of trying out a new business?

It’s unlikely but possible.

A couple of seconds tick by, and Barry is sure that Len is thinking about how to answer, which causes the sinking feeling in his stomach to return.

“I-IS it a-a p-problem th-that I-I w-was…” Barry breaks off and swallows nervously, pulling himself closer to Len, suddenly afraid of letting him go.

“No.” Len’s reply comes much quicker this time, and it sounds utterly certain, which dampens some of the anxiety that has latched itself onto Barry once more. “That wasn’t because of that.”

“B-But i-it w-was b-because of m-my p-past as th-the F-Flash?” Barry inquires and moves slightly so that his forehead is pressed against the warm skin of his partner’s throat.

Len starts to rub his back again, and Barry is sure he does so absentmindedly, though it is a comforting gesture all the same.

“Having Garrick contact us directly did spook some of them,” Len eventually settled on. “It’s not really because of you but more due to the old geezer.”

“D-Do th-they th-think I… I-I w-would s-sell y-you o-out t-to J-Jay?” Barry’s concern gives way to irritation when Len snorts at that, softly chuckling as if what he said was amusing in some way.

“Don’t be daft,” Len remarks and smirks when Barry pulls slightly back to shoot him a dark look. “Give them some credit, Barry; they know you’d never do that.”

“Wh-Why w-were th-they s-so u-uneasy ar-round m-me, th-then?” Barry demands, sounding frustrated, which he is grateful for since it covers the anxiety that is currently eating away at him.

“Because the whole situation is messed up,” Len points out, and he does so in such a deadpan voice
that Barry has to laugh despite himself.

Len is right; the whole situation is messed up.

That’s probably putting it nicely.

There isn’t anything Barry can add to this, he thinks about mentioning that he considers having a sit-down with them, but that possibly makes it sound too concrete of an idea since he still isn’t sure just yet whether he wants to do that.

He should just jump over his shadow and touch upon the elephant in the room, things won’t turn bad if he does, maybe things between them will get awkward for a while, but they won’t kick him out.

Sighing wearily, Barry closes his eyes and decides to put the idea out of his mind for now. He can think about it later. Right now, he just wants to enjoy being this close to Len, who keeps holding him and makes him feel safe.

To his surprise, Len speaks again after a minute or so passed in silence, “They’re still getting used to the idea of you as the former Flash, but they don’t hold it against you.” He tightens his grip on Barry’s back lightly, and adds, “We don’t let people in lightly, but when we do, it’s hard to get rid of us.”

A smile pulls at Barry’s lips, and he tightens his embrace around his partner in turn. “I kn-know.”

“We probably should get back inside,” Len remarks, though he sounds less than excited about the prospect, seeing that Axel will grab Barry and demand his attention the moment they step foot back into the hideout.

Barry hums and reluctantly lets go of Len. Before he pulls back all the way, he presses a light kiss against the corner of Len’s lips, pausing there for a moment as he speaks, softly, “I l-love y-you.”

A breeze picks up, making Barry shiver as it pulls at his hair and brushes over his neck, but then the patch of bare skin is covered by Len’s hand as he pulls him into an actual kiss. It’s their lips only touching at first, which is already an intimidating enough experience on its own, and Barry feels another shiver run down his spine as Len keeps watching him, attentively.

Barry’s heart is drumming in his chest, and he suddenly feels warm all over, it is a pleasant sensation if somewhat overwhelming.

When Barry finally relaxes, and the tension eases out of his muscles, Len nips lightly at his lower lip. It is a question and encouragement at the same time, and Barry only hesitates briefly before closing his eyes and parting his lips.

Feeling Len’s hot, slick tongue carefully push inside his mouth, moving against his before sucking at it tentatively, causes something hot to spike low in Barry’s belly, something that leaves him out of breath and flushed.

It nearly becomes too much then, but before a familiar sense of panic can take hold of Barry, Len ends the kiss, leaving him shaken and slightly overwhelmed.

Soft lips brush against his own once more, chaste like earlier. “You did great, baby,” Len says, his words hardly more than a whisper against Barry’s lips. “I’m proud of you.”

Warmth settles over Barry, and while he still feels somewhat dazed, there is also the sense of pride and relief.
They haven’t kissed like this since Cameron kidnapped him, it would have been too much for Barry so that they stuck to lips on lips contact and cuddling, something he felt much more comfortable with.

This time, Len decided to deepen their kiss, though, and it feels like an achievement to Barry that he was able to get along with it, to open up to his partner like this.

Len kisses the corner of Barry’s lips like Barry did earlier to him, and his breath is hot against his skin as he speaks in a low but warm voice, “I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, who would have thought that the Rogues could decide to try out something new for a change after all this time? Bounty hunting offers enough adrenalin-inducing excitement at least that it won’t get boring, though Barry is not wrong about it also being more dangerous than sticking to their usual heists, even with Wally being in a rather abysmal mood right now.

It will be interesting to see what comes of this, but this new choice of occupation will certainly cause Barry some headache for the foreseeable future.

I know that some of you have already been impatiently waiting for Len to return so we can get some more Len/Barry interaction, and I hope that this chapter was to your liking. I certainly enjoyed having some sweet moments between those two again; it is nice to see how far they have come in their relationship. Even so, Barry is still not good at having arguments with Len, even if those arguments can hardly pass as such.

I always liked the idea of Barry tutoring Axel, who is obviously a smart kid but never got the right support or education to make something of it. Barry can see his potential, and he wants to help him use it. :)

Thank you all who take the time to leave me feedback, it is just always amazing when I read your comments; they never fail to cheer me up. It is just mind-blowing to know that you guys are out there and that you enjoy reading Singularity just as much as I do writing it. <3

Next chapter will be a little bit of a breather in which we’ll meet James again.

Have a wonderful two weeks! Till then! :)
Dinner for Three

Chapter Summary

James, Axel, and Barry spend an evening together and enjoy a good meal. Tensions still arise, of course.

Chapter Notes

My amazing editor Quintessenzz edited this chapter. Thank you for your help and doing such a marvelous job, my friend. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The slightly spicy aroma of the traditional Chinese dish James is currently preparing in Barry’s small kitchenette fills the whole living room. It causes both Barry’s and Axel’s appetite to rise a notch, which result in the teen complaining about how long it takes James to prepare the food, and that he is about to starve.

“I c-could l-lend y-you a h-hand,” Barry suggests, not for the first time this afternoon as he turns his attention away from the UNO cards in his hands and back to where his friend is currently stiring the noodles in one of Barry’s two pots.

“That’s not necessary,” James assures him once again, shooting him an amused and warm smile over his shoulder. “Just relax and let me work my magic.”

“Maybe you can work your magic a little faster?” Axel grunts, clearly irritated by how he still hasn’t had anything for dinner so far. “I’m starving here, and we don’t want Barry getting in trouble with the pigs because he has to explain the handsome corpse of a young teenager in his apartment.”

“Ax-xel.” Barry shoots the boy a warning look. “D-Don’t c-call th-the p-police th-that.”

“Len and the others call them that,” Axel retorts and adds with a smirk, “That’s probably not the worst I’ve heard them call the cops.”

“I-In th-that c-case I’ll h-have t-to h-have a t-talk w-with th-them a-about th-the l-language th-they’re u-using wh-when y-you’re over,” Barry replies with an exasperated sigh, not in the least surprised that the Rogues don’t bother to censor their language when the boy is around.

Axel rolls his eyes and turns back to his cards, studying them with a rather bored expression. “Fine, what I’ve said before stands but replace pigs with cops.”

“Will do,” James agrees easily, earning him a frown from Barry and a smirk from Axel, which leaves his face when he adds, “But you really should listen to Barry, Axel. The police are an authority we have to respect; there are a lot of good men and women out there who put their lives on the line to keep us safe on a daily basis.”
“Like the cops who shot a black girl in Alabama?” Axel asks with a slightly challenging tone to his voice.

“There are always black sheep,” James replies and picks up the pot with the boiling water and noodles, moving it over to the kitchen sink, where he empties it into a strainer. “Their actions don’t speak for the whole police body.”

“Maybe there are good ones, but it doesn’t matter if the whole system is corrupt,” Axel argues stubbornly, before picking a card, a yellow six, and throwing it into the slowly growing heap on the table in front of him.

“Th-The wh-whole s-system i-isn’t c-corrupt.” Barry is a little surprised that Axel’s opinion of the police is that low, not that it should, considering that the boy is spending quite a lot of time over at the hideout these days, and the Rogues would rather bite off their tongues than say anything nice about the police.

“If you say so,” Axel agrees flippantly but looks very much like he has a lot more to say on that topic.

“W-Without th-the p-pol-lice th-things w-would b-be m-much w-worse f-for everyb-body,” Barry points out, and a part of him wants to drop the topic because he is not blind to the bad reputation the police has right now, and for a good reason, too. “Th-They p-p-protect us.”

“Like they protected you?” Axel asks, and the question is like a slap, leaving Barry speechless.

“You think by being a little brat you’re proving a point here, Axel?” James cuts in as he stirs the sauce he made alongside the noodles. He meets the boy’s stubborn but slightly guilty gaze with a reprimanding look.

“I’m just saying how it is,” Axel insists, though he seems to try and avoid looking Barry in the eye.

“No, you don’t,” James disagrees and turns to him, frowning. “You don’t know anything about the events back then, so don’t try to turn what happened to Barry into an argument for your stance on that matter.”

“That’s not what I’m doing!” Axel seems honestly infuriated by James’ accusation, and Barry decides to interfere before they have a real fight at hand.

“I-kn-know,” Barry interjects swiftly, causing both of his friends to turn their attention back to him. He gives Axel a faint smile, still feeling upset about how the boy threw what happened to him in his face, but he knows that it wasn’t meant to hurt him. Axel is just a little moody today, has been for a few days now, and it probably is mostly due to him being a teenager than anything else.

“B-But wh-what h-happened t-to m-me i-is n-not th-the p-police’s f-fault,” Barry goes on. “Th-They d-did th-their j-job. Th-They w-were p-presented w-with c-clear e-evid-e-dence, th-there w-was n-noth-thing a-anyb-body c-could h-have d-done t-t-to p-prevent m-my i-imp-prisonment.”

That is not strictly true, but Barry can’t bring up the Justice League’s involvement, since neither Axel nor James are aware of his past as the Flash, and he doesn’t want to change that. Not yet, at least.

There was no way for Barry’s former work colleagues to change the outcome of his process. There has never been a process, to begin with.

Thinking about that, about how his former friends pulled strings to make sure that he would swiftly be locked away in the high-security ward of Iron Heights, is still daunting and painful, and at times
he does wonder what people at the CCPD thought about the whole affair. Whether they every questioned the proceedings of his conviction.

In the end, it doesn’t matter, and nobody seems to have lost any wink of sleep over it. None of his former working colleagues ever passed by, not even Patty. He is probably as dead to them as he is to the League.

Not that he expected anything else, within the first couple of months in that awful place he resigned himself to his fate, knowing that people at the CCPD probably were glad to get rid of him. Singh’s likely more so than anybody else.

“They should have done more than their job,” Axel says, the anger gone from his voice, and when Barry meets his eyes, he can see that the teen is regretting his words from earlier.

Barry swallows and shrugs, unwilling to talk about his past any longer. He turns back to the game, picks up a card, and throws a green four into the growing stack.

Axel is palpably unhappy about having to drop the topic but he doesn’t protest. He has always been quite vocal about what he thought of Barry’s criminal status. Over the last couple of months, he has gotten more insistent on his opinion, though, less willing not to fault anybody from Barry’s past for what was done to him, and, again, Barry is pretty confident it’s the Rogues rubbing off on him.

“You wanna give me a hand with setting the table, Axel?” James asks after a couple of minutes went by in uncomfortable silence, with Axel staring sullenly at his cards, and Barry not sure how to lighten the mood once more.

“No.” Axel glares at James, apparently still angry at him for what he said earlier.

“You don’t?” James sounds surprised, arching his eyebrow, and turns to Barry. “It seems there is more for the two of us, then.” He glances back at Axel and shoots him a very fake sympathetic look.

“To bad that this dish is only for people who are willing to earn their share.”

“You're being an ass,” Axel points out and rolls his eyes, but gets up anyway, conveniently ignoring Barry’s chiding look. “You’re lucky that your cooking is somewhat edible, and I’m hungry.”

“Lucky me indeed,” James chuckles as he watches the boy saunter over to the cupboard that holds the dishes. He notices Barry getting up as well and quickly lifts his hand, stopping him. “Nope, not you. You stay put and let us do the work. You’re busy serving others five days a week, you can make an exception today.”

Barry chuckles, amused by his friend’s antics, and sits back down. “If you insist.”

“I do,” James agrees with a firm nod and winks at him before turning back to the food.

“Funny, how come he gets food despite not pulling his weight here, and I’m being threatened with starvation?” Axel demands as he starts to set the table, though obviously it is in good humor.

“Because Barry is a productive member of grown-up society, and you are a loitering teenager,” James explains. He is not taking his eyes off the task at hand as he speaks, which is arranging the vegetables he has prepared earlier in different bowls, careful not to spill any despite the limited working space he is currently has.

“I’m productive,” Axel grumbles as he hands Barry his silverware.

“W-We know you are,” Barry assures him, watching the boy fondly. “J-James is just trying
“I am funny, there is no trying involved,” James declares and grins when Axel scoffs in return.

“Yeah, you’re a real comedian,” Axel quips and walks back to James to get the vegetables.

“I’ll let you know that my colleagues at work find me very funny.” James grabs the last two bowls containing the noodles and the sauce and makes his way over to the kitchen table as well.

“Right, consultants are infamous for their side-splitting humor,” Axel sarcastically agrees as he retakes his seat to Barry’s left side.

“Indeed, we are.” James nods as he picks the seat on Barry’s right side. He pushes the bowl with the noodles towards him, signaling that he should get started with the food.

“I-I th-think y-you’re b-both f-funny,” Barry remarks, putting a portion of the thick wheat noodles on his place.

“Of course, you do.” Axel huffs, but there is unmistakable fondness behind the exasperation he tries to convey.

“I think you’re funny, too,” James tells Barry while accepting the bowl back from him, causing Axel to roll his eyes in mock annoyance.

“I-th l-looks r-really d-del-delicious,” Barry remarks as he scoops some of the reddish-brown sauce onto his noodles. “Wh-What’s th-the n-name o-of th-the d-dish ag-again?”

“Zhajiangmian,” James replies, smiling, and looks pleased with the praise. “It’s a dish I ate quite a lot over the last months when I stayed with my relatives. My great aunt likes it a lot, and she let me in on some tricks to make it taste even better.”

“Like a family secret?” Axel inquires, putting about double the amount of noodles on his plate than either James or Barry have.

“Yes.” James hands Barry the dish with cut cucumber and reaches for the one with grated carrots. “And we Chinese are very strict when it comes to family secrets, so don’t even bother to ask.”

Axel snorts and shoots him an unimpressed look while covering his noodles with plenty of sauce. “Like I care for your old aunts cooking tips.”

“You should, and you will, as soon as you taste it,” James says in an overdone ominous voice that causes Barry to smile.

“Whatever, man.” Axel picks up a couple of noodles with his fork and takes a bite. He pauses, then, before looking back at James with eyes wide with wonder. James appears quite smug all of a sudden.

“Told you.” James grins. “Nothing beats shūzǔmǔ’s Zhejiang sauce.”

Curious, Barry picks up his fork as well and tries some of the food. A pleased hum escapes him the moment his tongue registers the rich flavor of the soybean sauce, and he gives James a praising nod as he chews on the bite, enjoying the texture of the noodles.

“That’s really good,” Axel remarks before eating another mouthful.

“Eat s-some of th-the v-vegetab-bles a-as w-well,” Barry tells Axel, nodding to the bowls with the raw, freshly prepared carrots, cucumber, and soy sprouts. It earns him a grumpy look in return, but
Axel reaches for the carrots anyway.

Later, when the food is mostly gone, and even Axel can’t eat another bite, Barry helps James with the dishes after the teen declared he is too stuffed to move around for at least the next hour and retreated to the couch.

“I have no idea how he can nap on that thing,” James remarks to Barry, glancing incredulously to where Axel is currently resting, and by the sound of his light snoring, he has already nodded off.

“I-Youth f-forg-gives a l-lot,” Barry points out, amused. He knows that nobody other than Axel appreciated his couch, understandably so, but after all the years he has grown used to it and can sleep on in for a couple of hours at a time without his spine feeling like it is going to snap in two.

“It can’t be that forgiving.” James frown and shoots him a skeptical look. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say your couch was evil.”

“I-It’s n-nice e-enough t-to me.” Barry shrugs, grinning, and accepts the plate James hands him to dry it off.

He feels warm, relaxed, and pleasantly full, it has been a pleasant afternoon, and he is glad that he can share it with two people that mean a lot to him.

Glancing back to Axel, Barry feels a familiar fondness overcome him, a comfortable feeling of companionship and family.

“Well, I’m pretty sure if a demonic spirit were haunting the couch, it would still end up being nice to you.” James’ voice causes Barry to turn to his friend, who is watching him with a warm smile. “You’re too damn likable of a person.”

Barry chuckles and shakes his head. “Y-You’re g-giving m-my l-likab-bility t-too m-much c-credit.”

“I don’t, I’m just a very observant person,” James argues, handing Barry another plate. He seems to think of something then, and a grin starts to tug at his lips as he inclines his head to where Axel is still napping. “Apropos of observant, my cousin, Mimi, seems to have taken notice of our cavalier over there, she asked me about how he was doing.”

“Th-That’s v-very n-nice of h-her,” Barry remarks, positively surprised about this piece of information. He thinks he knows who James is talking about, the kind teenage girl that offered comfort to Axel at Mrs. Ming’s funeral.

“She is a very nice girl,” James agrees, the affection he feels for his cousin plain in his eyes. “I’ll tell Axel about it later. I can give her his phone number if he wants me to.”

“Y-You w-want t-to p-play m-match m-maker?” Barry wonders aloud, amused by the idea, though he thinks that friendship with someone like Mimi can be beneficial for Axel.

“Well, considering that her dad is a black belt in kung fu and very protective of his daughters,” James starts and shoots another look at the couch, chuckling, “it’s probably in Axel’s best interest that I refrain from doing anything of that kind.”

“I’m s-sure h-her d-dad w-will l-like h-him.” Barry doesn’t doubt that Axel will be respectful towards James’ cousin, the boy seemed pretty shy around her the last time around, and despite his antics, he is a good kid.

“Yeah, he probably will,” James agrees, but adds smirking, “after he puts the fear of God into him.”
They retake their seats at the kitchen table after they finished doing the dishes and Barry made them some tea, talking a little more about how they’ve been for the last couple of weeks since work has kept both of them pretty busy.

It is close to nine, just as Barry starts to grow drowsy, when James mentions an odd call he got about a week ago, someone from the CCPD, inquiring about their kidnapping back in December.

“I thought the whole thing had become a cold case by now,” James remarks, giving Barry a curious look, “How long does it usually take for something like that to happen?”

“Well, a case is never really cold,” Barry explains, “not in the way TV shows portray it a-at times. Th-There are always detectives on unsolved cases, but s-sometimes they r-run o-out of l-leads and th-the c-cases a-are in a k-kind of s-stasis t-till s-something t-turns u-up th-that c-can m-move th-the in-vestigation along.”

“Really? That doesn’t seem to be the case in Law and Order.” James sounds honestly surprised to hear that, and Barry feels the familiar dislike for cop TV shows rise in him. They spread so much misinformation; it has always annoyed him how inaccurate those portrayed the inner workings of the police body, though Iris and Wally liked to watch them. Iris found it endearing how grumpy he always got when he joined them for an episode.

“It’s just a show, Barry,” Iris tended to say, smiling. “People know that it’s not real.”

People still picked up bogus information they thought of as facts, though, just like James has in this case.

“Well, makes sense that the detective called me, then, I guess,” James mutters, frowning down at his cup of tea which he is holding with both hands. It’s evident that remembering the whole ordeal from nearly half a year ago is difficult for him too, and Barry can’t but feel guilty that he has been bothered by it once more.

The fact that Barry didn’t have a landline nor a cell phone back then and couldn’t provide the cops that interviewed him with any number to reach him is probably the reason why he got spared from any further inquiries of that sort.

“Wh-What d-did th-the d-detect-tive w-want?”

“He asked some more questions about the whole thing, like whether I’ve been approached by those people before the kidnapping occurred and the rundown of the whole night,” James’ frown deepens, and he pauses for a moment. When he goes on, he shoots Barry a worried look. “He wanted to know whether it can be that the Rogues were involved.”

“Wh-What?” Barry’s stomach makes a painful lurch at these words, and he feels his body tense up with anxiety.

Mick burned the facility down; there should have been no traces left after the fire department was done with the firefighting operations. Why would a CCPD detective assume the Rogues were involved?

He and James only brought up the Blue Velvet and Blacksmith when they were being questioned.

“Yeah, odd, isn’t it?” James leans back into his chair and reaches up to rub his eyes, exhaling a somewhat weary-sounding sigh. When he meets Barry’s gaze again, his expression seems even more troubled. “He also questioned me about you and brought up your stay in prison.”
Barry feels himself grow cold and can only stare at James with wide, panicked eyes.

Why would a detective ask about him? Why now? Did he do something to cause their suspicion?

“Hey, it’s okay,” James tries to assure him with a concerned look. “I’m sure there is no reason to worry, the man was probably only trying to follow leads. He didn’t sound accusing or anything, just like he needed to work down a list of possibilities.”

Swallowing with some difficulty, since his throat is suddenly ridiculously dry, Barry nods.

James is probably right; this doesn’t need to mean anything.

He is just paranoid.

“R-Right,” Barry agrees eventually, his voice hoarse and weak sounding to his ears.

“I’m sorry I brought it up, I shouldn’t have bothered you with it,” James apologizes, his guilt plain on his face.

“N-No, i-it’s f-f-fine.” Barry tries to smile at his friend, though he is sure that his attempt is feeble at best, and instead lowers his gaze to the table. “I-I’m s-sure y-you’re r-right.” Something occurs to him, then, and the dread hits him with full force once more. He glances back up at James and asks reluctantly, “D-Did th-the d-detective s-say h-he w-wants t-to c-cont-tact m-me, t-too?”

The frown returns to James’ forehead, and he shakes his head. “No, he only said he would stay in contact.”

That’s odd. Barry would have expected the man to want and question him, too.

An uneasy feeling nestles in Barry’s guts, and he shivers involuntarily, before he asks, “Wh-What w-was th-the d-detect-ive’s n-names?”

“I think it was Malone,” James answers after thinking for a moment. “Detective Malone.” He studies Barry curiously. “Do you know him?”

“N-No.” Barry shakes his head, but there is an odd nagging suspicion that he does, even though he didn’t know anybody with the last name Malone working at the department when he was still part of it.

“D-Did h-he a-ask a-anyth-thing a-about m-me?” Barry knows that he sounds paranoid, but he can’t help it.

There is a brief pause, James seems hesitant to reply, and even before he eventually opens his mouth, Barry knows that he is going to lie. Or not tell him the entire truth.

“No, just about whether I was aware of your stay in prison,” James tells him, and there is concern in his eyes, making Barry believe that he is hiding something from him because he doesn’t want to worry him.

Barry hates it when people do that.

He doesn’t feel like getting the truth out of James, even though he is sure that his friend will come out with it fast enough. A part of him just doesn’t want to know.

So, he nods instead, murmuring a soft okay, and doesn’t protest when James changes the topic.
The bad, uneasy feeling follows Barry for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

This note will be very short, I'm quite exhausted from things real life is throwing at me right now, and I can't wait for July to arrive, everything will get back to normal then... or so I hope.

Anyway, this chapter is a shorter, quieter one as well, but I hope you guys enjoyed it even so.

Thank you all so much for reading, next chapter will have us finally learn some more about what actually is going on, and our favorite Bat-tective will be back. ;)

Cu all in two week! <3
Something Wicked Is Going On

Chapter Summary

Things clear up a little. Or maybe they don't...

Yeah, they don't.

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT:
Hey my lovelies, I have to sadly inform you that I will put Singularity on HIATUS until 1st of July. Work and studies keep me busy, and I've simply no time to spent on doing anything else at the moment. Currently I feel like my energy is leached right off me, I got sick a week ago and I'm in a near constant state of exhaustion and tension, which is why I wish I had time to work on Singularity since it helps me to relax and calm down, but it's just not supposed to be right now... I'm so looking forward for this semester to be over.

Anyway, enough of me moaning, I'll try to put up another chapter earlier than the above named date, but I can't promise anything. In any case, I'm looking forward to posting the next chapter again and, hopefully, returning with more energy. :)

Also, I know I have not yet responded to your comments on my last chapter, and I'm sorry about that, but I just didn't have the time. I'll get to it asap.

This chapter was edited by my amazing friend and kickass editor Quintessenzza. I don't what I'd do without you! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I must say, I’m surprised,” Zatanna remarks as her feet touch the Batcave floor, a guarded expression on her face as she turns toward Bruce. He is wearing his cowl, only his pursed lips give away that he is not happy about her being here.

If it were up to Bruce, he would not have extended this invitation, but Jay has a point. They need additional help with this since they have been investigating for weeks on end now without getting any closer to what is going on when it comes to Barry or who is responsible for it.

It is mostly pettiness on his part that caused him to balk at the mere suggestion of seeking out Zatanna’s help. Bruce is acutely aware of that since he knows the magician is probably their best chance to move on with their research about Barry Allen and who or what is messing with his and the rest of their lives. Zatanna has tried to get his forgiveness many times by now, and he knows that she was nothing but a young rookie back when she was forced to meddle with his mind. She was impressionable and simply scared of what could happen if she didn’t get along with the other heroes’ suggestion, but it is still hard to be around her nonetheless.
He expected better from her, and part of him knows how hypocritical that is since he has done too many questionable things over the run of his career as Gotham’s protector to judge her this harshly.

Bruce fights the urge to shudder, his hair standing on end since Zatanna’s magic causes the air around them to feel unnaturally dense, static in a way like it does with the Flashes when they connect to their source of power. It’s a raw feeling, a little unsettling, and it makes unwelcome memories in Bruce’s mind resurface.

It has been a long time since the magician was allowed inside Batman’s base of operation, and Bruce isn’t surprised that Zatanna is a little suspicious about him extending an invitation to her out of the blue. Despite the reason behind Jay’s words, and him knowing that they need some additional help if they want to get somewhere, he still isn’t sure how he feels about this.

“I did not expect to be welcome here again anytime soon,” Zatanna admits after a second ticked by in an unwelcome silence and glances from Bruce to Jay, who is standing close to where she appeared out of thin air just a moment ago.

“This is only temporarily,” Bruce informs her coldly. He doesn’t miss the guilt that flickers across the woman’s eyes when she meets his once more. It’s his pettiness that causes a nearly childish glee to rear its head in Bruce’s chest as he watches her discomfort. She does not seem surprised, though, and a wary kind of resignation settles over her as she nods in agreement, “I see.” Her gaze moves from him back to Jay then, and she studies the older man for a second.

“You need my assistance,” she states.

It’s not a question.

“Yes,” Jay agrees, earnestly, and unlike Bruce, there is no hostility in how he regards her.

Zatanna considers him, a thoughtful expression her face, and what she says next catches both heroes by utter surprise. “Is it about the Flash?” she asks, curiously, but doesn’t give them time to respond before she adds, “The current one…” She turns back to Bruce. “Or Barry Allen?”

Bruce doesn’t bristle, even though he did not expect her to grasp the reason for why he asked her here this quickly. All the members of the League have picked up on Jay no longer believing in Barry’s guilt by now, it is not like the old hero is making a secret out of it, but even so, he is surprised that this is her first assumption.

Something in Bruce urges him to be careful, and for a split second, the paranoid part of him wonders whether the magician could be in on whatever is going on.

“Barry,” Jay tells Zatanna honestly, and while he still seems startled and a little wary, he does not sound accusing. “We think—”

“That someone is influencing him and the people around him,” Zatanna finishes for him, with a faint, grim smile, catching Jay off guard once more.

Bruce, who is just as caught off guard by Zatanna’s unexpected insight, recovers quicker than the senior speedster and demands, “You know about this?”

Zatanna hesitates, eying Bruce with a slightly pinched expression, apparently considering what to say, and Bruce feels his patience run thin, as it tends to do these days when he has to deal with other heroes. It is apparent that he is not the only one who picked up on things not being as they are supposed to be, and it causes a familiar unease to settle onto him. Even so, he fights the urge to dismiss the other hero outright, since they need her help to get somewhere here, no matter how little
he will like it.

Before Bruce can press her any further, Zatanna replies, “It came to our attention not too long ago.”

“Our attention?” Bruce asks but doesn't need an answer from her to know whom she is talking about. “This, whatever it is, has its origin in magic, doesn’t it?” he demands, irately, already dreading where this is about to go.

Again, Zatanna doesn’t respond right away but meets Bruce grim look quietly, the guilt from before replaced by a much more cautious expression.

“You know who is doing this?” Jay asks, stepping closer to her, which causes her to return her attention to him with a frown.

She considers him, then Bruce, looking very much ill at ease. Eventually, she glances around briefly, lifting a hand just as Jay was about to say something else, stopping him.

“I need to cast a spell,” Zatanna informs them out of the blue and Bruce has no time to protest before she does just that. “Seyednasraedtnawunmorfsudleihs.”

Energy flickers between the palms she lifted in front of her chest, facing each other. It is glaringly bright, painfully so, and Bruce has to shut his eyes despite the automatic dimming function of the lenses in his cowl, causing him to grunt in annoyance.

A sensation of an invisible power rolls over them originating from the magician, and just as suddenly as it appeared, it is gone, leaving both men blinded momentarily, with an odd, slight ringing in their ears.

“Don’t use magic in here without asking for permission beforehand,” Bruce orders sharply, still blinking to get rid of the dancing shadows that impair his vision. He is already regretting inviting her here at all.

“I apologize,” Zatanna says, sounding earnest. “We have to be careful if we want to discuss this.”

“You think someone could be spying on us?” Jay inquires as he glances at her with his eyes still slightly squinted. “Do you know who is behind this?”

“No,” Zatanna shakes her head, looking very much troubled by this little fact. “It’s a force neither I nor any of my circle is familiar with.”

“Since when do you know that something is awry?” Bruce demands. It irks him that he finds himself at a disadvantage, unable to get the upper hand in this situation due to his lack of information.

“Probably not much longer than you do,” Zatanna replies, meeting his accusing glare steadily, and she doesn’t need to spell it out to let Bruce know that he is hardly in the position to point fingers about keeping secrets when it comes to this matter.

“Can we, please, focus on the matter at hand?” Jay asks, sounding like his patience is starting to run thin, which is unusual for the man. Bruce doesn’t miss how tensed up he is, likely due to him worrying about Barry, which leaves the older man with no tolerance for any possible quarrels between his colleagues.

Neither of them protests.

“Of course.” Zatanna glances to Bruce as she continues, “I’m not here to pick up another argument,
Bruce, especially one as useless as this one." She meets his eyes firmly, without anger but no longer showing any guilt either. "I'm here because I think we owe it to a former friend to find out who is manipulating us.”

A former friend.

The words make Bruce bitter, the feeling he has become more and more familiar over the last couple of weeks.

It sounds so final, the way she says it, like Barry is lost to them-

Bruce pushes that thought away, stomping on the guilt before it can really start to bother him.

He needs to focus.

“What do you know?” Bruce asks, probably sounding more gruff than he intended to, but having Zatanna around grinds on his nerves, even though he knows that it isn’t the woman’s fault.

Zatanna regards him quietly, the slightly pinched expression telling him that she is not willing to share too much information with them just yet. He isn’t the only one fighting with guilt here though, and she knows she owes him. Undoubtedly She is also aware that he can be an asset when it comes to finding out what or who is manipulating them, no matter that he is not adept at using magic.

“The time and space continuum of our reality has been damaged.”

That is not what Bruce expected, and neither did Jay, judging by his bewildered expression.

“What?” Jay asks, sounding more unsettled than confused.

“Someone or something hurt the net that keeps our reality together,” Zatanna elaborates as if this made much more sense. “We don’t know yet what is responsible for it, but we can feel its repercussions.” Unease settles over her face, and she crosses her arms while proceeding, “It causes magic itself to change, makes it more difficult to get a handle on it as if the source of our power is detaching itself from our realm or can’t keep a grasp on it. Consequently, my connection to it is loosening, and I’m not alone when it comes to this.”

“You’re losing your powers?” Bruce tries to clarify, and the notion itself is alarming, despite how little love he has for anything related to magic.

“No.” Zatanna shakes her head, lips pursed for a moment. “My powers are still very much there, but I have trouble wielding them at times.”

“At times?” Bruce studies her. “So it’s not something constant?”

Again, Zatanna takes her time to answer, and Bruce quickly realizes that it is not due to her unwillingness to give away information but her merely not knowing for sure.

“Not yet,” Zatanna eventually settles on.

It’s a progressing problem then.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jay interjects, meeting Zatanna’s eyes earnestly, even though he obviously intends to bring their conversation to the topic at hand. “But what does this have to do with Barry?”

It is a legit question, considering that, while what Zatanna just told them is very worrisome, even Bruce has trouble to see how this connects to Barry or someone messing with his life.
Uncrossing her arms, Zatanna lifts her right hand, palm facing the ceiling of the cave, and closes her eyes. She whispers something softly under her breath which causes an orb of light to appear a couple of inches above her fingertips where it hovers briefly before suddenly morphing and shooting outwards, drawing an illuminated three-dimensional network of lines in front of her.

Bruce has no idea what this is supposed to be and briefly considers whether this could be another depiction of the alternative Earths he has once seen on Earth-Two, but there are too many pulsing orbs to be only fifty-two.

“These are the ports that connect our universe with the other ones out there.” Zatanna focuses her eyes on Bruce then, as if she has heard his thoughts. “All of them.” She turns her attention back to the structure of light hovering in front of her, her expression troubled. “Or, to be more precise, these are the ports like they used to be, less than a decade ago.” Closing her eyes briefly, she once again murmurs something Bruce is not able to pick up despite the audio sensors in his mask, which should make such a thing impossible. He doesn't have much time to be annoyed by this since the net of light suddenly changes, dims, and shifts before their very eyes.

Eventually, it takes a new form with many of the former connections between the spheres gone, and many of those spheres changed in size and brightness, taking on a sickly reddish brownish glow. Bruce can’t say why, but something seems entirely wrong about it, it's a feeling that rests just below his skin, and he can't entirely grasp the meaning of it, causing an apprehension to settle in his guts as he notices how the past, ordered pattern is now gone from the hole-riddled structure.

It may sound ridiculous, but something about it nearly feels obscene.

Glancing over at Jay, Bruce notices that he isn’t the only one who is put off by what Zatanna is showing them since there is a nearly disgusted expression on the other man’s face as he observes the structure of light with a deep frown.

“This is the current state of those ports,” Zatanna informs them not that Bruce hasn’t already come to that conclusion on his own. She looks pained as she studies the structure in front of her, a nearly mournful expression in her eyes Bruce isn’t sure what to think of.

“They are damaged,” Jay states, not needing an explanation what he sees there either. The unease is thick in his voice as he asks, “What did this?”

“We do not know yet,” Zatanna answers honestly, while her eyes don’t leave the magical construct in front of her. “We are currently investigating that very question.”

“What does this have to do with Barry?” Bruce demands and focuses his gaze back on Zatanna because looking at this construct of light makes him slightly nauseous.

“The ports should all be connected,” Zatanna points out, seemingly ignoring his question much to Bruce’s annoyance. “They should stabilize each other, ground each other so that reality around them can exist in the form we are familiar with. Everything in our universe, all matter, is connected to this network, and while nobody can say whether it is the source of life itself or not, it is integral to its existence.” The crease between her brows deepens as she studies the faintly pulsing orbs in front of her for a moment. “This stability no longer existing will have consequences for everything and everyone in our universe. The repercussions are not yet noticeable to most living beings.” She smiles bitterly, at that. “At least not to those who aren't directly connected to it.”

“But we will end up noticing them?” Bruce inquires, not liking where she is going with this. Despite his current aversion against magic and what people who wield it can do with such a power, he was fascinated by it for a very long time, and he knows of its close connection to everything around them,
even if it isn’t evident to most. That means if Zatanna is right with her assumption that something is messing with the magic in their universe and thus with an integral part of its foundation, it could have catastrophic consequences neither of them can predict.

A question remains, though.

What does any of this have to do with Barry?

“Yes,” Zatanna agrees, her face grim as she finally averts her eyes from the magical structure in front of her and turns her focus to Bruce. “If we don’t do anything, we will…” She stops briefly but adds somewhat reluctantly, “Well, it’s likely that we’ll have to face the consequences of what is currently happening either way. It’s possible that the destruction has progressed too far to be undone or keep any ill-effects from showing even if it is possible to fix it now.”

“What timeframe are we speaking of here?” Jay asks, and he doesn’t seem surprised when Zatanna shakes her head, probably all too aware of the unpredictability when it comes to anything related to the higher arts, just like Bruce.

“It’s hard to say,” Zatanna explains, “but we are certain that it won’t be another decade.”

“Did you inform the others about this?” Jay asks, but Bruce is sure the older hero already knows the answer to this question, just like he does.

Unsurprisingly, Zatanna levels him with a somewhat guilty but unapologetic look. “Not yet.”

“How could you keep this from the rest of us-” Jay sounds incredulous, angry even, but is cut off by Zatanna who presses on. “Whatever or whoever is responsible for this has been very thorough in keeping themselves and their meddling hidden from us. The fact that they were able to interfere with the order of things to such a degree in the first place shows how powerful they are and how malicious their intent is.”

She dispels her magic, causing the construct to fade away into nothingness, and lets her hand drop to her side. Her lips pressed into a thin, worried line as her gaze lingers at the spot where the net of light has just been a mere moment ago. “As does what they’ve done directly under our very noses.”

Bruce immediately knows what she is talking about, of course, he does, it’s the very reason they asked her here tonight.

“Barry,” Jay says, voice low and pained since he seems to have come to the same conclusion.

“Why would someone this powerful concern themselves with Barry?” Bruce asks, not seeing how Barry fits in with what Zatanna has just told them. “If they are planning something on a scale that puts the fabric of our universe at risk, why would they be interested in him as well?”

Zatanna doesn’t respond right away but considers her words once more. “We don’t know,” she settles on, meeting Bruce’s eyes behind the white lenses of his cowl. “We are currently working on making sense of what is happening.”

“Are you certain that whoever does this to your magic is the same person that messed with Barry’s life?” Jay wonders, sounding somewhat doubtful. Below the doubt, Bruce can make out fear, though, and he understands where it comes from. If Zatanna’s assumption is right, they are up against something that possibly is beyond their capabilities to take on. Magic is a kind of power that is hard for non-users of the higher arts to keep up with in a fight it is used in. Even Clark is powerless when faced with it. There is Billy, of course, but he doesn’t understand the power he wields, and against a powerful sorcerer even all his brawl won’t do any good in the long run.
Shifting her weight from one leg to the other, Zatanna’s restlessness breaches through her façade of calm, and she pinches her lips as she lays her head back, letting her gaze drift up to the ceiling of the dark ceiling of the cave.

“Constantine and Boston were able to trace the origin of the disturbance back to this planet a few weeks back,” Zatanna informs them, crossing her arms once more while she keeps her eyes upwards, a faint frown settling over her features. “Constantine concluded a while ago that the current anomalies we all deal with are rooted deeper than the rest of us had initially assumed.” A bitter smile tugs at her lips. “He was right, and after we recognized the danger we are facing, I contacted Hector to ask for his assistance.” She exhales a soft sigh and turns back to them. It is then than Bruce notices how worn out she looks.

“He had no inkling that anything was awry with our universe,” Zatanna says, and Bruce feels goose bumps rise up his arms and back as he realizes what that means. “Nabu hasn’t noticed anything either, and it wasn’t until I told them that they picked up on how wrong the current state of our reality is.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce enquires, observing her with an increasing feeling of trepidation. “The state of our reality?”

“Things are supposed to be different,” Zatanna replies with a faint, humorless smirk. “I don’t know how exactly, but the course history of our world is different from the one it was supposed to follow. Things were meant to turn out differently, and while we can’t be sure, we think that that may be the decisive factor of why our universe is slowly coming undone at its seams.”

A heavy, uneasy silence settles between them for a minute as both Bruce and Jay take in what they have just learned.

It is difficult to make head or tails of what he has just learned, especially with the limited knowledge Zatanna herself seems to possess right now, but even so, Bruce gets the inclination that he starts to understand how Barry may be involved in any of this.

As does Jay since he voices what Bruce himself is considering, “You believe the change of history is somehow connected to Barry.” The older man doesn’t sound unsure but very much reluctant, as if he would rather not have this to be an option, considering what it implicates.

Zatanna nods. “We think a crucial event was supposed to take place during the last decade, involving Barry as the Flash, but it didn’t.” The concern that shows in her eyes then is stark and blatant. “Meddling with fate in such a way should not be possible, reality itself has ways to keep this from happening, but somehow it still was done.”

“Someone used us to keep Barry from taking part in that event? To keep it from happening?” Jay tries to clarify, at least somewhat confused by everything he has just learned, which Bruce understand since he doesn’t do much better.

“It’s possible,” Zatanna agrees, but Bruce can see that she isn’t convinced that this was the real reason for what happened.

“But you don’t think so?” Bruce asks.

Zatanna keeps quiet as she thinks of how to respond, letting a handful of seconds tick by, before she slowly, somewhat reluctantly says, “I think that whoever is responsible for this did not have the destruction of our universe in mind when he started manipulating our reality.”
“You believe their actual target was Barry?” Jay asks and shoots an alarmed look at Bruce, who also realizes that they had utterly no idea what they are up against thus far, no matter their hypothesis that someone powerful must be behind all of this.

If Zatanna is right, it means that there is someone or something out there who won’t shy away from destroying an entire universe just to get to Barry Allen.

Why?

Why Barry? He doesn’t have enemies like that, he never faced someone with powers this destructive, not even as a member of the Injustice League.

Who could harbor such a grudge against the former Flash to go to these lengths?

“I do,” Zatanna agrees. “A lot of what happened points to that conclusion, but it is nothing but a guess on my part for now. We can’t be certain of anything until we have a better understanding of what is happening and why.”

“We need to inform the others,” Jay says firmly. “They have to learn of what is going on. We have to do something about this if the threat is as big as you say.”

“That wouldn’t be wise,” Zatanna remarks but is cut off by Jay who is growing palpably impatient.

“Why? Aside from Earth and our reality being at stake, Barry deserves to have his name cleared, he deserves that the others know he didn’t do any of those crimes he was accused of and convicted for,” Jay demands, angrily. “He had his life ruined by us because someone decided to use us as their puppets, and we did nothing but play along. How can you be willing to let this go on any longer?”

He directs his anger at Zatanna, but the accusation and hurt are not meant for her. Bruce knows that just as she does and she doesn’t seem angered by the harsh words. Jay has been weighed down by guilt since he approached Bruce, Cark, and Diana to talk about Barry for the first time at the beginning of this year. He thinks himself responsible for what happened to Barry and probably faults his inability to recognize Barry’s innocence more than he blames theirs.

Barry was the closest thing Jay has ever had to a son, and Bruce does not doubt that it is nearly killing the old man to know that he took part in what was done to his successor, even if it was not on his own free will.

Barry’s innocence will eventually come out, and they all will have to face the fact that they played a role in ruining an innocent man’s life.

Their friend’s life.

Over the last weeks Bruce has been confronted with that knowledge time and time again. He puts off dealing with it, but he can still feel the guilt linger at the edge of his mind hiding in the darkness, waiting for the day he will eventually have to deal with it.

He wonders how he will handle it, how anyone of them will.

They did something horrendous, and they will have to live with that knowledge for the rest of their lives.

“A strong spell made us forget Barry as we know him,” Zatanna reminds Jay calmly, wearily. “It was put there to keep us from learning the truth, and it is bounded to his very essence.”
“What?” Jay sounds as taken aback by that piece of information as Bruce feels.

“A spell was put on him?” Bruce tries to clarify, but Zatanna shakes her head and explains, “No, it affects him, of course, but the prime target was not him but the people around him. He is just an anchor for it.” She frowns and reaches up to take off her top hat, so she can rake her fingers through her hair, sighing softly once more. “Very strong magic that is supposed to last for a long time needs to be anchored to something or someone for its effects to persist. Whatever was put on Barry probably was meant to last for the duration of his life.”

“It’s meant to be permanent,” Jay realizes, suddenly looking pale.

“Yes,” Zatanna agrees. “You can influence a big group of people by putting spells on them, of course, but if you want for the spell to stay consistent without renewing it every couple of months, it is much more sensible to extend it to the actual target that it is supposed to effect. To bind it to them, so to say.”

“A curse,” Bruce realizes.

“In a way.” Zatanna puts her top hat back on, her expression grim. “But we can’t say for sure without taking a closer look.”

“Why aren’t you then?” Jay asks though he doesn’t sound accusing anymore but wary.

“Because this spell is not the only one we detected on Barry. He hasn’t been the target of misfortune for just the last decade.” Zatanna turns to Bruce then, giving him a knowing look. “I take it that you’ve learned by now that an outside force has manipulated Barry’s life for a long time.”

The implications of what Zatanna is saying are sickening, and immense sympathy for Barry hits Bruce like a brick wall.

“You say all of this has its origins in his childhood?” Bruce doesn’t need her to affirm it; he is already coming to the same conclusion. Barry’s parents cross his mind, how they seemed to have abandoned their child, and how he was not able to find anything regarding any Allens living within or close to the Gems who had a child of Barry’s age around that time.

Zatanna smiles faintly. “This is why I assume that Barry is the actual prime target here.”

“If that is true, why not help him?” Jay urges. “He is a good man, and he deserves that we stop whatever is messing with him and his life.”

“The purpose of the magic put on Barry was not only to alter people’s opinion of him,” Zatanna explains. “It seems to possess a kind of self-preservation instinct as well.”

“It takes care of people that get too close to finding out that something is influencing his life,” Bruce concludes grimly. He thinks of the many names he came across when researching Barry’s life, of the people who came too close to Barry and tried to offer him help and consequently vanished.

As Bruce does so, he notices that this conclusion can’t be entirely right, though.

Those people were ordinary humans; they probably didn’t know much about magic than what they’d learned from books and movies.

They were not taken care of because they came close to finding out about the spell that was put on Barry but because they wanted to aid him in the first place.
That notion alone is daunting. Bruce wonders once more who could hate Barry this much to go to such lengths to make his life so miserable.

And why?

“That’s only part of it,” Zatanna explains, addressing the conclusion Bruce already came to on his own. “Whatever was put on Barry was put there with the intent to keep people from offering him aid. The incidents in his childhood and youth show how people who tried to help him were either deterred from doing so or just vanished.”

“My God.” Jay sounds short of breath, like what he just heard is holding him in a tight, painful squeeze, and Bruce can see the same horror he feels settling over himself right now reflect in the older man’s eyes.

“Why was he able to become the Flash, though?” Bruce inquires, growing more confused by the whole situation the more he thinks about it.

Barry’s life was miserable in his childhood and youth, but it became better when he grew older, when he got accepted into college, got friends, and left the abuse of the past behind him. He was happy for a while, Bruce is sure of it, Barry told him so himself. Barry had Iris and a job he enjoyed, and there was Wally of course. The boy meant so much to him.

Why was he allowed to get that happiness eventually when the purpose of that spell was to keep him miserable?

Was the spell defective?

Or was it done on purpose?

And what’s about Barry’s current situation? He is not living the best life, he has to put up with a lot of trauma and hardship, but things are starting to work out for him again. Barry seems to be okay with where he is right now; he has a job he is good at and people who support him.

Not to mention, there is also Snart and the close relationship those two have.

Why is the spell not working on the Rogues or the other people Barry considers his friends right now?

In a way, it seems arbitrary, but Bruce doubts that’s the case.

There is a lot he will have to look into after this conversation is done.

“I can’t say for certain.” Zatanna shrugs, looking weary and grim, like just talking about this issue is starting to suck the energy out of her. “We have some theories, but they are nothing more than that.”

“I understand that we are dealing with a very dangerous situation here and that we have to be careful about how we are going about to handle it,” Jay interferes. “But I can’t just stand by and let Barry keep on living the life we forced onto him because we let ourselves be manipulated. He deserves better than that.”

“None of us wants for Barry to keep living as he does right now,” Zatanna tells Jay firmly. “We are working on finding a way to make sure that whatever is influencing him won’t be triggered into action by our attempts to help him. We don’t want him to end up worse than he already is.”

“What are we supposed to do then? Stand by and let him keep living his life marked as an ex-
convict?” Jay asks sounding understandably less than happy about that prospect.

“For the time being,” Zatanna agrees. “It is far from ideal, but the others and I are currently working on finding a way to undo the spell so that we can fix its repercussions. That doesn’t mean that you can’t be there for Barry. You’ve started to support him again, and so far this didn’t lead to any ill effects so just continue doing that. Eventually, we will find a way around the spell and help Barry.” A determined expression settles over her face. “I promise.”

Zatanna has only briefly been in contact with Barry during his time as the Flash. She joined the Justice League after he was put into Iron Heights, but even so, they worked together a couple of times, and Bruce remembers her telling him how she wasn’t sure what to think of Barry just a few months after she joined the League.

“There was something odd about him,” Zatanna explained to him after they had talked about a case of his during which he brought up a dirty cop that was distantly involved in it. The man was garbage, physically and sexually abusing his daughter, which caused unwelcome memories to stir up in both of them. “He seemed so kind, but at the same time I got that awful feeling whenever I was close to him.”

Bruce wonders whether the magician feels somewhat responsible for what happened to Barry as well. She probably should have detected the spell, or at least she thinks so.

There is a lot of potential guilt waiting to be freed, Bruce can’t help but think.

“Is there a way we can assist you?” Jay inquires. “I don’t just want to stand by and wait, Zatanna. I’ve been doing nothing when it comes to Barry for far too long.”

“I don’t think that would be wise,” Zatanna points out. “You’re too close to him, and I don’t know how sentient the spell is. As I said, I don’t want to trigger a reaction by accident.” A palpable unease overcomes her then as she adds, “There is also the possibility that whoever or whatever did this is currently present in Barry’s life and they shouldn’t be tipped off on someone being on to them.”

That is a very legit concern. Bruce has considered the possibility of whoever is messing with Barry staying close to him to watch, and his mind immediately goes to the people that are currently being part of Barry’s life.

It’s unlikely that the Rogues have anything to do with it, not out of the question, but Bruce doubts that they have the powers or connections to pull off something like this. They also don’t have a reason to do this to Barry, despite him being the last Flash, and from what Bruce has learned so far by monitoring Barry, Snart seems to honestly care about him.

There are his other friends as well, of course. Mary, James, Axel, and, the speedster, Eddy.

The last one being the most suspicious in Bruce’s opinion, at least right now, mainly due to his connection to Dr. Elias. The doctor is someone with an excessive interest in the Speed Force. But after supervising them for the last months, he hasn’t learned anything that would warrant any real suspicion on his part when it comes to the problem at hand.

Considering that the culprit seems out to hurt Barry, it is easy to conclude that he is likely someone who gains much joy from watching him suffer. There are so many conflicting factors playing into the whole cluster f*ck that is Barry’s current situation though, and Bruce can’t come to any reliable conclusions just yet.

“I’m not in contact with Barry,” Bruce points out, causing both Zatanna and Jay to turn to him in
surprise. “I will assist you in this matter.” Zatanna watches him with a slightly irritated frown, probably due to the finality of his words, and he adds before she can protest, “I’ve been researching this for months if anything were going to detect me it would have by now. I’ll stop investigating in Barry’s direct environment to be on the safe side, but I can join your investigation on what exactly this spell is.” He gives her a thin smile. “I’m not a magician, but I’ve had an avid interest in the art for a while, I’m sure I can pick up on something of interest if it comes to me.”

Zatanna doesn’t seem happy with his offer that isn’t really an offer, but him forcing his assistance onto her doesn’t seem unexpected.

“I’ll talk to the others about this,” Zatanna tells him as she levels him with an unhappy, somewhat annoyed look, “They’ll most likely insist on putting some spell on you to make sure that you stay undetectable to the magic we’re dealing with.”

Bruce expected this and nods, but can’t refrain from adding, “As long as I have a choice in that matter.”

A slightly stricken expression crosses the magician’s face then, and Bruce feels no satisfaction from it. Jay shoots him a look. He wants them to work together and get things done.

“Thank you, Zatanna,” Jay tells the woman earnestly. “It’s good to know that we’re not on our own in this.” He sighs and reaches up to rub his eyes. “I wish there was more I can do.”

“You’re there for him,” Zatanna reminds him, kindly. “That’s probably the best thing anybody can do right now.”

Jay nods, shooting her a grateful smile, though the doubts persist in his eyes.

Zatanna moves on to Bruce, expression severe and guarded. “I’ll inform the others of our talk and inform you of our decision on your offer.”

Of course.

Bruce doesn’t roll his eyes or protest; he knows that Zatanna cannot make this decision on her own, but he knows just as well as she does that they won’t refuse his help.

The magician parts from them soon after that, taking the feeling of invisible, dense power with her.

Exhaling a long, tired sounding sigh, Jay turns to him. “I will keep out of the investigation for now, I trust Zatanna, if she says that my presence could cause additional problems.” He meets his eyes firmly, sternly. “I want you to keep me informed on what you find out though. I want to be prepared in case anything changes, and Barry has to deal with another effect of that spell.”

“Of course,” Bruce agrees readily, seeing that he knew the older hero would ask for this. He, too, takes Zatanna’s warnings seriously, but he does not intend to leave it up to her and the other heroes that are somehow connected to the higher arts when it comes to helping Barry to regain his life, even should they decline his offer of assistance.

Things are not as they are supposed to be, Bruce can’t help but think, and not for the first time in the last decade he is hit by the intense sensation of the world around him being wrong.

Something big was supposed to happen, but it didn’t, and the repercussions probably will be dire. It’s a sobering thought.

“It’s not that late,” Jay remarks out of the blue, glancing at his watch, “I think I’ll pay the boy a short
visit before returning home.”

The boy.

Bruce knows, of course, who he is talking about, but it is strange for Jay to call Barry that. He hasn’t done so in his presence since before Barry’s imprisonment. It is then that Bruce notices how Jay appears more relaxed, worried, yes, but not as strung up as he has been for months now. It hits him that the old man, despite learning of the actual direness of their situation, probably for the first time allows himself to hope that things will turn out alright.

It is a surprisingly reassuring realization.

“I’ll let you know what Zatanna and the others decide,” Bruce tells the older hero, who gives him a grateful nod before wishing him a good night and taking his leave.

The Batcave lies wide and empty around Bruce just a moment later.

He stays there, briefly following his thoughts before slowly walking over to the main console.

“Alfred?” Bruce contacts the older man over the com, who hardly needs a second to respond.

“Yes, Master Bruce?”

“Would you mind preparing me a snack before I leave for tonight’s patrol?”

“Have Master Garrick and Miss Zatanna already left?” Alfred sounds a little surprised by this, and there is light reproachful ton accompanying it. Bruce has to smile at that seeing that he probably deserves his Butler’s suspicion about him driving the two other heroes off, considering he hasn’t made a secret of the ill feelings he still holds for the magician.

“We finished our discussion just a moment ago, and both have places to be,” Bruce explains.

“I see.” Alfred sounds more at ease again. “I’ll prepare you a snack right away, sir.”

“Thank you, Alfred.”

“Of course, Master Bruce.”

Bruce turns off the com and takes a seat at the central console, hesitating for a moment before calling up the files he has created regarding Barry. He updates them with the new information.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed, especially the ones of you who have been waiting to learn a little bit more of what is going on. ;)

I really like magic and I enjoy the characters that have to do with the higher arts in the DC universe. I wonder whether we are going to see some of them eventually, other than Zatanna, that is, of course.

Btw, I forgot to mention in my last AN that Malone is Bruce, but you guys were smart and comic lore savvy enough that you picked up on it anyway. :)
Next chapter will have Barry and Len in it again and in the one after that we are going to make a small jump ahead in time.

See you soon! I already miss you and posting new chapters... ;-;
It is early Friday morning as Barry closes the bar after another slow night when a strange feeling settles into the pit of his stomach. He pauses and, after a moment of hesitation, glances around with a growing sense of unease, unsure what could have caused the odd premonition.

The bar is empty.

He is alone.

Of course, he is alone, the last customer left about twenty minutes ago.

A frown settles over his features.

He is probably just tired; he hasn't been sleeping too well the last couple of nights due to the pain in his abdomen acting up again and-

Out of nowhere, a shudder overcomes him, and, for a second, despite knowing better, he is confident that somebody is watching him.

It is such an unsettling feeling that he freezes, the fear like a hand around his chest that keeps him in a tight squeeze, making it difficult to breathe.

For a brief moment, it is as if he can feel someone right there next to him, feel warm, moist air of an exhale on his neck, and the sensation is sickening.

The sound of the storage room door being opened and closed cuts through the heavy, oppressive silence, followed by the sound of heavy footfalls.

Charlie turns up at the entrance to the back of the bar a minute later, two heavy crates of beer in his hands, but stops when his tired, slightly grumpy gaze falls upon Barry. He frowns.

"Everything alright?" Charlie asks in the familiar gruff manner of his, and it helps Barry to snap out of his stupor.

"Y-Yes," Barry agrees quickly, and he can already feel his cheeks warm up in embarrassment.
"You look like you've seen a ghost," Charlie remarks, sounding both annoyed and bored, as he makes his way past Barry to put the beer down in front of the fridges behind the bar. He hasn't been in the best mood tonight, mostly due to his migraine that started to act up sometime early last afternoon.

"J-Just..." Barry fidgets a little, feeling restless with an anxiousness he can't explain clinging to him. His eyes sweep over the empty bar once more that mostly lies in shadows in front of him. "J-Just t-tired, I-I g-guess."

There is nobody else around other than him and Charlie.

He is being paranoid.

Barry frowns and tries to shake the bad feeling off before he walks over to his boss to take over the job of restocking the beer for the following night.

He really must be more tired than he thought. It is not surprising, though, since, despite the low number of customers he had to deal with tonight, a feeling of exhaustion has been following him around since before his shift even started, and he has been looking forward to going home for a couple of hours now.

Whether he would be able to find any restful sleep tonight is another question, though, and a part of him feels apprehensive about the notion of lying awake again for hours on end, with the dull, throbbing pain in his lower abdomen that always gets worse when he doesn't have something to distract himself with. Right now, the only thing that he had on his mind when he tried to fall asleep, other than the pain, was the upcoming meeting between the Rogues and Gael's friends.

"You can go home; I'll finish the rest," Charlie orders, ripping Barry from his glum thoughts. Barry opens his mouth to protest, but the other man levels him with a glare, which quickly shuts him up. "Grab some sleep, Allen, you look like death warmed up, and I don't need you to keel over tomorrow because you caught something."

Barry feels his face heat up, embarrassed but also slightly annoyed about being dismissed like this. The anger quickly dissipates a second later, and he feels the tension leave him as his shoulders slump a little. He knows Charlie is probably right, and there is no real reason for him to stay around any longer anyway, he pretty much finished with closing ten minutes ago.

"R-Right," Barry mutters, and gets up from his crouching position next to the half-emptied crate, grimacing slightly as a sharp pain flashes through his knees in protest.

He can feel Charlie's eyes on him, the contemplative look palpable even though Barry avoids looking at him just then.

His joints are getting worse, and Charlie doesn't miss that.

Barry tries not to think about what this could and probably will lead to in the end.

When Sam helps him into one of the men's restroom mirrors a few minutes later, he seems to pick up on Barry's pensive mood.

"You okay?" Sam asks, studying him. "You look pretty pale."

"I-I k-know, a-alright?" Barry nearly snaps, feeling unusually thin-skinned, probably because he is really coming down with something.
That would be just his luck.

“You caught Trickster's bug?” Sam doesn’t seem at all deterred by his irritated tone when amusement replaces the slight concern that was visible in his gaze just a moment ago.

Barry realizes then, as another fresh bout of annoyance overcomes him, that it will be the best course of action for him to go straight to bed once he is back at the hideout. He clearly needs some rest.

“M-Maybe-” Barry is cut off when he stumbles as he follows Sam out of the mirror dimension. He would have fallen if it weren't for his friend quickly grabbing his upper arm to help him regain his balance.

His body tenses up automatically, but the contact is brief, and Sam lets him go just as quickly.

"Watch it," Sam tells him, sounding more surprised than annoyed by his clumsiness. It has been while since Barry had troubles dealing with traveling via mirrors.

"You're really not looking so good," Sam adds after a brief, uneasy silence settled between them, and while he clearly tries not to let it through, Barry can pick up on the concern.

"Y-Yeah..." Barry sighs and reaches up to rub his eyes. His head is starting to hurt as to reinforce his friend's statement.

Great.

"I kn-know, Ch-Cha-lie s-sent m-me h-home e-ea-rl-y b-because o-of th-tha-th..." He snorts and shoots Sam an amused look. "I-I th-think he f-f-fears I'll d-d-drag his g-good n-name th-th rough th-the m-mud i-if w-w-word g-gets ou-ut th-tha-th h-he f-f-forces h-his e-employee t-to w-work w-while s-s-sick."

His mood lifts a little when his friend laughs outright at that.

“"I doubt Charlie worries about stuff like that,” Sam tells him, smirking. “The guy’s good name went down the drain years ago, and it is all thanks to his charming personality.”

It is currently around four in the morning, and while Barry wants nothing more than to vanish to his and Len’s room to catch up on some sleep, he is also hungry. Enough so, that he decides to postpone rest for now, so that he can join Sam on his way to the living area of the Rogues’ current hideout behind which a small kitchen lies, and make himself a little snack.

Entering the big room that initially must have been a storage facility below the deserted office building, he is greeted with the sight of Marco, Digger, Hartley, and Axel playing another game of poker.

A slight twinge of irritation returns at that, seeing that it is too late for Axel, and the teen should have been in bed hours ago.

“Hey, Barry!” Axel greets enthusiastically as he spots him. A broad grin splits his lips as he gestures towards the small heap of money next to his glass of coke. "Guess who is cleaning out these old geezers over here?!" Axel shoots the others a gleeful look. “I’ve won 50 bucks so far and the night is still young!” The boy pumps his fist into the air with an elated whoop, at that, and Barry doesn’t want to know how many energy drinks he has consumed this night so far.

The others on the table aren't happy to be on the receiving end of Barry’s irritated, accusing glance, and Digger points out to their defense that Axel had already been like that when he joined them about an hour ago.
“It seems that one of his friends was able to get his hands on some booze,” Hartley adds with mild annoyance and it is then that Barry realizes the teen isn’t just hyper due to too much caffeine but actually drunk.

“A-and y-you d-didn’t th-think that i-it w-would be a-a g-good idea t-to s-send h-him to b-bed?” Barry asks, exasperatedly, not feeling patient enough to deal with this right now. The slight throbbing sensation of a headache is already increasing at the base of his skull, and he ignores Axel’s protest about being sent to bed like a child, instead glaring at the rest of his friends.

“Yeah, because the pirralho would have listened to us,” Marco remarks with a snort, shooting Barry a smirk over the edge of his cards. “He may be a good little angel whenever you’re around, but, believe me, that changes the moment you leave the room.”

Barry resists the urge to grind his molars in frustration, something that certainly won't help with his headache, and instead, he turns to the boy in questions.

"G-Get u-up a-and g-go t-to b-bed, A-Axel. I-I th-think y-you've h-had e-enough e-excitm-ment f-for o-one d-day," Barry tells him, sternly, and ignores the teen's indignant protests about being treated like a little kid which quickly turn into whining when Barry doesn’t have any of it.

In the end, Axel complies, muttering about stupid adult and how annoying they all are, as he makes his way to the room Len assigned him when the Rogues relocated to this hideout about a week ago.

“Good riddance, mate, bloody time the little shit left,” Digger comments, smirking as he reaches for the cards Axel threw at the table before storming off. He picks them up and studies them briefly, which causes his expression to fall before he scoffs and puts them back down, mumbling, “Bloody brat.”

Barry takes it that Axel must have had another good hand coming and that it probably will be a while before his friends allow the teenager to join them for another game.

Sam follows Barry to the kitchen to grab himself a beer from the fridge before joining the others to watch the rest of the poker game, while Barry warms up some soup for himself.

Barry takes his food back to the living room, sits down on the old but comfortable couch in front of the television that usually runs in the background whenever James is around, but is currently turned off, and listens to his friends while having his meal.

There is a calming quality to the familiarity of their bickering, and after Barry is done with the soup, he decides to stay for a bit longer, to listen to them as he rests his head on the back of the couch.

He does not remember his eyes closing.

***

There is a man.

He is watching him.

A stranger without features, wrapped in darkness.

Barry watches him back. He has no choice, he can't move, can't breathe or even blink.

He is frozen, though it has nothing to do with the fear he is currently experiencing.
This is a dream.

Barry has had it before a number of times.

It is always the same.

He can't move, can't talk, can't do anything but watch and wait.

He never remembers the dream when he wakes up; it eludes him the moment his mind clears up, leaving nothing but an uncomfortable aftertaste that follows him around for a while before vanishing as well.

It is strange, unsettling so, but there is nothing he can do about it.

As Barry watches the stranger, the sensation that he may have seen him somewhere before overcomes him.

The man is standing just outside of the dim cone of light Barry finds himself in, covered by the dark shadows that fill everything else. He is too close for his liking, but even so, he can’t make out his actual features.

There are just faint silhouettes that are hardly distinguishable amid the darkness.

That does not change the threat that oozes off the stranger like a thick fog, engulfing Barry like a tight glove, and he wishes he could wake up and get this over with.

He hates this.

He is cold and scared.

He doesn't want this man to watch him like this, there is something sinister behind his unseen gaze, and Barry knows he is in danger.

The stranger never moves, doesn't even seem to breathe, but he is watching, and Barry does not understand why his mind keeps doing this to him.

It is a disturbing feeling, frightening and much too familiar, but no matter how much he tries, his body doesn't obey him, and he can only stand there and stare right back into the darkness, into the other man’s face.

He is helpless, it is a sensation that is smothering in its intensity, and he wants to wake up, get away from this latest fabrication his mind came up with to torment him.

It is just a dream, but he knows he is in danger, he can feel it-

And just like that, the dream vanishes.

It eludes him like water eludes a net, and with it does the memory of it.

The confusion that follows is thick and briefly holds Barry's complete attention, then he picks up on someone’s hand being on his shoulder, lightly shaking him.

He tenses up in response, causing the hand that is still touching him to pause but not leave, and for a horrible moment, his bleary mind isn’t able to make head or tails of where he is or what is going on.

It makes the fear from earlier return tenfold-
“It’s okay. You’re safe.” Len’s voice is quiet, comforting, and Barry can feel his body instantly relax in response. “You just nodded off.”

It is difficult, but after some struggling Barry can get his eyes to open and the slight feeling of anxiety that is still clinging to him starts to subside as he spots his partner. A strong sense of affection overcomes him when Len meets his gaze with a faint but warm smile, the relief and lingering worry plain in his eyes. He cups Barry’s neck, an intimate gesture Barry has come to associate with just him, something that is theirs, a kind of tenderness Len only allows himself to display with him.

Barry’s eyes grow heavy again when Len starts to caress the side of his throat with his thumb, small, light strokes that feel reassuring and calming. Despite the pain in his back and neck, which stems from the position he fell asleep in, he doesn’t want to move. He would much rather prefer to stay like this, with his partner so close.

“I’m pretty sure you’d regret that later on.” Len smiles faintly, and Barry's cheeks grow hot when he realizes that he must have spoken out loud.

“Come on, let’s get you upstairs,” Len says, grabbing his hand and helping him to his feet.

The pain in Barry’s neck and back intensifies momentarily in response to moving, causing him to grimace and pause. He tries to ease the ache by rolling his shoulders, telling himself that he really should have known better than choosing to fall asleep sitting upright on that worn-out couch.

Yawning, Barry rubs his eyes before looking around the room, realizing that they are alone.

“W-what t-time’s it?” The living area is, like it’s commonly the case with the Rogues’ hideouts, in the basement of the compound, and the lack of windows makes it hard to guess how late it is. Not that Barry believes that he could have been asleep for all that long.

“Around six.”

He slept a bit more than an hour. That isn't much rest, and Barry can feel so in his limbs, which feel heavy and ache in protest when he moves too much. He looks back down on the couch and suddenly he has the strangest sensation as if he has forgotten something.

A frown settles over his face, but before he can ponder over it, Len lays his hand on the small of his back and urges him lightly to move.

“Come, let’s go to bed. I can also use a nap.”

Barry hesitates briefly, the odd feeling still lingering, but eventually nods and complies.

Ten minutes later, when he is lying in bed with Len’s warm body so close, his mind still tries to find some reason for the persistent unease that seems to have followed him to their room. He is tired from his lack of sleep, though, and the arm around him gives him a comforting sense of security so it doesn’t take long for him to drift off again.

The dream and the stranger are long forgotten.

***

Barry is lying on the bed he shares with Len when he stays over at the hideout, reading through a cooking magazine Lisa lent him. It is shortly after eleven at night, and he tries to find inspiration for what to prepare for Mary’s welcome back dinner next Monday.
She is returning this Saturday, but because of Barry’s working schedule, they’ve decided to postpone celebrating for a couple of days.

It is hard to believe that it’s been over two months already, and Barry can’t help but feel somewhat caught off-guard by the swift passing of time, despite how much he missed Mary and how glad he is for her to return to them finally.

Studying a picture of a strawberry cupcake he is certain Mary would enjoy, he listens absentmindedly to the argument going on between Mick and Digger downstairs in the basement, which is heated enough that it can be heard all the way up to the ground floor, where the sleeping quarters are situated.

It is about someone of them cheating again during a game, undoubtedly, and Barry isn't interested enough to pay close attention to it.

They have been playing for a couple of hours now, starting sometime in the late afternoon, and this is not the first time that one accused another of a rigged game and it is unlikely to be the last.

Barry muses as he moves on to the next article of the magazine, that he would probably be worried if it was too quiet with his friends around.

Len is downstairs in their living room as well, watching an ice hockey game he has been looking forward to for about the last two weeks. The faint noise of the game can also be heard whenever the rest of them calm down.

Barry hardly takes notice of it, though. Thanks to the thin walls in his apartment and the years in prison where privacy was pretty much an illusion, he is good at turning background noise out, whether it be people arguing, screaming, crying, or something mundane as the sound of a television or a radio.

Aside from that, it is even calming in a way to listen to them, even if they bicker. It reminds him that he isn’t alone.

Len probably doesn’t share his opinion, though, and Barry expects him to speak up to tell the others to shut up any moment now.

Yawning lightly, Barry rubs his eyes and reaches for his water bottle that rests on the wooden crate next to the bed, a makeshift bedside table of sorts, taking a sip. He returns to study the article about coconut cupcakes for another minute or so before letting it drop onto his chest and glancing over at the other magazine he has with him. That one belongs to Hartley and is about mechanics, which holds an interesting piece about the acoustics of internal combustion machines his friend wanted to share with him the other day.

Hartley is currently working on an upgrade for one of his flutes, which has piqued Barry’s interest, and while he does know the basics, he has never actually studied the subject of acoustics. When he asked Hartley in passing whether he has something regarding this topic, his friend was more than happy to lend him a bunch of books and journals on the matter.

It is a kind gesture that offers another way to pass the time at night when he is suffering from bouts of insomnia, something that has started to become a more regular thing, much to his frustration.

While Barry thinks about letting his search for fitting cooking recipes rest for now, he half-listens to his friends’ continuous bickering downstairs, which seems to have grown louder, and Marco has joined in too by now. The Latin is certainly busy swearing their socks off in a mixture of his first and
second languages.

Unfortunately for them, not everybody seems to have Barry’s patience when it comes to all that noise. The door of the room opposite to his is suddenly ripped open with way more force than necessary, and as he glances over, he spots a very livid looking Sam, wearing only his boxer shorts, his usual sleeping attire.

“Shut the hell up, you damn jackasses! Some people are trying to sleep here!” Sam yells, looking ready to blow a gasket. It’s hard to miss that he is pissed off over being kept up by his colleagues, and Barry can’t say he is surprised about this turn of events. Sam doesn’t share his lenient attitude towards the other Rogues’ tendency not to care who they could keep up this late at night, and while he doesn’t have the same severe sleeping troubles as Barry does, he still needs a somewhat quiet surrounding to be able to fall asleep. This circumstance has caused the man to clash with his friends more than once in the past, and it is undoubtedly going to happen once more right now.

Sighing softly and letting his head drop back onto his pillow, Barry thinks about getting up and closing his door to dampen the ruckus that is about to happen.

It is then that Axel pipes up from his room down the floor, “Dude, you do realize that you just spoke of yourself in plural, right?”

“Fuck off-” Sam’s retort to the teenager is cut off by both Marco and Digger, who yell back upstairs, telling him to shut it in turn.

As Barry has suspected another argument breaks out, and he listens with a slight sense of exasperation how his friends seemingly try to out-scream each other.

Turning back to his magazine, he decides to ignore it and instead read some more until his friends have calmed down enough for him to try and catch some sleep.

The yelling match between Sam and the other Rogues goes on for a few minutes until Len eventually has had enough. “Shut the fuck up! All of you! I can’t hear a damn thing!”

“Nobody cares about your fucking ice-” Mick’s response gets muffled halfway through, causing Barry to look over to the now closed door of his room.

He is surprised to spot James standing there.

The man is wearing his space-themed pajama that is peppered with small rockets, moons, and astronauts, and he has the little plush fox in his right arm he never seems to be without these days. The plush animal is also wearing a pajama, an adorable little get-up that Lisa sewed for James a while ago when he suffered from an intense bout of depression and hadn’t been able to stop crying for most of that day.

“Hey, J-James, is everything al-alright?” Barry asks, sitting up.

James, who stopped not too far from the door, keeps his eyes on the floor, while nervously gnawing at his lower lip. He doesn’t answer.

It causes a familiar worry to rise in Barry, and with it, the same uncertainty that always accompanies the concerns when his younger friend isn’t doing well these days. Hartley is the person who knows the best how to deal with James when he isn’t doing so well, and usually he is also the one James seeks out when he doesn’t feel alright.

The problem with that is, the other man is on a date tonight.
That is probably also part of the reason why James is here instead of sleeping or tinkering with one of his gadgets. He has been in a grumpy mood since the early afternoon when he learned from Hartley that the ginger wouldn't be around which only grew worse when he didn't succeed in convincing the other Rogue to stay with him despite persistently trying so for hours.

In the end, James had locked himself in his room, angry and unwilling to be reasoned with, much to Hartley's frustration.

It was an uncomfortable thing to watch, but Barry was somewhat relieved that Hartley put his foot down today even though he feels terrible for both of his friends.

Hartley and James have always been close, pretty much from the get-go as far as Barry knows, but their friendship has changed over time, especially the last couple of years. Where once both of them have been equals, James' mental state has caused him to regress in that regard. Hartley has become more of a caretaker additionally to being James' support, which is something that isn't healthy for either of them, and Barry has been worried for a while now that this could lead to a rift between both men since Hartley has started to become increasingly on edge around James lately.

It is good that Hartley got out for once, not with James tagging along, but James doesn't share that opinion, and Barry feels for him.

Before Hartley left for his date, he had asked Barry if he could keep an eye on James, just in case. "He'll have trouble sleeping," Hartley explained with a tight little unhappy smile. Barry agreed, of course, and it still worries him when he thinks back to how tired Hartley looked.

Barry shakes that memory off and is just about to repeat his earlier question when James finally looks up and meets his eyes, nervously shifting his weight. "Can I stay here for a bit?"

Barry gives him a warm smile and nods. "Su-sure. I'd l-like to have some c-company an-nyway."

The embarrassed expression on James' face eases away, a relieved grin taking its place, and he is about to make his way over to Barry when he suddenly freezes.

His brows tug together, and he glances down to the little plushy fox in his arms. James studies it with uncertainty, and Barry isn't sure what to make of it.

It is getting harder and harder to understand his friend these days.

"I-is ev-everything okay, James?"

James doesn’t answer immediately, and for a long moment, he keeps staring down at the little plush fox in his arms. Then, just as Barry is about to get up and walk over to him, he mutters something softly under his breath. It is too quite for Barry to understand, but he is probably talking to the little plushy. That’s one of the newer quirks the man has picked up over the last few months.

One of the more concerning ones.

"M-Mr. Fox c-can st-stay a-as well i-if he wants t-to," Barry offers, unsure.

The dark expression on his friend’s face brightens away, a relieved grin taking its place, and he is about to make his way over to Barry when he suddenly freezes.

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"M-Mr. Fox c-can st-stay a-as well i-if he wants t-to," Barry offers, unsure.

The dark expression on his friend’s face brightens once more, and he raises his eyes to meet Barry’s with a somewhat embarrassed smile.

"Thanks, Barry."

"Th-That’s ok-kay, I’m ac-actually l-look-king f-forward t-to y-your and M-Mr. F-Fox’s c-
company,” Barry assures him and looks down to the little plushy in his friend's arms, adding with a 
chuckle. “B-but I-I h-have t-to l-let you kn-know t-that h-his p-puns h-have b-been w-way b-better 
than y-yours, l-lately.”

James shoots him a surprised look that quickly turns into one of gratitude before he smirks. “What 
can I say, he’s learning from the best.” He shoots him a wink then, and his relief over Barry not 
telling him off for treating his plushy like an actual person is so palpable it nearly hurts.

Barry tries not to let his concern over James’ behavior show, which has gotten even stranger since 
Barry gave him the fox. A part of him regrets his choice of gift, though he is pretty sure that James 
would have found another catalyst if it weren’t for the little plushy.

The Trickster never really grew up, he is famous for his silly pranks, love for hand puppets, and 
gaudy choice of clothing, and it became apparent early on that this isn’t just a persona James puts on 
for a heist but the man himself.

The other Rogues have grown used to it over the years, and they can work with it. Nowadays, 
though, it is no longer a quirk, something the younger man has under control, but it has turned into 
an actual problem.

“He doesn’t like the screaming, you know.”

Barry turns his attention back to James, arching an eyebrow in confusion since he isn’t sure what his 
friend means. He studies him silently, frowning when he notices that James doesn’t meet his eyes but 
instead keeps them on the little fox in his arms. His expression is an uneasy mixture of sadness and 
embarrassment.

“W-would you two l-like t-to pl-play a g-g-” Barry stops and takes a deep breath, annoyed at himself 
for stumbling over a word, especially an easy one as this, even though he has started to do better 
lately. He tries it once more, glad that James patiently waits for him to finish.

“A g-game of U-UNO?” It is always a little humiliating to Barry when he sounds like that, and even 
though he doesn’t need to worry about the other man thinking less of him because of his stammer, 
the nervousness still sticks to him when James looks back up to meet his eyes.

There is no scorn, of course not. James doesn’t even seem to have picked up on his stammer acting 
up, and his expression says quite frankly that he likes the proposal.

“Sure!” James agrees gleefully and pulls a deck of said cards out of the back pocket of his pajama 
trousers, waving them at Barry, grinning broadly. “You’re lucky; I have one on me all times when I 
go to bed.” His smile slips off his face, and he averts his eyes, grimacing unhappily, before shrugging 
it off and making his way over to Barry.

It is a somewhat confusing display, but Barry is pretty confident he knows why his friend tends to 
carry a deck of UNO cards around with him these days. He has spotted James and Hartley playing a 
game of UNO more than once when passing the former’s ajar door late at night. That is something 
they probably regularly do when James is unable to sleep.

But Hartley isn’t around tonight.

There is a slight pang in Barry’s chest, and he once more feels an intense rush of sympathy for both 
James and Hartley.

It can’t be easy for either of them.
They end up playing on Barry’s blanket, which he spreads over the ground next to the bed, and it doesn’t take long for James to relax enough that he starts to include the little plushy in their conversations.

Barry plays along despite his concern.

Most of the Rogues prefer to ignore the Trickster’s newer ticks and peculiarities. They don’t know how to deal with them, and if Barry was honest with himself, neither does he.

There is not a lot that can be done about James’ mental state, though, not without him returning to the Heights, and while the prison does have a psychiatrist on its payroll, the man is nothing but a joke. Barry had to see him a couple of times during his stay there too, and like the guards, the doctor was not interested in doing his job. At least, Dr. Weber isn’t cruel, not like most other people working at the Heights, but he is disinterested and prefers not to deal with patients.

James won’t get any help there, and he also won’t get any help outside. Medical treatment of any kind is costly for criminals since rogue doctors will only bother to treat them for the right price, and while Barry knows from Len that there are also psychiatrists that offer their services to criminals, they are rarely sought out.

Criminals are a paranoid bunch, and opening up to someone like that, a medical professional you don’t know much about, is something most prefer not to do.

A while ago, Barry asked Len about whether he knew someone who could aid James with his problems, but the man brushed him off quickly. Len did not like the idea of James seeing someone like that.

Of course, the rarity of any psychiatrists who are willing to work with criminals, and the distrust of the criminal community towards them is only one part of the problem. James himself gets very upset whenever someone mentions that he could have a mental issue, something the other Rogues tend to do to get a rise out of him unfortunately, and Barry isn’t sure how well asking him to seek help will go.

It is a frustrating situation.

Around half past one, just when Barry went back to reading the cooking magazine since James nodded off after their fourth round and is now snoring on the blanket that is still covering part of the ground in front of the bed, a somewhat grumpy looking Len enters the room.

It seems his team has lost.

“What the hell?” Len asks, glaring daggers at the sleeping Rogue resting next to their bed, before shooting Barry an annoyed look that demands an explanation.

“H-He g-got ups-set b-by all th-the s-screa-ming,” Barry explains quietly and offers Len an apologetic smile.

Len’s frown deepens, and he doesn’t seem to have the patience nor the willingness to deal with this, so that he walks over to the sleeping James, glaring darkly at the sight of him hugging the little fox tightly, and kicks him lightly against his back.

“Get up, Trickster. Naptime is over,” Len tells the younger man, scowling down at him.

“Don’t wanna,” James protests and rolls to the side, curling up into a ball, before muttering, “Mr. Fox and I like it here.”
“If you don’t scram right now, I’ll kick you over to your damn room myself,” Len threatens and he sounds like he means it, much to Barry’s concern.

James seems to pick up on it as well, since he glances over his shoulder up at Len, pouting. “But we like it here! Barry is here!”

“For fuck’s sake-”

“J-James,” Barry cuts Len off, shooting his partner a sour look for how he decided to handle this situation. “L-Len and I w-would l-like t-to r-rest n-now, t-too.”

“We can make a sleepover,” James offers, giving him a pleading look.

“No way in hell,” Len argues, grinding his molars.

“You wouldn’t notice us,” James promises, and Barry doesn’t like the desperate quality that slips into the younger man’s voice. As if the prospect of returning to his room alone actually scared him for some reason.

“I’m not in the mood to put up with your shit tonight, Trickster.” Len either doesn’t pick up on James’ unease or doesn’t care. “You move your ass out of this room right now, or I’ll do it for you.”

“Len,” Barry says in a warning tone, ignoring the glare he gets from his partner in return despite how a part of him starts to scream at him to shut up and back down. Instead, he directs his next words to James, who is still lying on the ground. He looks scared. “Wh-What if I-b-bring you b-back t-to y-your r-room and t-tell y-you a sh-short s-story. W-Would th-that h-help?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Barry,” Len grinds out, but Barry only shoots him another warning and impatient look in return.

Hartley told Barry a while ago that he tends to read James stories to get him to sleep when he is distraught for some reason. The ginger looked a little embarrassed when he mentioned it, but Barry didn’t and still doesn’t judge either of them for it.

There are nights he doesn’t want to go to bed either due to the fear of what his mind would conjure up if he did.

“I think that would help,” James admits after mulling the offer over for a long moment and pushes himself up into a sitting position. He doesn’t meet Barry’s eyes but keeps staring at the ground in front of him, suddenly looking like a heap of misery.

“You… you don’t have to, though,” James adds, frowning, and Barry doesn’t miss how he digs his fingers into the little plush fox before glancing up to Len with an unhappy, clearly embarrassed expression, while Len keeps glowering down at him.

“It’s ok-kay-”

“Nah,” James cuts him off and gets up, cheeks deeply flushed, and laughs awkwardly. “It’s okay.” He grins, though it looks more like a grimace to Barry. “I’m good. Sorry for bothering you.” With that, he turns and speed walks out of the room.

Len glares after him, and his expression only darkens when he turns back to Barry and notices the irritated look he gets in return.

“He is a grown ass man,” Len points out, crossing his arms. “Don’t feed into his idiocies.”
“J-James d-doesn’t f-feel w-well,” Barry argues angrily. “H-He’s u-upset, and th-that has n-nothing t-to d-do w-with h-him b-being an id-diot.”

“No,” Len agrees, and Barry gets the notion that he fights the urge to roll his eyes, “but it’s nearly one in the morning, I’m tired, so are you, and he’s a grown man.”

They watch each other quietly, and the tension that has built up between them is uncomfortable, so much so that Barry suddenly feels the need to get up, so that Len can no longer glare down at him while he is sitting on their bed. He doesn’t, though.

“I’d s-still l-like t-to h-have s-someone b-be th-there f-for m-me i-if I w-were h-him,” Barry says quietly.

Len huffs a sigh and rubs his eyes, sounding weary and annoyed, and like he wishes they could just drop this topic.

“Sam is currently picking up Piper, so stop worrying about Trickster,” Len informs him. “He’ll be fine.”

Some of the concern eases away at these words, and Barry feels himself relax somewhat thanks to that piece of news.

Len makes his way over to the bed and sits down on its edge, putting a hand on Barry’s knee, giving it a slight squeeze.

The frown on his face prevails as he meets Barry’s eyes, but he doesn’t seem irritated any longer but somewhat guilty.

Len does care for his Rogues, all of them. He sees them as his responsibility, and Barry knows so, which is why he feels sorry for implying that his partner doesn’t.

Barry covers the hand on his knee with his own and leans forward so that his cheek can rest on Len’s shoulder.

“S-Sorry,” Barry murmurs and he hopes Len understands.

A kiss is pressed on the top of his head, and Len turns his hand on Barry’s knee so that they can intertwine their fingers.

“No need,” Len says, his breath warm against Barry’s scalp. “You’re a caring person, and there’s nothing wrong ’bout that.”

Barry smiles and closes his eyes, grateful to have the other man with him and that they won’t have to go to bed with tension between them.

"S-So are y-you," Barry murmurs, starting to feel drowsy now with Len this close.

Len hums nonverbally, apparently not interested in going there right now.

Barry is fine with that and instead enjoys having him at his side, a warm, comforting presence that would keep his nightmares at bay.
And the hiatus is over! Yay!!! :D

I'm a little early, I said the hiatus would be officially over tomorrow, but I got too impatient, and it's so good to be back with another chapter, even if this one is not as exciting as the last one. I know some of you will be disappointed that things are not moving as quickly as you've hoped after the previous chapter, but the reason for this is two-fold. I still have around ten chapters pretty much finished before we are getting to the climax of this part, and I don't really want to discard them after putting all the work into them and, secondly and most importantly, I'm still too busy.

I was able to go over this chapter about a month ago during a rare moment of calm, but I have not been able to do the same for the next chapter yet. Things have been too busy, and I had to postpone two of my exams, which I will have this upcoming week (and Monday and Friday, please wish me luck ;) ), but after that, I will finally have more time at my hands again. I'm not joking if I say that I can't wait for next week to be over.

In case you guys are interested, I passed pretty much all my exams so far and was able also to pass both of those big laboratory exercises that pretty much took up all of this semester. I'm very excited and happy about it, and I'm so ready to forget studying for a while and concentrate on other things, like Singularity (I miss working on it so much... ;-; ).

Quintessenzza, my wonderful beta, will be on holiday for a time in July, and since I did not have the time to go over the next chapters so I can send them to him, I will probably post them unedited. I was thinking about waiting until he is back again, but I really don't wanna put up with another hiatus.

I also have to confess that I wasn't able to reply to all of your comments so far (as you have undoubtedly noticed), which sucks and bothers me to no end, but I simply didn't find the time to. I will get back to do so when things have calmed down again, promise. :)

It seems Barry picks up on something not being alright, though he tries to assure himself that he is only paranoid. Who could be stalking him and his dreams? It seems his subconscious picked up on something he hasn't so far.

I really enjoy the antics of the Rogues. They are the worst and best babysitters at the same time. Worst because they are any responsible guardian's nightmare, and best because they don't give a damn about whether the kid among them is being drunk or up past their bedtime, which is something Axel certainly approves of. ;) Poor Barry, it has to be hard to be the grown-up all the time. Though he pretty much shares that responsibility with Len when it comes to the Rogues.

Initially, the part with James' (aka Trickster in this case) and his deteriorating mental state was more focused on in this story, I had to cut it due to a number of reasons, but I didn't want to leave it out entirely and will include some smaller glimpses here and there about what is going on there.

Anyway, I hope all of you had an enjoyable and successful couple of months so far, and that you're just as happy to have Singularity back on track as I am.

Next chapter will have us meet up with Jay and Joan who have a big surprise for Barry and Axel. Till then! <3
A New Path Opens Up

Chapter Summary

Barry and Axel join Joan and Jay to a farmer's market. They spend a nice afternoon together, afterward, and an unexpected offer comes up.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not edited, yet, so please excuse any errors you may come across. :)

Also, I hope you don't mind I'm super early with this chapter, but I will visit my parents this weekend and won't have the opportunity to upload there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It is early June when Barry and Axel join Jay and Joan on a visit to a farmer's market in the KC garden center park.

The market is well visited despite the weather being cloudy and somewhat crisp. Barry doesn’t mind the drop in temperatures. He enjoys the fresh air, seeing that he spent the majority of last week in a bar that gets quite stuffy at times since most of their clientele enjoy to have a smoke to their drinks. Additionally, Jay picked him and Axel up shortly after they had lunch so that he uses this opportunity for a post-prandial stroll.

Axel, who keeps looking around with a somewhat bored, disgruntled look, doesn't seem to share his opinion. He keeps complaining about that fact to a minimum, though, likely because Jay is there as well.

The vendors they pass offer a variety of lovely looking vegetable and fruits as well as numerous baked goods which fill the air close to them with a delicious smell. It is enough to tempt Barry to pick something up even though he is still feeling quite full from the couscous chicken wraps he had earlier.

He keeps stopping every so often to take a closer look since he intends to buy a healthy selection of greens, not only for himself but for the Rogues as well, who tend to be negligent when it comes to keeping an eye on what they eat.

"Look at these peaches," Joan says as she shows him one of the plum, ripe fruits she has been investigating next to him. "They look just perfect for a pie, don't you think?"

Barry hums in agreement, redirecting his attention from the apples he has been studying to the yellow fruits. He has been thinking of making some dessert tomorrow, something easy but festive enough he can bring over to the hideout since it will be Marco's birthday. A peach pie does sound rather lovely and would be fitting for that occasion. Len isn't too fond of peaches, though, and Barry decides to keep looking a little longer.
It doesn't take long for Joan and him to pick up a number of vegetable and fruits, including tomatoes, corn, green beans, carrots, onions, and of course peaches. Barry also bought a jar of honey after debating with himself whether it was worth to pay fifteen dollars for it, and while a part of him keeps insisting that it is outrageous to spend this much on something he does not actually need, he does reason with himself that it will last him a long while, and he is supporting the local farmers with it.

"I love their honey," Joan informs Barry as they move on from the vendor who sold the honey, "I like to have it with butter on buns and a cup of black tea for breakfast."

"I have to try it that way then," Barry replies, returning the elderly woman's warm smile.

"You've to eat a lot of buns to make it worthwhile fifteen bucks," Axel remarks from next to him, sounding a little sourly, probably because he isn't enjoying this little trip nearly as much as the rest of them do. The teen has been keeping complaining about all the vegetables Barry is picking up, likely because he knows that he will end up having to eat them as well.

The comment about how much money Barry just spent on the honey stings a little, but Axel has been in a somewhat irritable mood since he woke up this morning, which likely has no real reason and is just him being a teenager. Axel pretty much only came along due to him, since he would have preferred to stay on his couch, reading a stack of comics he got from who knows where. Because of that, Barry tries to appease him by getting him a bag of miniature apple maple scones at the next vendor when he notices the boy eying them with interest.

"Seriously, I'm shocked there isn't a beanstalk sprouting out my ears by now," Axel grumbles while he munches on one of his scones. "I'm sure there's no one else my age who has to eat so much healthy stuff." He says healthy as if the word leaves a nasty taste in his mouth, causing Barry to huff a chuckle and shoot him a fond look.

"There are also not too many young men like you who find someone generous enough like Barry they can live off," Jay points out, one slightly disapproving frown in place. Joan, who has just been looking for some cabbage, turns to her husband and lightly slaps his upper arm.

"Really, Jay," Joan gives him an indignant, disapproving look, "The boy is not even sixteen yet."

Jay clearly isn’t happy about being rebuked by Joan but insists, "I know, and I’m not saying he should be looking for a job just yet, but he should have a goal he can work towards to. That is important for a boy his age."

Axel tries not to appear all that ruffled by what Jay just since this has become something of a familiar topic whenever the older man was around him, much to Barry’s annoyance. Still, Axel can’t stop the glare he directs at Jay in response, which isn't surprising, since he hates being called a freeloader, even if there may be more truth to that claim than either of them likes.

"Don’t worry, old man, I'll find a way to pay Barry back," Axel informs with some snide to his words.

"A-Axel, watch your t-tone," Barry warns him sharply, though his expression turns milder as he goes on, "You do don’t n-need t-to p-p-pay me b-back. I d-don’t s-support y-y-you because I-I w-want s-something b-back fr-from you, b-but b-because I kn-know you’re a v-very sm-smart and g-good kid, and y-you’re ve-very d-dear t-to m-me."

Axel’s cheeks redden in response to those words, causing him to duck his head while scowling that Barry can’t say those sappy things when they are out in public. Despite his embarrassment, Axel
can’t prevent the grin that is tugging at his lips, though, and Barry feels himself relax again.

Barry turns to Jay, then, a weary smile on his lips. They have talked about Axel and his lack of formal education a few times over the last month since Jay picked up on the fact that the boy is not attending any school, and it is not a conversation he wants to have another repetition of right now.

Barry knows that the older man means well, and he too wants Axel to start school, but he also knows that the teenager isn’t like Bart or other boys his age who grew up with people caring about them, at least not till he was already in his teens. He hates the idea of putting up with any authority figure like a teacher, and unlike with Bart, Barry doubts that anybody could get Axel to attend school against his will.

Barry tried to talk to the boy about it a few times, and while he is alright to be tutored by him, and even enjoys it, for the most part, he hates the idea of visiting an actual school, and he would probably end up skipping it most of the time if he was forced to do so.

It’s not only Axel’s dislike for teachers, though, but the boy’s lack of belief in his capabilities.

"I'm just too stupid for that kind of stuff,” Axel told Barry once with a shrug, looking little bothered by that statement.

When Barry, who didn't like at all that the teen could think so little of himself, asked him why he would think so, Axel just huffed and shoot him an annoyed look, explaining that people said so numerous times when he was younger, both the teachers in his elementary school as well as his family. So why wasting time on something you aren’t going to succeed in any way?

Barry tried to find out a little more about this, he was disturbed that the people in Axel’s life talked to him like that, but the boy made it clear that he didn't want to have that conversation anymore, and Axel can be stubborn like a mule in that regard.

Right now, Len pays Axel for running little errands for the Rogues, like getting food and things of that kind, or doing chores like helping him fix stuff at the hideout. It's hardly an ideal situation, but Axel likes it well enough, and he is smart and a quick learner. He enjoys picking up new things, which will undoubtedly aid him in his education, but he doesn’t like being forced to spent time on something that doesn't pique his interest. Usually, only Barry gets him to do something he doesn't want to, and even then, he puts up a fight more often than not.

“W-we’re w-working on i-it, J-Jay, I’m su-su-re w-we’ll f-find s-something for h-him s-soon,” Barry assures Jay and hopes that the older man will let the topic rest. While he knows that Jay means well, and his intention is not to criticize him, Barry can't help but feel like it is somehow also his shortcoming that Axel isn’t sure what to do with his life yet.

There are training programs Barry learned of when doing some research about what kind of alternative education to school is out there, and Axel does find some of them interesting, but for most of them, you either need to have graduated from at least high school and/or pay a significant fee. Apart from that, the attendee needs to state their current physical address and their parents’ or guardians’ identities, and Axel doesn’t have either as he isn’t registered anywhere, and he stubbornly refuses to talk about his family, even to Barry. An apprenticeship program would be another possibility, but those bring along the same problems they face with the other programs and are usually harder to get a place in.

“And h-he’s a bi-big h-help t-to me,” Barry adds since Axel deserves more credit than he usually gets from others. The boy has become an essential part of his life, a source of support and strength he wants to acknowledge. They both were alone without any real family to lean on in the beginning,
and while Barry initially didn’t want the teenager to get involved with his messed-up life, he is now very grateful that he ended up doing so anyway.

Jay doesn’t seem reassured by Barry’s words, judging by his frown, but he doesn’t press the issue any further and instead nods. “I know, Barry. I didn’t mean to criticize you for supporting the kid.”

Then, he turns to Axel, who still meets his eyes with a hardly suppressed scowl, and smiles as he goes on, “And I know that you don’t mean to exploit Barry’s kind heart by accepting his help. I don’t doubt for a second that you’re smart enough to find something for yourself if you were looking, but I think you give yourself a little too much time to do so.”

Axel’s cheeks heat up again, and he turns away, apparently embarrassed by the statement that must hold too much truth for his liking.

“J-Jay…” Barry is cut off by Jay who presses on, “I don’t mean any harm, you two, but it is a fact that you don’t earn a lot of money, Barry.” He quickly adds as Barry is about to protest, “You do much better now, I know, but taking care of a teenager isn’t cheap.”

This time, it is Barry who feels his cheeks heat up in response, feeling both flustered and embarrassed. Joan cuts any reply from his part off by heaving an exasperated sigh before leveling her husband with a stern look.

“Jay Garrick, didn’t we agree that we’re going to have this conversation with them when we are back home? I hardly think that the middle of a farmer’s market is the best place for it.”

Jay ducks his head somewhat flustered and gives her an apologizing smile. “Sorry, my dear, you’re right. I got carried away.”

Barry and Axel throw the pair a confused look, and as they share a look afterward, it is clear to both of them that they have to be missing something here.

“Talk about what?” Axel inquires, curiously, but Joan shakes her head, smiling warmly.

“It’s nothing, we’ll talk about it once we’re back home,” Joan assures him and turns back to the vendor with the cabbages as she adds, “Let’s enjoy the beautiful day for now.”

Though it is hard, Barry goes along with her and lets the topic drop, as does Axel, who shoots him questioning looks, even though he knows just as much about what Joan is talking about as the teen does.

Barry is glad when Axel finds something that takes his mind off the matter, which turns out to be a young salesgirl that seems to be helping her parents at one of the stalls not too far away from them.

Axel goes over there, after asking Barry for five dollars, ignoring Jay’s disapproving frown, and it is only about ten minutes later that he re-joins them, a bag full of cucumbers in hands and a flush on his cheeks.

Another half an hour goes by, and it starts to drizzle, though it is already warm enough nobody of them is bothered by it. Barry pulls out an umbrella, as does Jay who steps closer to Joan to cover them both from the falling rain, and Axel pulls up his hoodie.

“You want me to carry the bags?” Axel asks, and it takes Barry a moment to realize that the boy is talking to him since he had his attention on some tasty looking Red Delicious.

He shoots his younger friend a confused look, and Axel shrugs, explaining, “You keep grimacing
and shifting the bags from hand to hand.” He holds his free hand out. “I can carry them if you want.”

“Are your hands hurting, my dear?” Joan studies Barry with a concerned expression, putting the apple she had been inspecting back to the rest of the batch, apparently no longer interested in them.

Barry feels familiar unease rise in his chest and isn’t sure how to reply since he doesn’t want to let Jay or Joan know about the trouble his joints have started to cause him once more.

It turned out that the couple of months he lived pain-free after his run-in with that evil speedster were only a temporary affair, and the pain has started to slowly but persistently creep back into his body, causing him a well-known discomfort throughout his days.

So far, it is still not even close to the level it was towards the end of last year, but Barry has the depressing suspicion that it is only a question of time before picking anything up will once again be a painful experience.

Shifting uneasily, he tries to think of something to say that won't give too much away since the notion to share this with Jay or Joan doesn't sit well with him.

Axel beats him to it, though.

“Yeah, his joints are messed up, and he can’t lift or carry stuff that is too heavy,” Axel explains and throws Joan a funny look. “How do you not know about that? He's been much worse in the past.” He glances over at Jay and frowns. “You never picked up on that?”

Axel misses the look of unease that has settled over Barry’s face, who wishes the boy would just have stayed quiet for once.

“What does he mean?” Jay turns to Barry with concern, and his frown deepens when he notices how obviously uncomfortable this topic is to him.

“I-I-It i-is n-n-no…” Barry swallows, and he is pretty sure that his face has to be crimson by how warm it feels. He truly hates his stammer in moments like this one, when it acts up and makes a difficult situation even worse for him. The urge to grit his teeth in frustration is nearly overwhelming, but Barry forces himself to stay calm, not wanting to make himself look even more suspicious. “I-It’s n-n-noth-thing.” When he sees Jay to protest, clearly not believing him, he adds, “P-Please.”

The desperation in his voice is uncomfortable to listen to, even for him, which causes the others to watch him with a mixture of surprise and worry. It is then that Axel seems to realize that he said something he wasn’t supposed to and gives Barry a puzzled but also apologetic look.

For a long moment, nobody says anything, and they stand in silence among the other visitors who don’t pay them any mind while going about their own business.

It is Joan who eventually breaks the tense moment. “I think we have spent enough time at the market. It is getting late, and I was hoping to make a blueberry pie as dessert for dinner tonight.” She adds towards Barry and Axel, “To which I’d like to invite both of you. Jay and I would like to discuss something with you two.”

While Barry hesitates, not sure what to think of that invitation, Axel doesn’t have the same reservations and enthusiastically agrees, “Sure, that sounds awesome!”

Barry can’t say he is surprised, mentioning dessert usually gets the boy’s okay for about anything, and he bites down on a sigh, seeing that he can't decline now.
He tenses up somewhat when his companions turn their eyes expectantly on him, but gives a stiff nod, trying to smile. “Th-Thank y-you, w-we’d l-love t-to.” Barry wants to appear nonchalant like it doesn’t worry him that he doesn’t know what Jay and Joan want to talk about with them, but his movement feels wooden, and he is sure he must be quite pale right now.

Their journey back to the Garricks’ home doesn’t take long thanks to the light traffic, and once they arrive, Axel helps Jay to carry everything they bought inside, while Joan asks Barry to help her with preparing some coffee. He agrees, even though it is evident that she does so because she is still worried about what Axel told them about Barry being in pain due to his joints.

Barry tries not to think about it, he doesn’t want to show Joan how uneasy it makes him that Jay and she know about it.

After they are done and enjoyed some coffee, and in Axel’s case a coke, Jay asks Axel if he would like to join him in his laboratory in the basement to give him a hand with an experiment that is currently running.

“You have a real lab at home?” Axel sounds both very impressed and somewhat suspicious. “Like, with acid and all that stuff?”

“Yes,” Jay agrees, amused by Axel’s reaction. “It’s well-equipped since I did prefer to work from home at times when I was still more involved in my company’s projects.”

“Damn, you’ve to be pretty rich,” Axel remarks, frowning, and Barry tenses up, knowing what has to be going through the boy’s head just then.

“Watch your language,” Jay admonishes Axel, who looks confused for a moment before he realizes what could have bothered the older man. It causes him to snort, but quickly apologize when both Jay and Barry shot him admonishing looks in response.

“Fine, I’ll stick to golly and holy moly in future, that’s better?” Axel asks sarcastically and does a bad job of hiding his eye-roll as he crosses his arms. “You guys are worse than a PG rating.”

“G-Go w-with J-Jay,” Barry encourages Axel, meeting the teen’s eyes with an encouraging smile. “Y-You l-like ch-chemist-try, a-and h-his l-labor-raty is r-really imp-ressive.”

“You don’t wanna tag along?” Axel seems surprised about Barry’s insinuation that he will be the only one going downstairs with Jay, seeing that he knows about Barry’s interest in that field of science.

“I-I’m g-good,” Barry assures him and tries not to let the discomfort show the suggestion to follow along causes him. Jay picks up on it, of course, and gives him another one of those concerned frowns, like he usually does when the topic of Barry possibly working for him or in another laboratory comes up these days. Thankfully, the older man leaves it at that.

“You sure?” Axel seems uncertain about what to make of his decline to see the basement lab and shoots Jay a somewhat reproachful look as if it was the man’s fault that Barry didn’t want to come.

“You can help me with preparing the pie, my dear,” Joan offers Barry, clearly noticing his unease. “I want to try out a new recipe a friend of mine gave me, and I would love to have your assistance.”

“Of c-course,” Barry agrees quickly, glad to have an actual excuse for avoiding the trip downstairs.

“Fine, if you don’t wanna come along.” Axel shrugs but still seems somewhat confused about Barry’s decision; it probably doesn’t help that he is also picking up on his unease.
It is a relief that Axel lets go of this issue that quickly since the boy can be pretty stubborn, and Jay hardly is one of his favorite people just yet, which causes him to be suspicious of the older man. Axel does like Joan well enough, though, which is probably the reason that he eventually decides that he doesn’t need to be wary of any bad surprises if he is around Jay on his own.

Barry watches them both leave the living room and make their way towards the stairs, where the staircase to the cellar is, glad that Jay seems to have started to grow fond of the boy, even though Axel usually tries to be a brat around him.

When Jay learned that Axel is not visiting a school, he was not exactly surprised.

“He’s a street kid, isn’t he?” Jay has asked him, and after briefly hesitating, Barry decided to tell him more about the teen and how he met him.

He also brought up that he is tutoring the boy a bit in chemistry, even though he worried that Jay could misunderstand his intentions. To his surprise, the older man considered it to be an excellent idea, going so far as to encourage him about it and offering to bring over some books that dealt with the basics of Chemistry and Physics.

“Would you like another cup of coffee?” Joan offers, causing Barry’s mind to return to the presence.

“N-No, th-thank y-you, I’m g-good,” Barry declines.

“What do you think of us starting on the pie, then?” Joan asks, and Barry readily agrees, since he never actually made a blueberry pie, though he tried his hand on blueberry tarts for Mary’s welcome back party. Both of his friends loved them with Eddy ending up eating most of the batch, of course, which resulted in a scolding from Mary after it turned out that Barry hadn’t the chance to try one of them himself.

The memory causes Barry to smile, and he decides to bake something for them for their next movie night since he is pretty sure that they will like blueberry pie.

It is about one hour later, when the pie is in the oven and the stew on the stove, that Barry and Joan return to the living room to drink some tea and play a game of draughts. The mood is pleasantly relaxed, and they talk about how she is doing, her gardening, how he is doing, and how things are at his new job.

Talking to Joan is enjoyable, relaxing even since Barry doesn’t get the feeling like he has to be ashamed for his stammer. Joan also knows a lot of people, not just because her husband is the original Flash, but because she is a very committed person when it comes to community work, and her stories are fascinating and often amusing.

Calm moments like this one make Barry realize that it was the right decision to allow Joan and Jay back into his life. They are kind and decent people, and while what happened still clings to him, and there is a certain reproach he holds for Jay, he can be around the older man without feeling anger most of the time these days.

Being around Joan is much more comfortable, and he enjoys spending time with her as they wait for Jay and Axel to return upstairs.

Nearly three hours go by before Axel and Jay reemerge from the lab and join them in the living room for a game of UNO. Axel suggested a game of poker, but neither Joan nor Jay think it is a good idea for a boy in Axel’s age to play something like that, and, to Barry’s surprise, Axel doesn’t protest.

Barry patiently listens while Axel tells him about the experiments Jay has shown him, and he is
apparently excited about the experience but gets bored pretty quickly when Barry and Jay go more into detail about some specifics of the running tests which goes entirely over his head.

After the dinner is over, Jay grabs Axel to clear the table and prepare some tea and pie for everybody.

“Why me?” Axel protests as he follows the older man to the kitchen. “Barry likes doing dishes and preparing tea.”

“Joan and Barry made the excellent meal we just had, and they also baked the pie. I think it’s just fair for us to take care of the dishes,” Jay points out, and Barry doesn’t miss how much more lenient the older man seems around the boy now. Just a few hours ago, he would have admonished Axel for complaining. Axel, while muttering something about child labor, does not put a fight either, but goes along with Jay’s suggestion.

It seems the two started to get to know and thus like each other better, and the thought causes something warm to bloom in Barry’s chest.

The pie is to everybody’s liking, and Joan is highly amused about how flustered Barry gets when she mentions what a help he has been in the kitchen.

“I-it wasn’t anyth-thing s-spec-cial, y-you d-did m-most of th-the w-work anyw-way.” Barry tries to wave Joan’s compliment off, but she has none of it.

“Don’t sell yourself short like this, Barry,” Joan says, watching him with warm eyes, “You’re an excellent cook. You prepared the stew nearly all on your own while I made the dough for the pie, and I think it was a good idea to add Cashew nuts and dried cranberries to it. Don’t you think so too, Jay?”

“Indeed,” Jay agrees readily but decides to change the topic when he notices how uneasy Barry seems to feel about the praise. “Joan now is probably a good moment to talk with our guests about our idea.”

These words pique Barry’s and Axel’s interest as neither has forgotten Joan’s ominous insinuation from earlier today.

“What is it? It has something to do with me, doesn’t it?” Axel alternates a curious and expectant look between Jay and Joan, and Barry finds himself doing the same since he didn’t ask Joan about it while they prepared dinner. He too came to the conclusion that it must be about Axel and decided that it would be better for all of them to discuss it together, especially if it is something of importance.

“Well, you see, you told us about the problems you have with getting an apprenticeship place for Axel because of his current living conditions. Which is a real shame because the boy is as bright as a button,” Joan explains before she shares a quick glance with her husband. “Therefore, we thought we could help you with that if you two agree.”

“H-help us w-with it?” Barry gives them a surprised look. “H-how?”

“Yeah, how? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I don’t exactly match a textbook example when it comes to being an applicant for those places.” The incredulity in the teenager’s voice is hard to miss, and Barry feels once again frustration rise in his chest over how little his younger friend always seem to think of himself.

“Well, that may as it be, but that doesn’t mean that it has anything to do with you or how clever you are, my boy. Jay told me how quickly you pick things up when Barry tutors you,” Joan points out
“And you did well when you just gave me a hand in the lab,” Jay adds, smiling. “I’m honestly surprised how quickly you pick things up, and how well you can perform a rather difficult task with just some guidance.”

“Not to mention that Barry is fond of you,” Joan goes on, “enough so that he is willing to support you.” Her eyes turn sad as she glances over to Barry. “Unfortunately, he can’t offer you as much as he wants to because of the circumstances he is in.”

“It would be easier if he could apply to be your guardian,” Jay remarks, “but that is out of the question. That does not mean that you shouldn’t get the opportunity to an education, Axel. You are a smart young man, and I see a lot of potential in you.”

Axel’s face grows red at the unexpected praise, and he averts his eyes, mumbling that it was nothing. Jay and Joan share a brief, amused and surprisingly fond look then, before Jay proceeds, “Therefore, we were thinking about serving as your guardians until you’re of age and no longer need one. That is if you two are alright with that.”

Axel’s eyes grow huge, and Barry can’t say that he does feel any different.

That comes utterly unexpected.

Jay and Joan spent a handful of times with Axel over the last month and a half when Barry started to bring the boy along on his visits, and they seem to like him well enough, especially Joan, but it seems he left a more significant impression than expected.

“Oh-What?! Wait!” Axel sputters and alternates his stare from Jay to Joan. “You want to adopt me!?”

Barry nearly cringes and hopes that his friends don’t take Axel’s outburst the wrong way because he is pretty sure that the boy didn’t intend to sound as put off by this as he just did.

Fortunately, Jay shakes his head as he explains calmly, “No, my boy, we’re more thinking along the line of offering you the possibility to state us as your legal guardians as well as a physical address for the application forms. Being the legal guardian for someone doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to adopt the person.”

“Take your friend Bart for example,” Joan reminds him, “He stays with Max who also acts as the boy’s guardian even though he hasn’t adopted him.” When she notices how Axel shoots Barry a wary look, she goes on quickly, “Us being your guardians doesn’t mean that you can’t spend time with Barry anymore if this worries you, dear.”

“But we would expect to have some involvement with your life, of course,” Jay takes over, “For example, make sure that you study for your exams and take your education seriously.” He then turns to Barry. “If you two decide to accept this offer, we would be more than willing to bear the expenses for his training. And before you refuse-” Jay lifts a hand, stopping Barry who was about to protest just then. “Barry, please think about it. You know how expensive such an apprentice program is, and we know that you want to pay for it yourself, but that is not really possible with your current income. I mean no harm in saying that, my boy, it is remarkable how you have supported the kid for so long on your own and, as Joan has already mentioned, we are not going to take him away from you. We only want to give you two a hand there.”

“You don’t have to decide right now, of course,” Joan assures them. “Take your time and discuss it kindly.
amongst yourself. Just know, that the offer stands if you should decide to accept it.”

There is a brief silence after Joan finished and both Barry and Axel exchange a startled look. Then, Barry turns to the elderly couple, wondering whether he looks as exhausted as he feels. He knows that the sadness coiling up in the pit of his stomach must be visible on his face, but he tries to smile nonetheless.

“Th-that… th-that’s re-really g-g-generous of yo-you t-two,” Barry starts a little unsure of how to respond and glances over to Axel, who doesn’t seem to know what to think of what is just happening any more than he does and just watches him with huge eyes. “I-I do-don’t re-really kn-know w-what to-to s-say b-b-but th-thank y-y-you. Th-this w-will c-certainly b-be v-very b-benef-ficial f-for A-Axel’s l-life i-if h-he de-decides t-to a-accept. I-I Th-Thank you.”

“But, wait a minute. How exactly do you want to get that to work? I mean, like, don’t you need the approval of my… you know, my parents?” Axel sounds unhappy about having to bring them up, and a noticeable apprehension takes hold of him that always overcomes hi. when he mentions his family.

“Well, my dear, if you tell us who your parents are, we can try to talk to them,” Joan offers and gives Axel a searchingly look which the boy doesn’t return as he lowers his gaze to the empty dessert plate in front of him. The older woman frowns but doesn’t seem all that surprised, since she knows from Barry what a sensitive topic Axel’s parents are for him. “In that case, there isn’t anybody to ask for permission, and, you see, it will be a non-binding agreement between us.”

“I get that, and it’s great and all, but I don’t think that the authorities are going to see it the same way.” Axel throws a help-seeking look to Barry. “They won’t let that happen, I know that, and I don’t wanna be put back…” The boy breaks off and lowers his eyes again.

Suddenly, he looks like the personification of misery, and it breaks Barry’s heart.

“A-Axel.” Barry touches the boy’s shoulder lightly. “I d-don’t th-think th-that i-it wi-will co-come to-to th-that. Y-you kn-know th-that J-Jay i-is th-the or-original F-F-Flash, and he-he kn-knows a l-lot of pe-people wh-who ca-ca-can he-hep hi-him a-and y-you wi-with th-this.”

The look of utter surprise that Axel gives him is amusing to Barry, at least, till the teenager asks his next question.

“Wait, are you telling me that the heroes are controlling the government? For real?!?” Axel gives Jay an appraising look at that. “Not bad, old man.”

“N-No, A-Axel, th-that i-is n-not…” Barry sighs, and shakes his head, wondering where the boy picks that stuff up all of the time. Probably from the Rogues.

He seriously has to talk to them about this.

“T-that’s re-really n-not wh-what’v-e I-I m-meant. J-Jay h-has j-just h-helped a l-lot o-of p-p-peo-people as th-the F-Flash, and th-therefore th-there are a l-lot o-of pe-people wh-who w-would b-be w-willing t-to h-help h-him a-as w-well i-if h-he a-asked th-them t-to.”

Briefly, a thoughtful expression settles on Axel’s face, before he nods. “Sure, I get it. It’s, I’ll do you a favor, you’ll do me a favor, right?”

Neither of the grown-ups is all that happy with this analogy, but, in the end, Axel pretty much hit the nail on its head with it, even though they would have preferred for him to interpret a little differently.
Before long, they start to discuss how exactly they would get the whole thing to work should Axel agree to it, since neither Barry nor Axel want to accept or reject the offer just yet, but they are curious to learn what exactly their friends have in mind.

They end up staying late into the night.

Chapter End Notes

So, who of you expected Jay and Joan offering to be legal guardians for Axel? Yes, I think Axel was about as surprised. ;)

I always liked the Garricks a lot, in the comics they were just such a sweet and kind couple who don't have any kids of their own, and I think if someone like them had looked after a troubles teen like Axel, things would probably have turned out very differently. It's neat to be able to try things like that out in your own stories, this is an idea I've had from pretty early on. Unfortunately, due to rewriting and cutting scenes for pacing and length, some of the interactions between Jay and Axel got cut as well, so in the older versions, Jay offering Axel to be his guardian probably felt not as surprising as it does here. I hope it is not too much of an issue, though.

Jay and Joan learning of Barry's problem with his joints is also something I'm happy about it finally being out, and Jay will probably look back and remember all those moments when Barry did behave odd in the past because of him being in pain, and feel pretty crap about not having noticed so earlier. Unfortunately, Barry is pretty good at hiding things that bother him, whether it is emotional pain or physical one.

It is sweet of Axel to tag along only because of Barry and so he can keep an eye on him. Jay does give him too little credit for how much of a support he really is to Barry. I think Jay's concern due to Barry's financial situation and about Axel's future is understandable, though. It will be interesting to see whether the idea of the apprenticeship will work out, and Axel will end up becoming a chemist. Bart would be so envious. ;)

Thank you all for your feedback, it always means a lot to me. :) And I'm super happy to report that I was finally able to answer all the comments from the last three chapters.

Next chapter will have Barry be surprised by someone unexpected at work, who could mean a lot of trouble and has an unusual request. We will also finally see Mary, Eddie, and James again.

See you in two weeks! <3
Caught Red-Handed

Chapter Summary

Barry learns that he has to do someone a favor.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited by my awesome friend and beta Quintessenza! Thanks for the help and doing an awesome job as usual. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is a late Thursday evening when Barry gets an unexpected visitor.

There aren’t too many customers around, and Barry uses the break to clean the cabinets behind the bar thoroughly.

“I seriously should consider giving you a raise, Barry. I don’t think I’ve ever had someone working for me who did that kind of stuff without me having to order them to,” Charlie comments while sitting at the bar and eating a late dinner consisting of a simple tuna sandwich and a Snickers bar.

He is watching Barry’s cleaning with interest since some curious stuff has been brought to light so far, like a handful of wallets, cleared of any cash, of course, a still sealed bag of M&M’s that expired twelve years ago, an obscure looking little doll that holds an eerie similarity to Charlie himself, and a bunch of driving licenses.

There is no doubt that Barry’s predecessors are responsible for the lack of content in the wallets, and while both of them deem the Charlie doll a bit alarming, they are quite amazed that one of the driving licenses actually dates back to 1933 and belongs to some Austrian guy named Reinhold Hauser.

“Wh-When d-did s-someone c-clean th-these c-cabin-nets th-the l-last t-time?” Barry asked Carlie curiously as he studied the faded picture of Mr. Hauser.

“No idea.” Charlie shrugged and took a sip of his coke before he added, “I’ve never used the lower levels of the cabinet.” He frowns. “Don’t think my dad did either.”

“I w-wouldn’t have a pr-problem w-with that.” Barry gets up and stretches his back, grimacing as a sharp pain flashes down his spine, and turns to the other man. “You k-know, m-most of our c-custom-mers l-like m-me be-better than y-you, an-nyway. Y-you sh-should give m-me a r-raise s-soley d-due t-to h-how p-popu-ular I am.”

Charlie barks a laugh and shoots him an amused grin. “Shove it, Allen, or I’ll put your ass back on the streets faster than you can blink.” He snorts and takes another bite of his sandwich, chewing on it while studying Barry with a thoughtful look. What he says next, catches Barry utterly off-guard. “I’ll think about it.”
An hour later, shortly after eleven, Barry is quite satisfied with his work and closes the now once again clean cabinets. Charlie went back upstairs to his apartment. He started to take Wednesdays and Thursdays off after he deemed Barry well enough trained to do the job on his own. He still hardly goes out on these days and mostly just sits around at the bar or watches TV upstairs, but Barry noticed that his boss has become remarkably more relaxed over the last few weeks.

“Wow, you really are a busy bee, Allen.”

The voice catches Barry off guard since he is standing with his back to the bar and he hasn’t heard the entrance door open in the last ten minutes or so. It startles him badly enough that he loses his grip on the full bottle of vodka he has just picked from the glass shelves to wipe it off. A loud crash cuts through the otherwise calm bar when the glass smashed on the ground, and the clear liquid floods the area around his shoes.

The murmur in the bar ceases for a moment as the handful of residing customers turn their attention to the source of the noise, but it swiftly goes back to its usual level when they fail to discover anything of interest and probably assume that its cause was just the clumsiness of their bartender.

Barry turns around, slowly, reluctantly, and feels his stomach drop as his gaze lands on Guy Gardner, someone he would have never thought to encounter here of all places.

Guy, for his part, also looks quite surprised. They end up staring at each other for a few uncomfortable seconds.

“I can’t say that I was expecting that kind of reaction,” Guy remarks with a somewhat amused smirk.

Barry blinks, and it is due to the slight burn in his lungs that he realizes that he has been holding his breath. He exhales with a shudder, but his eyes stay fixed on his unexpected visitor, warily returning the man’s curious gaze.

His body suddenly feels much too small, as if his skin has shrunk down. A familiar agitation takes hold of him, and he shifts uneasily.

Guy frowns, likely surprised by Barry's odd behavior.

“Did you really lose some of your marbles, Allen?” Guy asks jokingly, though there is something akin to concern behind the man’s brown eyes.

For a long moment, Barry just stares at Guy, before he finally stammers a confused, “Wh-what?”

“Your marbles,” Guy repeats and grins in a not very friendly way. “You see, most of your former colleagues think you went coo-coo quite some time ago.”

Apparently, Guy has had enough of standing as he takes a seat on a bar chair while nodding to one of the hard liquor bottles behind Barry. “Looks like you have some good stuff here. Let’s see if you’re any good at your job.” He thinks for a moment before proceeding. “Make me a Rusty Nail with the lovely Scotch that is winking at me from over there.”

Barry follows Guy’s nod and recognizes the bottle of old Whiskey that is one of Charlie’s favorites. He looks back at the other man who returns his gaze patiently and eventually forces himself to get to work.

The shards of the broken glass crack under Barry’s shoes as he moves around, but he hardly notices it. His head feels empty, a terrible fear settling itself into the pit of his stomach.
The Green Lantern now knows where he works.
He knows that he works at the Saloon.
How did he find out about that?
Will he tell the others?
Of course, he will, why wouldn’t he?

Barry can feel Guy’s gaze on himself while he is preparing the drink, and it is a horrendously disconcerting feeling.

Should he try to beg the other man to keep quiet about this? Would that make a difference?
He doesn’t want to go back to prison. He can’t.

He is such a damn fool for deciding to work here in the first place! He knew something like this could happen, and he did it anyway!

Barry’s hands are slightly shaking when he puts the drink in front of Guy and quickly takes a step back, away from him, before he even realizes what he is doing.

Guy studies him with a hard to read look for a few seconds. He picks the cocktail up and sips on it. An appreciative hum escapes his lips a moment later.

“That’s some really good stuff, man. You sure you were supposed to use that bottle. That probably belongs to your chief’s private stash,” Guy remarks with a snort.

Unsure how to answer, Barry shrugs helplessly. The broken glass cracks under his shoes as he shifts uneasily, and he wants to clean the mess up but doesn’t dare to do anything other than stand there, waiting.

He wishes Charlie came back downstairs.

“Look, you don’t need to gawk at me as if I was planning to skin you alive, Allen.” Guy suddenly grunts, looking somewhat uncomfortable, and nods to Barry’s feet. “Don’t you wanna clean that mess up or something?”

Guy shoots him an annoyed look, and Barry doesn’t need to be told twice to follow the prompt.

While Barry gets a bucket and a mop, a small group of new customers enters, which keeps him busy enough between making drinks and cleaning the floor to ignore the looming presence of the Green Lantern in the bar for the next ten minutes. Guy seems just fine with that, and to Barry’s surprise it appears that he is more interested in the rerun of the football game shown on the new television Charlie got about a week ago than having small talk with him.

After initially hesitating, Barry goes back to cleaning and re-organizing the cabinets, since there is nothing else he can do, though a big part of him tries to urge him to just scram, to run and don't look back. It is a ridiculous idea, but even so, it is hard for him not to follow along.

Over the run of the following hour, Barry keeps himself busy with cleaning and re-cleaning the bar area and tables around, taking orders, and trying not to lose his nerves due to Guy’s presence. He keeps throwing apprehensive looks in the other man’s direction every other minute, but Guy doesn’t show whether he notices it or not. Instead, he orders the same drink once more before changing to
coke, leaving surprisingly generous tips.

The night goes on like that, and shortly before midnight, when closing time arrives, the last two of the bar’s customers leave, so that only Barry and Guy remain.

Barry decides that he can start with closing since other than the Green Lantern there is no one else, and he really wants to bring some additional distance between himself and the other man who is currently sipping on his bottle of coke while watching some soap opera.

Another twenty minutes go by, and Barry is just about done mopping the floor when Guy finally breaks the silence between them.

“You don’t seem too bad at this,” Guy remarks, and Barry freezes when he notices that the other man is watching him. “Maybe you should have skipped the superhero thing and worked in a bar from the beginning. That probably would have saved you a lot of trouble.”

Barry’s hands are still on the mop he has been using to clean the floor, and he feels himself growing sick at those words, not missing the silent reproach. He doesn’t look at the other man but he can still feel his eyes on him.

“Look.” Guy heaves a sigh when Barry fails to reply and explains, sounding somewhat annoyed, “You don’t seem all that jazzed about me being here, and, in all honesty, I can think of better things to do on a Thursday night, so can you move it back over here? I’m sure you’ll have enough time finishing your cleaning duty when we’re done talking.”

Although everything in Barry bristles at the thought of getting any closer to the other man, he reluctantly does so, knowing that he hardly has any other option at hand. He still makes his way around the bar to have at least some kind of barrier between them which causes Guy to give him another frown.

“Seeing that you seem to have swallowed your damn tongue, I’ll come straight to the point.” Guy rests his elbows on the counter and leans forward, his gaze fixed on Barry. “I’m looking for something, and I’ve learned through the grapevine that the thing is likely to turn up in this gorgeous city.” His frown deepens as he goes on. “Unfortunately, I don’t really know shit about Keystone City’s underground market, and your nephew is currently in an even pissier mood than usual so that I can’t really expect any help from him.” He eyes Barry like a cat does a canary then while a smile spreads across his lips. “Seems I’m lucky, though, since I didn’t only stumble across the infamous Saloon that seems to have fallen off the face of the earth, but my favorite ex-con.”

Guy chuckles lowly, watching him curiously. “Seriously, you’ve some fucking nerves to work at a place like this.” He snorts, honestly looking amused. “Wouldn’t have thought someone like you had the guts to show his former colleague the middle finger in such a blatant way.”

“P-P-Please,” Barry stammers, his voice trembling just as bad as the rest of him, and it is hardly above a whisper. “D-Don’t t-t-tell th-them.”

“You promise?” Guy asks, glaring at him. “That our disgrace of an ex-colleague is working at an infamous bar for criminals after all the other shit he pulled off?” He scoffs. “Right, wonder why you’d be worried about that.”

“I-I-” Barry balls his fists and ignores the faint pain that shoots through his hands as he does so. “I-I d-don’t m-m-mean a-any t-t-troub… I-I p-p-prom-mise-”

“You promise?” Guy barks a laugh that startles Barry enough that he flinches, which in turn causes
the sneer to drop off the ginger’s face. Instead of going on, Guy studies him for a long moment, eyes slightly narrowed, and his anger nearly palpable.

“You’re one damn idiot,” Guy eventually goes on. “How do you think it will look on my record if anybody learned that I somehow beat the odds, found this shithole, and you along with it, but failed to mention it to anybody?”

Barry has no response to that.

“Look, Allen.” Guy huffs a sigh, looking rather disgruntled by his own words, and leans back, drumming his fingers on the dark wood of the bar. “I really couldn’t give less of a shit about you if someone paid me for it. I don’t wanna get mixed up in this little feud between you and my self-righteous comrades, so I make you an offer.” He picks his coke up, takes a pull, before pointing the bottle towards Barry. “You’re going to get me some intel, and if I’m satisfied with it, I’ll consider overlooking the little fact that I stumbled upon you, working in a bar that’s notorious for its criminal clientele. How does that sound to you?”

“Y-you b-b-believe-ve th-th-that I-I-I c-c-c…” Barry breaks off and swallows nervously, his cheeks growing uncomfortably hot before forcing himself to go on, “I-I c-can h-h-help y-you w-with th-that?”

Guy gives him an unimpressed look. “You’re a fucking bartender, Allen, you can’t tell me that you don’t hear shit like where thugs sell their loot. I know how things are running in bars like this one, and it’s like some unwritten rule that the bartender has an open ear for everybody and their grandmother.”

Barry swallows again and he isn’t sure how to respond without getting himself in trouble. It is true, he does hear things, but he has learned to turn out stuff he really doesn’t want to be involved with. That aside, since the disastrous run-in between the Rogues, Blacksmith’s people and the Black Velvet, Charlie’s bar has established itself as part of the Rogues’ territory, and news about the Twins’ organized smuggling ring has nearly stopped to exist within its walls.

People still talk about where they sell their loot, but those are mostly smaller, privately operated places, nothing coming close to the dimension of Blacksmith’s black market. It is doubtful that Barry will learn about the whereabouts of whatever the other man is looking for.

“I-I-I do-do-don’t th-th-think I-I c-c-can he-he-help yo-you w-w-with-”

“God, do you have any idea how damn annoying you sound!?”

Guy sudden outburst causes Barry to jump, and his trembling grows worse in response to the open aggression as he makes another step back, involuntarily glancing to the door leading to the back of the bar.

His reaction is enough for Guy to pause, watching him once again with a grim expression Barry isn’t entirely sure what to make of.

“Look, sorry about that.” Guy heaves a sigh and runs his fingers through his hair in an obviously frustrated manner. He observes Barry and probably doesn’t miss the raw distress he is currently experiencing, which causes his expression to darken even more.

“Don’t look at me like that, Allen, I’m not going to fucking jump you.” He frowns and nods towards him. “You’re shaking like a damn leave, try to calm down, I don’t need you to faint on me.” Guy hesitates then, but eventually adds somewhat awkwardly. “Seriously, sorry, I didn’t mean to yell at
you because of your stutter.”

They proceed to watch each other quietly for a minute until Barry realizes that Guy is waiting for some kind of reaction on his part. Not wanting to make this whole ordeal last any longer than it has to, Barry gives a stiff nod but doesn’t trust himself to speak right now.

Guy seems satisfied enough with that since he goes on, “Good, then get yourself a glass and bring the bottle of Whiskey with you, I think we both are in dire need of some high-quality booze.”

Although Barry dreads the prospect of having the other man around any longer, he complies with his wish, but insistently declines to get a drink of his own.

“It’s a painting,” Guy explains. “One that belongs to a good friend of mine, and it seems to have made its way from Los Angeles to the Gems.”


“No, it’s not famous or anything.” Barry can’t help but frown skeptically hearing that, causing Guy to chuckle and shrug, “It’s a long story, and I’m really not interested in sharing it with you, but let’s say the whole thing is a mix-up of galactic proportions.” He puts the glass of whiskey down and huffs. “Doesn’t really matter what kind of painting it is, does it now? I just need you to find it for me, not broker me a good deal.”

“I-I r-real-ly d-don’t th-think I-I c-can h-help y-y-you th-th-th-there,” Barry tries to explain once more, sounding slightly desperate by now.

“Well, you better,” Guy replies easily and gives him a rather menacing smile. “Otherwise you’ll be back behind bars in no time.”

Barry stares at Guy with wide, horrified eyes, unable to speak as a well-known nausea nestles into the pit of his stomach and tries not to get smothered by the hopelessness that constricts his chest like a squeezing fist.

Guy studies him in return, with a mixture of confusion and frustration, even though he attempts to school his features. Barry has gotten good at reading people who don’t want to show how they feel, though, and he is surprised when he notices guilt buried below the other emotions.

“Let’s focus on you trying to get me some information, for now, okay?” Guy eventually breaks the uneasy silence. He then pulls out a folded paper and passes it to Barry, who needs a moment before he can get himself to take it. “This is the print of a photo that was taken of the picture. Not the best quality, but you still can make it out, and its dimensions are also written down next to it, so you can maybe ask some of your buddies whether they know something about it.”

At these words, Barry’s head snaps back up quickly enough that he feels slightly dizzy, his heart nearly beating up his throat.

“Your poker face sucks,” Guy remarks drily while an amused smirk pulls at his lips. “Not that I wanna know whom you got up and cozy with, Allen, so please spare me.” He heaves a tired sigh and rubs his eyes. “Just try to find something out about that, we’ll see about the rest afterward.”

With that, Guy gets up and gives Barry a final nod and a thin smile. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He points upwards, wrinkling his nose. “My job involves quite a lot of traveling, as you know, so you’ll have some time at hand to collect information for me.”

Barry stays quiet and watches Guy turn without another word and finally take his leave.
When Len comes looking for Barry about half an hour later, he is sitting on the floor behind the bar with his face in his hands. He doesn’t want to talk about it, and Len doesn’t push him to. Instead, he helps him up and gives him a hand with the rest of the closing.

***

A feeling of dread follows Barry from his sleep these days.

It usually lasts only a few minutes after he wakes up but it is still disconcerting enough that it makes him jumpier than usual, so much so that his friends notice.

Like Eddy, who eyes him with concern after he startled Barry by accident. Barry was sitting on the couch, doodling around absentmindedly when Eddy suddenly came up next to him. He was so freaked out that the pencil fell out of his hand.

“Everything alright?” Eddy asks, studying him with a slight frown.

“Y-Yes,” Barry assures him and leans forward to pick up his pencil. His friend takes a seat next to him, a plate of blueberry cake in hand which Barry and Mary baked last night, and glances at the sketchbook on his lap.

“You’re still dreaming of that creep?” Eddy nods to the rough sketch of a person that is mostly made up of shadows. Barry told him and Mary about the man he kept dreaming about time and time again when his friends noticed that he kept drawing the same, faceless figure.

“Dude still looks spooky as hell,” Eddy adds, causing Barry to crack a smile.

“Y-Yeah.”

“Maybe you should draw him less often,” Eddy suggests, picking up another bite of the pie but letting the fork hover closely over the plate. “You know, I’ve read somewhere that you can worsen nightmares if you keep bringing them up.”

Barry hums, feeling tired but relaxed thanks to his friend’s presence.

Eddy is probably right, his sketchbook is filled with shadowy figures by now, and trying to get a better picture of that mysterious man has only resulted in him getting frustrated since it doesn’t matter how hard he tries to recall the strange man, he just isn’t able to.

A part of him believes that it has something to do with Guy and his request, but since these dreams have started before the Green Lantern found his way into the Saloon, Barry isn’t sure whether it is really only due to that.

Guy hasn’t turned up again in the last two weeks, and Barry hasn’t found out anything about any picture at work, mostly because their number of customers has still been pretty low, though things are starting to look up somewhat.

So far, he avoided bringing the man and his demand up to Len or any of the others, though his partner has picked up that something is eating away at him. The thing is, Barry doesn’t want Len or the others to know that someone of the Justice League is in contact with him, nor does he want them to get somehow involved into something that concerns the Green Lantern.

“I’ve heard it’s good to give whatever haunts your dreams a form, like writing it down or sketching it,” Axel pipes up from his spot at the kitchen table, where James helps him with some simple integral calculus, since the accountant seems to have a soft spot for all parts of mathematics, not only
accounting.

“Yeah? Shows what you know,” Eddy retorts, grinning when the teen shoots him a glare in return, along with a quick bird since Barry isn’t looking.

“No, he’s right, they usually suggest to people who suffer from nightmares to try and talk about them or get them off their chest in some other way since it helps them to get a concrete idea of what they are afraid of, which is less scary than some abstract monster or situation,” James comes to Axel’s aid, causing Eddy to roll his eyes good-naturedly and share an of course look with Barry, who smiles in return.

It is calming having his friends around, so much so that he has started to feel a little drowsy.

“Spending too much time focusing on your nightmares can probably be contra-productive, though,” James concedes, causing Eddy to proclaim a triumphant Hah! Told ya.

“I’m d-done w-with s-sketch-ching f-for n-now anyw-way,” Barry informs them and closes the sketchbook before putting it along with the pencil on the couch table in front of him.

“You want some pie?” Mary asks from her spot opposite James, where she is currently reading a fashion magazine she brought over earlier.

“I’m g-good,” Barry assures her, stretching himself, grimacing lightly when familiar pain runs down his back.

“You okay?” Eddy asks once again, and Barry would have been annoyed if his friend’s concern weren’t so clear on his face. He gives him a smile instead and nods. “F-Fine, j-just s-sat t-too l-long in th-the s-same p-position.”

“Man, growing old really sucks,” Axel remarks, sounding so earnest about it that Barry has to chuckle.

“Y-You’re on your b-best w-way t-to g-get th-there y-yours-self,” Barry points out and thinks about getting up but eventually he decides against it since his body is tired. If the others weren’t around, he probably would go for a nap right now.

“I’m still decades away from being your age, old man,” Axel replies smoothly.

“Respect your elders, brat,” Eddy tells the boy, sagely pointing out, “You’ll be Barry’s age sooner than you may think. I still can remember my teenage years as if they happened yesterday, and look where I’m now? Nearly as old as our resident senior here.” He nods to Barry, who gives him an unimpressed look in return.

“Barry may be older than you,” Mary interjects, “but he certainly doesn’t look it.”

“The heck?” Eddy sounds honestly put out by that statement. “I’m nearly a decade younger than him! How am I not looking it?”

“Probably because he doesn’t smoke a pack a day,” James remarks, sweetly smiling when Eddy glares dagger at him in return.

“Nobody asked you, bookworm,” Eddy grumbles.

Barry chuckles and lets his head rest on the back of his couch, closing his eyes.
“Am I supposed to take it personally that you fall asleep the moment I join you?” Eddy quips, and Barry hums in affirmation, causing the other man to huff a laugh.

“You’re boring,” Axel agrees, and while Barry can’t say for sure, he is pretty sure Eddy shoots the boy a dirty look in return.

“Your books are boring,” Eddy retorts.

“And you’re lame,” Axel decides with a scoff. “What kind of comeback is that anyway?”

“Maybe you should look it up, you’re clearly starting to take after the bookworm next to you as it is.”

“I’m not.” Axel sounds insulted by the insinuation of liking the studying he has to do. “I’m only reading this stuff because I have to.”

“Sure you are,” Eddy returns sweetly, and Barry opens his eyes a little to glance over at his friend, frowning.

“H-Him b-being a g-good s-student is n-not s-someth-thing h-he sh-should b-be ash-shamed of.”

“I don’t know whether you’ve ever heard of it, but there is this very abstract concept one calls a joke,” Eddy remarks drily, “And just if you’re wondering, what I’ve just said was one.”

“D-Don’t antag-gonize him,” Barry tells him firmly, knowing all too well that Eddy doesn’t mean anything by what he says, that he is just ribbing the teen, but it was hard enough to convince Axel to study for his upcoming interview for an apprentice position at Jay’s company.

He doesn’t doubt that Jay will make sure that the boy gets the place, not only because he wants to help him but because Axel was able to impress him the handful of times he helped him in the lab so far. Working as an apprentice means also spending a lot of time over books though, and Axel is not exactly fond of the idea of giving up his free time to do so.

Barry is glad that James offered to give him a hand when it comes to tutoring Axel, so he is at least somewhat prepared for the interview next month, and it is nice to see how well these two get along.

“How am I antagonizing him?” Eddy huffs and rolls his eyes. “I’m just being funny, and the brat knows it.”

“Tch, you think you’re funny,” Axel disagrees with a snort, “but you’re really only annoying.”

“Takes one to know one,” Eddy returns, smirking.

“He’s a teenager, he has an excuse to be annoying and moody,” James throws in and gets a smothering glare from Axel in response, which he conveniently overlooks.

“I’m not moody.” Eddy laughs. “I’m fine with you calling me annoying, but calling me moody isn’t fair.” He turns back to Barry, lifting an eyebrow. “I’m not moody, am I, Bar?”

Barry, whose eyes are starting to drift closed, lifts his right hand and makes a so-so gesture, which earns him a light punch on his shoulder.

“Great friend you are,” Eddy complains, and Barry smiles as he keeps listening to his friends, feeling safe and calm.
This will be a short AN. I've been sick for the last 9 days, got myself a nice case of sinusitis that is just now really retreating. I sometimes have the feeling my body has to be something like a spa for stuff like that. -_- 

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter. I was looking forward to Guy appearing once more, even if it means some additional headache for Barry. Guy is just one of my favorite heroes in the DCU in general. He isn't really sure what to think of Barry, but he has the inkling that something can't be right. Kyle's picture did appear in canon, btw, I don't know why, but it just stuck with me, and I can see Kyle as the kind of person who feels strongly about things that have emotional value to him. Guy is just trying to be a good friend here.

Next chapter will be longer one for a change. It will be another one taxing on Barry, but it will have sweet moments as well, so I hope everything is kept in balance more or less.

Thank you all for your comments and kudos, your feedback never fails to cheer me up.

:) 

Cu in two weeks!
Bart and Max invite Barry and Axel along on a shopping trip to Central City to get the young teen new sneakers. Bart keeps wearing them out in record time due to using his speed out of costume despite Max and Jay telling him to be mindful of such things.

When Barry commented on this, Bart grimaced and pointed out, "But everything is so slow all the time. It's like I'm stuck." He shot him an unhappy look. "I'm not using the speed force on purpose, grandpa, it just happens sometimes, really."

Barry didn't lecture him on being more careful, after that. He is all too familiar with what his grandson is describing, and while both Max and Jay do try to be understanding, Barry can tell that they don't really get it.

It seems that Bart is a lot more like him regarding his powers than the other speedsters, and Barry isn't sure how to feel about it.

Unlike Jay and Max, or even Wally and Jessy, he had more significant difficulties to still feel connected to the world around him after he got his powers. The speed force didn't only make him extremely fast but made it hard to not feel alien in a world in which everyone and everything else
was so much slower than him.

A part of Barry also started to worry whether the boy had the other growing pains he had to live through as well, but he didn't dare to ask, since mentioning his own powers around Bart still always felt like he was overstepping a line that could get him in a lot of trouble. Not that Bart didn't try to get him to talk about his time as the Flash, but Barry kept tight-lipped despite his best attempts, even without Max or Jay listening in.

If Barry was honest, he worries that he could give Bart some well-meant advice that could lead to the child being hurt, seeing that he is hardly the person to ask when it comes to what makes a great speedster or even a hero.

Unfortunately, neither Jay and Max seem to agree with him there, since both have approached him separately about this before.

"You know," Max said just a few minutes earlier, while Bart was using the bathroom after they arrived at the mall, "nobody will think anything about it if you want to talk to Bart about your experiences with your former powers." His voice was low, mindful not to let any of the passerby shoppers overhear him.

Barry didn't know what to say in response and merely nodded, causing Max to consider him with a frown but thankfully drop the topic. It is still odd to Barry that anybody would consider it a good idea for him to talk with Bart or anybody about his time as the Flash. He did fail spectacularly at it, after all.

To Barry's relief, Max didn't try to bring it again, whether it was due to him coming to the same conclusion as Barry or because Bart is with them, he can't say and doesn't care.

With the realization that Jay and Max no longer believe in his guilt, things have become both easier and more uncomfortable whenever Barry was around them.

"You're holding a grudge," Hartley pointed out a while ago when he and Lisa helped Barry preparing some snacks for a movie night, and the topic came up.

"Which is more than understandable," Lisa added when Barry was about to protest, with a by now familiar anger returning to her voice. "They put you through hell. It's okay if you're pissed at them."

Barry wanted to disagree with them but knew that they had a point, which still doesn't sit too well with him since he knows how quickly suppressed anger can turn into something much darker and destructive.

"I d-don't w-want t-to h-harb-bor a g-g-grudge," Barry told them, truthfully, unhappily, while cutting a carrot into sticks. "Th-They d-did wh-what th-they th-thought w-was r-right and t-tried t-to p-protect W-W-Wally..."

Thinking about what happened to his family never failed to make him feel miserable, it was like a leech sucked any positivity out of him, which was likely also the reason why Lisa refrained from sharing what she thought about his seeming refusal to get angry over what happened or how his former friends treat him.

Barry shakes that string of thoughts off as he follows Max and Bart to the shoe shop and once more thinks that it a real pity Axel couldn't join them. With the teenager around, Max would undoubtedly be more reluctant to bring his past or any of the other more sensible topics up.

Unfortunately, Axel couldn't join them since he decided to accept Jay and Joan's offer to be their
ward for the foreseeable future and is currently at the Garrick’s laboratories with Jay.

Jay offered to show the boy around at the facility to make him familiar with the place and the people there before his interview for the apprenticeship takes place in a little over two weeks.

Bart was disappointed when he learned that the other teen wouldn't tag along but was quickly mollified when Barry still agreed to join them. The two boys have become quite close over the last few months and have started to spend a fair amount of time together since Bart’s summer holidays started end of May.

“You know, I think I would like an apprenticeship much better than school as well, Max,” Bart remarks out of the blue as if sensing what Barry has been thinking about. He made it quite clear after Barry mentioned earlier what an apprenticeship at Garrick Industries involves that he would prefer doing something of that kind to how he has to visit school.

“It sounds way more interesting than the stupid classes I’ve to take,” Bart points out and glowers down at the ground in front of him. "I mean, who is ever going to need geography after they're done with school?” He turns to Barry, his eyes suddenly huge, and asks, “Can you ask Jay if they have another free spot in their apprenticeship program?”

Barry is somewhat caught off-guard by unexpected request. “I-I… w-well, I’m no-not s-sure. Axel i-is in q-quite a d-different s-situation th-than y-you are, B-Bart. H-he w-would b-be g-going to s-school j-just l-like you d-do if it w-was p-possible f-for him.”

This is clearly not what Bart hoped to hear since his face falls, and he heaves a weary-sounding sigh. “That’s so unfair, I want to work in a laboratory as well. I’m way better at chemistry and physics than Axel is.”

Max, who has stayed quiet so far, gives the boy an encouraging pad on the back. “Come on, it isn’t so bad at your school either, and if you want to get into an apprenticeship program after you’re done with high school, I’ll be more than happy to support you with that.”

Bart shoots his guardian a frown, evidently not thrilled by the perspective of having to spend another 5 years in his current school, but he grumbles his agreement nonetheless.

Barry is relieved that his grandson doesn’t seem to feel the need to protest any further. He is still worried about him since his start in school hadn’t been the best, and he was palpably unhappy there in the beginning. Thanks to the theatre group Bart is still part of, he does have a handful of friends now, though, which seems to have made his time at school a much more pleasant experience for him.

Still, the problem with the bullies is not entirely off the table. Max had another talk with Bart’s principle just a couple of weeks before the end of last school year because Bart got physical in a scuffle between him and three other boys.

Barry hates to think that Bart is picked on. He wishes he could do something about it, but there isn’t a lot he can offer other than listen to the boy about what is weighing on him and try to cheer him up whenever he calls him at night to vent a little about his troubles at school.

Having Bart turn to him when he needs someone to confide in is nice, but it is also something Barry feels guilty about. Max has been trying for a long while to get Bart to open up to him about things that bother him, but the kid usually refuses to do so. This has been worrying Barry at first, since he doesn’t want Max to take their conversations the wrong way, and while the older man assured him in the past that he has no problem with Bart going to him with his worries as long as he has someone to turn to, Barry doesn’t want him to feel like he is trying to get between Bart and him.
He really hopes things will get better next year. Max told him that the headmaster promised him to take the situation more seriously and to introduce an anti-bullying program, but Barry knows from experience that it is difficult to discourage bullies, even if a teacher tries to intervene and help.

“Come on, let’s focus on getting you a new pair of sneakers.” Max shoots Bart and somewhat exasperated look then, and adds, “Since you’ve worn down your last one again.” He doesn’t bring up why that’s the case.

“It’s only the third pair;” Bart grumbles.

“Yes, since the beginning of summer break,” Max agrees drily and turns to Barry, sighing, “and I very much doubt it will be the last one before school starts up again.”

“It’s not my fault they can’t withstand anything;” Bart glares accusingly at the rather rundown pair of shoes he is wearing right now and crosses his arms. “Why can’t I’ve sneakers made up of the same material Wally wears?”

It is clear that he is talking about the Flash suit. Like Barry did once, Bart creates his own costume when fighting as Kid Flash via the use of the speed force, but unlike him, the boy does so utterly unintentional.

Barry was surprised when he learned from Max that Bart is not creating a protective field which keeps his clothes from being harmed while running, something both Wally and Jay are able to do, and Barry was too once. Bart is more like Max in that regard, even though he does have a much firmer connection to the source of the speedsters’ powers than the rest of them do.

If Barry had to take a guess, he would say that it is probably merely a question of control and that Bart will eventually be able to learn and master that ability. Max and Jay think so too, but until then, the fact that he will ruin his footwear and damage his clothing when running without his costume will stay a source of annoyance for Bart and continue to cost Max a small fortune.

“Because you have to learn to control yourself,” Max reminds him, sounding only somewhat exasperated, “or I’ll end up having to take a credit from my bank to keep you clad.”

Bart huffs annoyed over his guardian's exaggeration but mutters an apology.

They arrive at the shoe shop soon afterward, and Barry is not in the least surprised that the clerk seems to know Max and Bart quite well by now.

“If your boy keeps this up, he’s going to fund my son’s first car,” the man, a thin, tall guy in his early fifties, quips amused. Max doesn’t seem to find the joke all that funny judging by his somewhat annoyed expression.

While Bart is busy looking for new sneakers as well as a pair of spare ones, and Max gets himself entangled in some small talk with the clerk, Barry decides to roam a little through the shop. He could also use new shoes since his current pair has started to slowly but surely fall apart and there is only so much shoe repair glue can do, but it’s not urgent enough that he considers spending any of his savings on it right now. Maybe in a month or so, should Charlie be serious about giving him a raise.

Barry is just looking at a very nice pair made of dark brown leather when Max comes up next to him. The other man watches him for a second before he asks, "You think about buying them?"

“N-No, m-mine w-will d-do just f-fine f-for a wh-while l-longer,” Barry says and is about to turn away when Max cautiously touches his elbow, as if not to scare him. It still causes Barry to freeze, since physical contact between him and the older man is not common.
“I know that you don’t like to take the money from others, and I respect that, but what if I lend you the money for the shoes and you pay them back to me by installments?” Max inquires. “Like you did with the medicine?”

The offer is tempting since he has been having his current pair of shoes for nearly four years now, and they are no longer waterproofed, which has been a pain, especially during last winter and spring.

He used up most of his savings he made over the last months to pay back Max and Jay in the first place when they helped him out and the hospital visits, which causes him to hesitate. He is earning more now, though, and it won't take him that long to give Max the money back, especially if he got a raise.

After considering Max' offer for a minute, Barry agrees.

“Th-Thank you, th-that’s v-very g-generous of y-you,” Barry tells him, smiling, “and I’ll s-start p-paying y-you b-back w-with m-my n-nex-age.”

“Of course,” Max agrees and looks nearly relieved as if Barry had done him a favor and not the other way around.

“Max! Look, they have an offer for those old men shoes you like so much!” Bart calls from the back of the shop, causing Max to snort and share an amused look with Barry.

“Today nobody appreciates good craftsmanship anymore,” Max grumbles and starts to make his way to the direction from which the boy’s voice came from. He has just vanished behind one of the shelves when the ringing of the entrance being opened sounds, and Barry glances over to it.

A young redheaded girl comes in, she can hardly be older than seven and is visibly fighting tears. Barry feels his stomach drop the moment he spots her.

The little thing hesitates for a second, and it quickly becomes apparent to Barry that she probably didn’t intend to end up in a shoe shop. He can’t help but worry whether she lost her parents while shopping.

Then, as if she made her mind up, she lifts her chin in determination and stomps her way over to the shelf where Barry is currently standing. She doesn’t pay him any mind, and he watches with a growing sense of unease how she comes to a halt just a couple of steps away from him.

As he studies her, it becomes evident to him that she doesn’t look scared but angry as well as lost on what to do. Barry guesses that she probably had a fight with her parents and sneaked away.

Seeing that it is a harsh breach of his parole constraints to talk or even just be close to a child without supervision, he decides to let the kid be for now and go get the salesman to take care of her. He is just about to turn away and look for the man when he hears a stifled sob.

The words are past his lips before he even realizes what he is doing. “A-Are y-you ok-ay?”

The little girl pauses momentarily before hesitantly looking up at him with big eyes. She doesn’t say anything but watches him with a mixture of curiosity and wariness, which causes Barry to shift nervously, regretting that he has approached the child at all.

“You sound funny,” the girl suddenly blurts out, likely unintentionally, as she quickly turns as red as a beet. She ducks her head, clearly aware, despite her age, that what she just said is not something you are supposed to say to somebody with a speech impediment. “Sorry.”
Barry, who has faced far worse comments because of his stutter, especially from people old enough to know better, can’t help but smile. He shakes his head and assures her, “N-no, it’s alr-right. I d-do s-sound a l-little f-funny, d-don’t I-I?”

The young girl lifts her gaze and locks eyes with him as a frown starts to form on her forehead.

“No, you can’t help it, it’s not okay for others to say mean things to you for something that isn’t your fault,” she protests firmly, and as if to reinforce her statement, she stamps her foot and crosses her arms. The look she gives Barry is piercing, and he can’t help but perk his eyebrows at that.

Well, someone did an excellent job teaching this little one about tactfulness when it comes to people like him.

“Y-Yes, you’re r-right,” Barry agrees with a soft chuckle, “It’s n-not ok-kay t-to insult others b-because th-they s-sound f-funny wh-when s-speaking.” He gives her a fond look as he adds, “B-But I-I b-believe th-that you d-didn’t m-mean t-to d-do s-so j-just n-now, am I r-right?”

The little girl hesitates for a second as she considers him with a thoughtful expression that appears strange on the face of a child as young as her but has something quite adorable to it all the same. Finally, she gives a single nod and smiles, obviously coming to the conclusion that she hasn’t really done something wrong.

“Yeah, you are right, Mister…” she gives him an inquiring look, and Barry suddenly realizes that he really shouldn’t be here.

“I’m, B-Barry,” Barry tells her and starts to look around for where Max or the salesman currently are.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Barry!” A huge smile appears on the girl’s face, and she offers her hand to him, probably in intimidation of when she saw her parents do so, “I’m.”

“Iry?!” Max's voice sounds surprised and concerned as he briskly makes his way towards them from the back of the store where he vanished to earlier.

“Uncle Max!!!” The little girl, Iry, sounds openly excited about seeing the older man and runs over to him.

Max is visibly taken aback by her presence, and Barry feels himself growing cold as he realizes who that girl must be.

“Iry, what are you doing here?” The worry in Max’s voice is audible, and Barry is hit by intense nausea at his next question. “Is your dad also around?”

Just as Iry is about to reply, she is interrupted by Bar, who is suddenly at their side as well. “Hey, Irita! What is my favorite little troublemaker cousin doing here?”

Bart must have zipped over here from the back at a speed that can’t pass as normal anymore, and it probably empathizes the severity of the situation since his guardian doesn’t seem to notice and instead keeps his concerned gaze on the girl.

“Hey, Bart!” Iris chirps happily before turning back to Max to answer his earlier question, “Yes, Dad and Mom are here too… and Jay…” She says the last name as if it actually leaves a bad taste in her mouth, and by now Barry has no doubts anymore who this little girl is.

This has to be Wally’s daughter.
Like on cue, the door to the shop is suddenly pushed open, with enough force that it hits the wall and its glass cracks. There is no time for Barry to grasp what is happening before he is thrown backward against one of the shoe shelves, knocking both himself and it over by the impact.

The pain that shoots through Barry’s back momentarily takes his breath away, and for a second he feels horribly disorientated, unsure where is up and down.

The back of his head is throbbing, and there is a shrill ringing in his ears that makes it seem like he is hearing everything through a thick layer of cotton. He really doesn’t want to move, but he can make out clearly upset voices and forces himself to look up.

The figures he sees are blurry, though he doesn’t need a clear vision to know who just joined them. There, just a couple feet away from him, stands Wally, and he looks utterly furious.

It seems that the only reason his nephew hasn’t done more to Barry than push him is due to Max, who has forced himself between Wally and him and is currently trying to get the younger man to calm down.

“You let that sick bastard near my daughter!!!”

It is like a punch, and Barry suddenly doesn’t want to be here, doesn’t want to hear or see any of what is happening. He lets his head fall back and presses his eyes shut.

“Calm down, Wally. He didn’t do anything—”

“Leave him alone! Iris came in here on her own! Grandpa couldn’t have known that!”

“Shut up! Shut your damn mouth, you little idiot!”

The voices grow quicker for a brief second, disorientated in their incredible speed before they slow down again.

“I hate you!” Bart’s voice is wavering, it’s thick with anger and hurt.

“For god’s sake, I don’t care, you little dimwit!” Wally is seething, and Barry feels horrible for Bart, for how painful this must be for the kid.

“You’re crazy if you think that bastard is innocent!” Wally’s hisses before his tone changes and adopts a quality of anguish that is painful to listen to. “Do you think I made it up what he did to me!?"

Barry grits his teeth, tears stinging in his eyes, and just wishes everything would stop. It hurts seeing what his failure to protect Wally did to the young man, the horrible repercussion it caused.

Why couldn’t he protect the boy? How could he let those horrible things happen to him!? Why is he never ever enough?

Another voice joins in from the still open entrance of the store, a female one, and Barry knows that it belongs to Wally’s wife, Linda.

“Oh my god, what happened?! Iry! Sweetie, are you alright!?” Linda sounds worried, even scared, and Barry feels even more miserable.

He doesn’t open his eyes again to see what is happening, he doesn’t need to. He knows that the
woman has run over to her daughter, who is, as he just now realizes, crying, and starts to speak to her in a cooing, loving tone.

“What the hell?! What happened to my shop!?” Apparently, the salesman has just now noticed what occurred.

The others ignore him since Max is still busy speaking with Wally in a low and grave voice, and Linda is much too focused on her daughter. Barry’s can’t hear what the older man is telling his nephew, but whatever it is doesn’t seem to succeed in calming Wally down.

“Fine.” Wally’s voice wavers and his hurt and fury are nearly palpable. “You want to protect that son of a bitch? Do as you like Max, but as long as you keep in contact with him, you are no longer welcome in my home.”

There moment of shocked silence.

“Wally, please wait a moment-” Max is ignored. So is Linda, who is obviously as surprised and shocked by her husband’s words as the old speedster and tries to get his attention. “Wally-”

“Don’t, Linda, please. Let’s just go home, okay?” Wally doesn’t sound angry anymore just exhausted, and after a brief silence, his wife agrees.

“Of course,” Linda says before Barry can hear her scoop her daughter up in her arms. “Come, Iry, I think we had enough of shopping for today. What’s about getting some ice cream on our way home, hm?”

“Ok-kay,” Iry answers in between sobs, and Barry opens his eyes slightly to watch them make their way out of the store. There, at the door, a small dark-haired boy in Iry’s age, who must be her brother, waits nervously for his parents to come, and is swiftly picked up by Wally as the family takes their leave.

“Are you alright, grandpa?” Bart is suddenly at Barry’s site where he has still not gotten up from the ground. The kid sounds worried, close to crying, and Barry realizes just then that he is very close to tears as well.

“Barry, are you alright?” Max steps to his site as well and crouches down next to him. The concern is thick in his voice.

The disorientation grows worse, and Barry closes his eyes once more as he gives a very slight nod. It takes him by surprise when a hand suddenly comes to rest on his shoulder, close to his throat, which causes him to flinch away with a soft, startled whimper.

“It’s alright,” Max assures him in a much calmer tone but doesn’t touch him again. Instead, he asks, “Are you hurt?”

“N-n-no…” Barry replies immediately. It’s not really a lie, at least, he thinks so. He doesn’t feel like the impact with the shoe shelf really damaged anything. His head seems to have taken the worst of it, but while he feels like someone took a bat to it, he is relieved to notice that the ringing in his ears has lessened already. It’s probably not a concussion, for which he is incredibly grateful.

Barry swallows around the lump in his throat and slowly shakes his head. His whole body hurts, but when he slowly pushes himself into a sitting position, he is relieved to realize that he probably got away with only bruising.

“You sure?” Max doesn’t sound convinced, and Barry can’t hold it against him. It has been quite the
punch he took, but, this time, it seems that the luck has been on his site.

He forces himself to meet the other man’s eyes. “Y-yeah… I-I’m o-ok-kay.”

“That’s good.” Max does sound relieved, but a palpable gloom clings to him that makes Barry’s stomach cramp painfully.

“Then let’s get you up on your feet.” Max helps him up and supports him as he is still weak-kneed.

Bart is also there, but he keeps his distance, probably due to how well he knows Barry by now and thus is aware of how badly he reacts to contact in stressed situations like this one. Barry tries to give him a comforting smile.

The salesman is understandably upset, glaring accusing daggers at them as he demands, “And who is going to pay for all this?! Your angry friend just scrammed, he’s lucky I’m not calling the cops on him!”

“I’ll bear the expenses for any damages,” Max assures the fuming man.

“I’ll p-pay a-a p-part o-of i-t t-too,” Barry interjects, causing Max to shoot him an exasperated look.

“Barry, this is not on you-”

“I-it’s m-more o-on m-me th-than i-it’s on y-you i-in a-any c-c-case,” Barry argues and suddenly feels really upset, enough so that the back of his throat starts to burn and his eyes to itch. Max seems to notice since he doesn’t protest any further.

“I’ll give the man my contacts, I think it’s easier if I pay for the damage and afterward we can talk about what you own me, okay?” Max suggests, and Barry nods wordlessly. He really doesn’t want to deal with this right now, anyway, he feels exhausted and slightly sick, and thinking about how much money this will cost him is not going to help.

It is a relief when they are finally able to leave the shop after everything is done, and Bart has his new pairs of sneakers.

The way back to the car goes by in a tense silence after Max asked him once more whether he is feeling alright and Barry assured him again that he is okay.

They still end up in the hospital, much to Barry’s frustration, since Max doesn’t seem to trust his judgment very much in this case, and while it takes nearly three hours till they are finally on their way home, their stay at least went without any more incidents.

The doctor agreed with Barry that he is fine but wasn’t confident whether she could exclude a slight concussion for sure. She ended up prescribed him some pills against the pain which they grab from the drugstore before finally moving on home.

“You can stay over if you want,” Max suggests as they drive on the highway.

“N-No, I-I r-really o-only w-want t-to g-g-get h-home a-and r-rest,” Barry declines, and while Max tries not to show it, he is sure that the older man is secretly glad about it.

“I-I’m s-sor-ry a-ab-bout…” Barry swallows and tightens his arms around his chest, frowning down at his lap.
“It’s fine, this wasn’t your fault,” Max says, giving him a faint but honest smile. “Wally will calm down eventually, and I’m sure I can work things out with him then.”

Barry wordlessly nods since he doesn’t dare to speak his doubts. He is grateful Max says that he isn’t holding it against him, and maybe he really doesn’t, but that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t want some distance and time to think.

“You should stay with us, grandpa,” Bart protests, not liking the idea that Barry won’t stay at their home after what happened.

“I-I’m o-ok-kay-”

“You shouldn’t be alone, what if you aren’t okay after all? Wally hit you-”

“B-Bart,” Barry cuts the boy off, squeezing his eyes shut, facing the side-window. “I-I’m t-tired…”

This shuts Bart up, and Barry immediately feels bad for the unintended sharpness in his tone, so that he adds, “I-I j-just n-need s-some r-rest, I-I’ll b-be d-doing b-better a-afterw-wards.”

“You can call us if you need anything,” Max tells him, and Barry agrees, grateful for the offer, even though he doubts that he will take him up on it.

“Yeah, we’ll be over in no time if you need us,” Bart agrees, and the honest desire for him to help him somewhat eases the curled-up lump of misery in Barry’s stomach.

They escort him upstairs and leave, but not without Bart hugging him goodbye. This time, the boy is surprisingly gentle and seems reluctant of letting go of him again. Barry returns the hug, so very glad to have the kid, and affectionately brushes over his head.

After Barry has closed and locked his door, he keeps standing in front of it for a minute, suddenly extremely tired. He doesn’t feel like moving, and he notices how an odd sense of detachment starts to grab hold of him, making it hard to think with how his thoughts seem to be buzzing around like a swarm of bees.

Finally, he isn’t sure after how much time has passed, he brings himself to turn and walks over to the kitchen table.

It is half past four, which means that Axel won’t be back for at least another hour. Barry initially intended to be there when the boy returns from his first visit of Jay’s company, but he doesn’t like the idea of being alone in his apartment. He hesitates before he makes up his mind and writes the boy a short note.

He could go over to Eddy, ask him for company but there is a pull that leads him in front of the mirror in his bedroom instead.

Sam seems a little surprised when he answers his call, seeing that Barry didn’t plan on spending tonight over at the hideout, and he usually gives his friend a heads-up when he plans to come over.

“You look like crap,” Sam comments, wrinkling his nose slightly as he studies him.

Barry huffs a chuckle. “Th-Thanks. I-I’m f-fine.”

His voice sounds coarse, but he ignores it as he enters the mirror, too tired to try and explain himself. Judging by the look Sam gives him as he joins him in the mirror-verse, he doesn’t believe him, and
his frown only deepens when Barry nearly stumbles to the ground as they enter the hideout a
moment later.

Traveling through the mirror-verse always makes Barry feel dizzy, but by now he has gotten used to
it and can usually keep his balance.

Fortunately, Sam grabs his upper arm firmly before he can give himself a real concussion this time.

“You sure you’re okay?” Sam sounds annoyed, but Barry easily detects the concern that lies
underneath.

“S-s-sorry, I-I’m g-good… j-just t-tired.” Barry closes his eyes briefly, hating how his voice wavered
there for a second. He can feel Sam’s eyes and hopes that he won’t probe any further, he just wants
to get to the sofa and rest there, with Len and the others close-by.

“If you’re sure,” Sam eventually says, skeptically, and turns to exit the room through which they
have just entered the abandoned building.

“I-I’m n-not d-d-disrupting a-anything, a-am I-I?” Barry licks his lips nervously, feeling tired but
the thought of retreating to Len’s and his bedroom doesn’t do anything for him since he knows how
likely it is that he will be plagued by bad dreams or, even worse, memories.

“Nah, most of us See playing poker, while Lisa and Dillon watch some tearjerker on the couch,”
Sam informs him with a shrug, and while he tries not to let it on, Barry notices how he keeps
glancing over to him.

It causes Barry to worry that coming over here wasn’t such a good idea, after all, it will probably be
rather apparent that something happened, and he isn’t sure whether he can handle any questions
about why he is in his current state.

Of course, it is then that Barry realizes that they’ve just arrived at the entrance to the living room.

“Hey Sam, you wanna join in on the next round? I think I’ve lost enough money for one day.”
Marco grunts as he spots the other Rogue, and by his tone, it becomes apparent that he hasn’t been
lucky with the game so far.

“That’s because you suck at poker, mate,” Digger points out helpfully before he nods to Sam,
“Maybe it will help if you take a page from the bloody wanker’s book.”

“Don’t even fucking joke about that,” Mick scoffs while glaring daggers in Sam direction, who has
stepped into the room by now and looks quite smug, which means that he must have won a couple of
rounds so far.

“Please, why the hell would I need to cheat to win against such a sad bunch like you guys?” Sam
laughs, goading Mick on, who is cut off from responding when Len suddenly gets up.

They watch in surprise as Len makes his way around the table with an alarmingly grim face, and
Sam promptly gets out of his way to let him pass so he can get to Barry, who watches him come
closer and suddenly can’t bring himself to move. He feels like in those dreams in which he can only
observe, in which his body doesn’t listen to him at all.

It’s daunting, and his chest hurts badly enough that he fears it will crack open. The urge to cry is
smothering then, and he really shouldn’t have come here. It was a stupid idea, what was he thinking?

Then, Len stands before him, so close that he can feel his presence and smell the beer and cigarettes
in his breath, which is so oddly comforting, so familiar, like coming home.

Barry sees that Len says something, he is probably asking what happened or if he is alright, but the world has gotten mute. It is disconcerting, but he can’t bring himself to do or say anything in response.

His head starts to hurt again, and, out of nowhere, the little girl, Iry, comes to his mind, who seems to be such a sweet and bright child. Wally’s daughter, who will grow up in the belief that Barry is the one responsible for hurting her father, that he is a monster.

And he is. He didn’t hurt Wally himself, but he let it happen.

He let his nephews get hurt in that horrible way, he couldn’t protect him like he couldn’t protect himself.

Because he is weak.

Len grasps Barry’s upper arms, causing him to whimper in confusion, and it takes him a moment to realize that his legs gave out under him, so that he ends up with his face pressed against his partner’s chest, who helps him to the ground.

The warmth is nice, comforting, and Barry presses himself firmer against it while his arms seek their way around Len so that he ends up holding onto him like he is his lifeline that will save him from drowning in that horrible darkness that has nestled itself into his chest and all around.

It is just them, Len and he, and Barry doesn’t want to let go again. He doesn’t want to go back out there, back where Wally and all the others are who look at him as if the world would be better off without him around.

It hurts.

Why couldn’t he be the hero Bart told him about? Why did he have to end up being so weak? What went wrong with him that he turned out to be the person he is right now? A pitiful man who can’t protect anybody, least of all the people who mean the world to him.

Barry shivers as he notices that someone is stroking his back soothingly, and while a part of him is alarmed, another one wants to get even closer to the source of comfort. The sadness and hopelessness that have latched onto him are smothering, and the warmth makes them easier to bear.

Despite how disorientated his mind feels, how jumbled his thoughts are, he knows that, right now, he is safe.

Barry can’t say how much time has passed when the pain finally starts to subside, and he no longer feels as if he is going to break any moment now.

There is a soft hum close to his ear, and he is surrounded by warmth and strong arms.

It takes Barry's sluggish mind a few seconds to understand where he is and who he is with.

His head hurts, the pain is familiar, though, one Barry always suffers after he had a bad crying fit, and his face grows hot when he realizes where he just broke down. He notices that there are still fresh tears running down his cheeks and croaks a slight, embarrassed moan.

This day can’t possibly get any worse.
“It’s alright, baby, you’re okay.” Len’s voice is soft, soothing, and Barry feels the ridiculous but strong urge to try and get somehow even closer to him.

He closes his eyes again and swallows.

Another couple of minutes go by in which Barry tries not to remember that he broke down in front of his friend, and instead concentrates on how close he is to Len, how lulling his warmth feels, and how nice it feels that he is caressing his back.

“Barry?” Len asks, startling Barry as he was just about to drift off.

“You good to get up?” Len’s lips brush against his temple as he speaks, his breath warm on his skin, and Barry really doesn’t want to move.

“Y-yeah…” He sounds horrible, hoarse as if he had a nasty cold. There is an unpleasant salty taste in his mouth, and the exhaustion from earlier hits him with full force once more. He coughs slightly and wants to sit back up to give Len a little space but can’t bring himself to move.

“Let’s get you to bed, okay?” Len suggests, and Barry grimaces, not liking the suggestion, but he still knows that his partner is right. He digs his fingers a little firmer in Len’s back, hardly noticing the pain in their joints, before exhaling softly and giving a small nod.

It is difficult, but eventually, he forces himself to let go and sit back.

An unexpected nausea hits him out of nowhere with such intensity that he hardly has time to turn aside before he starts retching up the little his stomach is still containing from the sandwich Max got him while they waited at the hospital.

His stomach soon turns empty, and his heaves turn dry. There are voices around him, but he doesn’t listen, he doesn’t want them to be there, doesn’t want to notice how his skin is itching all over again or how it suddenly feels too small for him.

Barry lets everything else fade into the background, he only concentrated on the arm around his back, that is supporting him to stay upright, and the hand that is holding his while his body is wrecked by tremors.

The nausea takes a painfully long time to retreat, and when it is finally over, he is crying once more, quietly, and too tired to fight the tears.

What happens next is wrapped in a blanket of fuzziness.

Barry thinks that Len takes him upstairs to their room and gets him somewhat cleaned up before he put him to bed, but it is hard for his mind to register.

The only thing he knows for sure it this cold, grey fog that seems to be surrounding him, and the all-consuming feeling of sadness.

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Barry is woken by two voices, arguing. His tired mind doesn’t want to wake up just yet, he feels exhausted, both mentally and physically, to a degree that he nearly falls back asleep despite the part of him which urges him to be cautious. It is never a good thing to have other people close-by when he is asleep, bad things tend to happen when that is the case.

Faint but painful memories rear up in his mind, smudged together by the sleep that is still clinging to
him, and the exhaustion gives way to worry.

Barry tenses up, more awake, but still not all the way there, so that it is difficult for him to get his body to do his bidding and move.

The sensation of fear touches upon him, causing his breathing to speed up as he fights to get his eyes open.

Then, as he only half listens to the hissed, agitated voices, something in his mind clicks, and he recognizes the one currently speaking, sounding both angry and worried, even though it is kept intentionally low, probably as not to wake him.

It’s Axel.

Is he at home?

Barry frowns, pushing his face into his pillow, just as he picks up on the second speaker, whom he recognizes now with ease.

“... your mouth, damn it. You’re going to wake him up with your damn whining, brat.” Len sounds tense, and it is hard to miss that he is annoyed by the boy’s presence.

Why are Len and Axel in his bedroom?

Barry still wants to get up, shake the sleep off, but now it doesn’t appear as urgent anymore.

He is safe.

It is when he registers what Axel says next that concern settles back over him. “I just wanna make sure he’s alright!”

“For fuck’s sake, lower your voice,” Len hisses. “If you don’t turn it down, you can be sure that I’ll have Sam put your ass back into Barry’s bedroom and this will be the last time we’ve to deal with you and your damn yapping.”

That doesn’t sound like an idle threat, Len is audibly on edge, but Axel is stubborn, and of course, he isn’t listening.

“Fuck you-”

“Seriously? Both of you, turn it down.” A third voice joins in, belonging to Lisa, and judging by her tone, she doesn’t have the patience nor the willingness to put up with either of them or their tempers. She too sounds worried and angry, but even so, she is able to keep her voice low.

Barry knows that he won’t be able to go back to sleep, not that he wants to since his friends’ behavior unsettles him, and he ends up trying to fight the grogginess off once more which has wrapped itself around him like a blanket.

With some effort, he can roll onto his back, and while it is ridiculously difficult, he finally gets his eyes to open a crack, so that he can look over to them.

“Barry!” Axel exclaims with an amount of relief that doesn’t sit well with Barry, and the teen uses the moment of surprise to slip past Len who tries to grab him but isn’t fast enough.

“You little shit!” Len hisses but doesn’t go after Axel and instead turns his frustrated gaze onto Barry, who realizes that something must have happened again, something involving him.
The worry with which Axel is studying him is enough that Barry doesn’t want to know what occurred. He still tries to give the boy a reassuring smile which probably turns out more tired than anything else.

“H-hey, k-kiddo.” His voice sounds raspy, and it hurts to speak due to how dry his throat feels.

“Seriously, Barry, what the hell?!” Axel yells, the relief replaced by anger momentarily. “Those bozos downstairs made it sound like you’re on your deathbed! Man, I’m not around for a few hours, and you’re ending up having a mental breakdown!”

The words feel like a slap, and while Barry knows that the kid is just upset, he averts his gaze and closes his eyes as they start to itch again traitorously.

Axel quickly realizes that his choice of words hasn’t been the best, but he isn’t given the time to back-paddle and apologize since Len grabs his neck and angrily yanks him back.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!?”

“Ow!!! Let go, you old jackass! I’m sorry, okay!? I didn’t mean to say that, I just-”

“You didn’t think!” Len sounds angry, way too angry for Barry’s liking, and he doesn’t need to see his partner to know that he is currently glaring daggers at the boy.

“L-Len, i-it’s o-ok-kay.” Barry murmurs, exhausted.

A painful throbbing has started at the base of his skull and just behind his temples, and it hurts like hell when he turns back to face his friends.

“Barry, sweetie, how are you feeling?” Lisa, who passes her brother and Axel, crouches down beside him, the concern hard to miss in her eyes as she studies him. He tries to smile but isn’t sure how good of a job he is doing since his headache is getting worse.

Lisa’s hand is pleasantly cool when they touch his forehead, and she makes a soft, soothing noise when he tenses up in response. “It is alright, honey.”

Her thumb strokes his warm skin tentatively before she pulls her hand back and gives his shoulder a comforting pat.

“It seems that your temperature is a bit high, Barry. I’ll get you some tea, ok?” Lisa waits for him to give her a nod and lightly brushes over his hair before getting back up. She turns to her brother and Axel.

“And you two imbeciles better behave while I’m gone. I’m sure his headache is bad enough without you adding to it.” Her no-nonsense tone can be quite intimidating if she wants, and Barry is not surprised when neither of his two friends argues with her.

After Lisa left the room, there is a moment of awkward silence, which is eventually broken when Barry turns his gaze to Axel, smiling wearily but warmly. “H-how w-was y-your v-visit t-to t-the l-laborat-tories, A-Axel?”

It’s hard to miss that the boy didn’t expect that question, and he needs a second to come up with an answer.

“Well, it was pretty neat, I guess.” Axel reflectively scratches his neck but winces when he touches the area where Len grabbed him just a few minutes ago. This causes him to give the other man a
dirty look before he turns back to Barry and goes on, “I mean, I did great, of course. Jay told me the others were impressed by the clever questions I asked.”

His pride over this little fact is hard to miss, and Barry can’t help but feel proud as well. Axel has been putting a lot of effort into studying the topics he would need to know at least the basics of for the upcoming interview, and Barry is grateful for how serious the teen takes the whole matter, despite his ongoing complaining about having to read boring books.

Len snorts derisively, looking much less impressed, though Barry is pretty sure that he only wants to tease Axel. He merely rolls his eyes when the teen whirls around to him, glaring, visibly insulted.

“I’m serious, you old prick! Jay told me that I did great and that the other scientists there were totally impressed by me!” Axel insists stubbornly, and Barry can’t help but chuckle. It is good that Axel doesn’t take it lightly, this can be his future, after all, and Barry wants him to succeed.

Axel notices his expression, which causes the anger to subside as he turns back to him.

“I-d-don’t do-doubt t-that f-for a s-sec-ond,” Barry tells him. “You’re a-an ex-xceed-dingly br-bright k-kid. I’m h-happy y-you l-lik-ked i-it t-there.”

Axel’s cheeks grow red he ducks his head, obviously uncomfortable but also happy about the praise. He mutters a somewhat awkward thank you, and Barry isn’t sure if it is more endearing or sad how embarrassed he is by a couple of kind words.

“Come on, Arrhenius,” Len says, breaking the moment, “I think you’ve done enough for one day. You can talk his ear off another time. Now, scram.”

Len ignores the evil eye Axel shoots him in response and starts to push the boy towards the still open door.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever! You’re as likable as a donkey’s stinking ass, Len!” Axel complains, annoyed, but clearly less worried or agitated than just five minutes ago. “And about as good looking!”

The teen exclaims a pained yelp when Len slaps the back of his head with audible force and then the teenager is finally out of the room.

“Get better soon, Bar-”

The door is shut in the boy’s face, and Len ignores the disapproving look Barry is giving him in turn.

“T-that w-wasn’t n-neces-sary, L-Len. H-he w-was j-just wo-worried.”

Len doesn’t respond but comes over to him so that he ends up standing next to the bed and looking down at Barry with a bleak expression.

For a long moment, neither of them says something.

“Y-you’re a-a-angry.” Barry’s voice is thin and slightly shaking when he finally brings himself to speak.

It isn’t a question.

By now, Barry can remember what happened earlier, and he too is mad at himself for how poorly he handled the whole thing.
Recalling the run-in with Wally is painful, excruciatingly so, and he regrets having agreed to Max’ invitation to accompany him and Bart. He should have stayed home. Central City is a big city, but he seems to draw in lousy luck as light draws in insects, and he should have realized that he could possibly run into Wally.

Or Wally’s daughter, as was the case.

The poor girl, the whole incident probably frightened her, and Barry sincerely regrets having been the trigger for it.

He is an idiot, he should not have talked to her. What was he thinking?

Barry’s is dragged out of his thoughts when he watches how Len’s expression darkens as he studies him in return, and something passes over his face but goes by too quickly for him to recognize what it was.

“No.” Len heaves a tired sigh and runs his fingers through his hair. He looks agitated but also tired, something Barry hasn’t initially picked up on.

There is an unusual tightness around Len’s eyes when he turns his gaze back to him.

“No,” Len repeats, firmer, “I’m not angry at you, Barry.” He sits down onto the edge of the bed, next to Barry, and observes him as he goes on. “But I could kill the bastard who did this to you.”

Barry has to look away, then. Memories from earlier today assault him once more, and he fights them down desperately, not wanting to relive that horrible meeting again.

“P-please, d-d-don’t.”

A tense silence follows, and Barry closes his eyes as an intense discomfort and guilt overcomes him.

Len means well, he does, but Barry hates it when he talks like this about Wally, and he doesn’t doubt that Len knows that his nephew is the reason for his current state.

It’s not fair towards Wally, and it makes him angry, but the anger is mostly directed towards himself. After all, Len is only trying to protect him.

This whole situation is so complicated and messed up.

Suddenly Barry feels like all the energy is drained right out of him.

Then, Len touches him lightly, his fingers wandering over the sensitive skin at the side of his throat, just below where his jaw joint is, and the contact is unexpected that it catches Barry’s breath.

Barry glances back to Len, seeks out his eyes, and doesn’t like the somberness with which he is being watched, but is grateful all the same. Len understands and won’t force him to talk about it right away but instead gives him time.

The thumb that has rested below his chin so far starts to stroke the sensitive patch gently, making Barry sigh softly while his eyelids grow heavy again.

He loves how easily Len can calm him down and make him feel safe.

In moments like this, Barry wishes they could just stay like this forever, just the two of them, with all the messiness of the world outside forgotten.
The door is ripped open, causing both Barry and Len to startle and turn to it with wariness and annoyance respectively as Axel storms in.

Len looks about ready to bite the kid’s head off but stops himself from cursing him when he notes that the boy is vehemently indicating for him to stay quiet.

“… seriously, he is alright! Look, I told you we went to James’ for moral support! What? No, he isn’t here right now! What, why would you do that!? Oh for frick’s sake, Jay, Barry is fine! What is it with you old geezers and your constant worrying! What… no, man, sorry… yeah, no, I know, sorry. Oh thank the ever loving Jesus-boy, I’m just seeing that Barry seems to have woken up, I’ll give you to him now, Jay! Bye!”

Axel has a slightly panicked look on his face, and he waves the mobile phone he got from Jay a few days ago quite forcefully towards Barry, mouthing all along the older man’s name as if the part of the conversation they have just witnessed wasn’t a giveaway.

Barry automatically reaches for the phone, and in his tired state, he hardly registered what is going on before he already hears the other man on the line saying his name in obvious concern.


“Are you alright?” Jay asks directly. “Max told me what happened and… I’m really sorry, Barry.”

Barry hums in agreement, feeling very tired once again. He wishes he could just go back to rest some more. “I-It’s f-fine, J-Jay.”

There is a brief pause on the other end of the line, and Barry knows that Jay is not believing him nor is he satisfied with his response. He can’t bring himself to care.

“I passed by your apartment after I learned of what happened,” Jay remarks, and Barry presses his lips into a thin, unhappy line while his stomach drops.

“You’re not at James’, are you?” Jay asks after Barry failed to say anything. He doesn’t sound angry or accusing, which is good, but he clearly is not happy over Barry’s choice of company.

“I-I…” Barry swallows, eyes itching so that he squeezes them shut as he blindly reaches for Len, who takes his hand just a second later and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “I-I’m s-sorry…”

“Don’t Barry,” Jay tells him firmly, “I told you that I understand.” He sighs, and Barry can nearly see his frown as he goes on, “You know I don’t like it, but I understand, and I’m not going to cause you any additional grief over it. I just want you to be careful, okay?”

“Y-Yes…” Barry agrees quietly, around the lump in his throat.

“Joan and I are there for you, and so is Max,” Jay reminds him, and Barry feels the first hot tears find their way down his cheeks at how honest the older man sounds. “You have your friends, of course, and I know that you will always turn to them for help first but remember that you can come to us as well. You can trust us, Barry.”

Barry bites down on a sob and squeezes Len’s hand with enough force that it must be uncomfortable, but he can’t help himself. He suddenly feels overwhelmed, he knows that Jay is also including the Rogues when he mentioned his friends, and it is reassuring to think that the older man is really okay with that.

A lingering fear of Barry’s has been that Jay will turn away from him again eventually because of his
friendship to Len and the others, and he doesn’t want that to happen, not again, not after he just started to rekindle with Jay once more.

Jay seems to sense that Barry has been shaken up by his words, since he doesn’t press him for a response or any more details about his whereabouts, but instead tells him to rest.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?” Jay asks, and Barry has troubles to get his voice to work at all.

“Y-Yes,” Barry utters quietly, eyes clenched shut, which doesn’t do anything to stop the tears, or the growing urge to curl up and cry.

“Take care, Barry.” Jay tells him, sounding honestly worried for him, and Barry ends the call without responding, just as a sob forces its way past his lips.

Len takes the phone from him and puts it on the nightstand next to them before cupping his cheek, making a soft, comforting noise. He keeps sitting next to Barry, a firm and soothing presence while Barry feels like breaking apart again, similar to how it was earlier, but not as bad.

It doesn’t take more than a couple of minutes for Barry to calm down this time, probably because of how exhausted he is, and afterward, he feels so drained that he doesn’t even put up a fight when he feels himself starting to drift off once more.

He feels better, lighter, but he still doesn’t understand where the sudden and overwhelming sense of sadness came from since he thought that he had made his peace with what was done to Wally and him. Apparently, that is not the case, not that he is surprised, seeing that he never really got over the guilt of failing his family back then.

Barry’s drowsy mind stays focused on Len’s presence, but he notices that somebody else is there as well.

There is some soft talking, nothing more than a faint murmur, and Barry recognizes Lisa, who speaks in just as much of a hushed tone as her brother.

Barry is unable to pick up on what is said, it doesn’t really matter, anyway. Axel briefly joins the quiet conversation, and Barry realizes that he forgot about the teen’s presence.

It seems like only a second later that the room is quiet, and Len’s touch is suddenly gone.

Barry gives a soft sound of protest but then he feels the mattress shift next to him, and his body relaxes once more when he realizes that it must be Len.

With much more effort than it should cost him, Barry is able to roll onto his side, closer to his partner, and he hums, pleased, when Len puts an arm around his middle and pulls him closer, so that he ends up with his forehead resting on Len’s collarbone, breathing his familiar scent in.

Barry is gone a moment later.

Chapter End Notes

So, this was a chapter on the sadder side, everything considered. It started out with Barry spending a lovely day with Bart and Max and pretty much went downhill from there… but you guys know me by now, so who is really surprised about me messing
things up for our favorite ex-speedster? ;)

But, on a more serious note, I think this chapter did convey very well where Wally and Barry stand right now regarding each other. Wally is still eaten up by what happened to him (and what he thinks Barry did to him), and Barry was hoping that things could go back to how they were but is once again shown that that probably won’t ever be possible. Some injuries are too severe, and some scars just run too deep. It is questionable whether their relationship could go back to how they were between them once. I think Wally would have to really confront and work through what happened to this to even be considered a possibility, and as things seem now, he hasn’t done so very well so far. Why that is the case is a big question, but it probably has less to do with him not wanting to than with what is actually causing all of what is going on.

Barry breaking down like that in front of the Rogues is probably causing things to be somewhat awkward for a little while between them, considering how most of them hate to deal with too emotional situations (them being manly men and all ;)– but they are good friends, so we know they will get over it rather quickly. It certainly did Barry some good to find the support he needed just then among his friends, and Len and Lisa taking care of him like that. Also, who would have thought that Jay would be so chill about the whole Barry not only theoretically being friends with the lots like the Rogues but actually seeking them out? Good of him.

I want to add something I missed to mention in the last ANs, mostly because I didn’t feel up to writing. Guy stumbling across the Saloon was pretty much him beating the odds. It should not have happened, it was a vast coincident for him being at the right place under the right circumstances as well as dumb luck. It will be explained later on, but any hero should not be able to locate the bar. I alluded to it a couple of times so far, but it probably went under.

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter and thanks all of you so much who took the time to comment. I love receiving them, they never fail to pick me up/entertain me. :)

The next chapter will have Barry worry about the Rogues being on their first mission as bounty hunters as well as someone turning up who will probably have most of you be excited over.

See you in two weeks! <3
Is It Fate or The Devil?

Chapter Summary

Barry learns once more that the public traffic system of Keystone City sucks at night (really, at all time, but especially at night).

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my wonderful editor Quintessenzza! Thank you for your help and hard work, my friend! :)

Warning: Flashbacks to corporal/sexual abuse, strong language

Attention please: I want to add something here, I just got an outraged comment about a line Len says in this chapter. It is a throw-away remark about how "Jews are stingy", which, of course, is a racist statement that holds no merit. Len is an idiot for saying so, of course, but that's part of his character. He didn't grow up in today's world where we are very mindful of political correctness (which is something I'm all for - I hate all that anti-pc culture talk), and he grew up in an environment that fed and breed racism and homophobia. He has left most of it behind, but there are still traces left over.

None of the Rogues have problems with people of other ethnicities, but that does not mean that they don't at times display what you can interpret as racist behavior by the comments they make solely due to ignorance or thoughtlessness. They are your average blue-collar Joes who don't concern themselves too much with what is politically correct and how their language can be regarded as racist or homophobe at times. That's just part of who they are. They are flawed characters.

I hope this will prevent anybody else from getting upset when reading this chapter. I wanted to mention this earlier, but due to me not feeling well today I truly just forgot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The air is cold when Barry steps out in the night, pulling the back entrance of the Saloon shut behind him. The Twins are currently experiencing a noticeable drop in temperatures, mostly thanks to the cold front that has been hanging over the Midwest, causing the cities to be cut off from the sun by thick pillars of grey, dirty looking clouds.

Barry pulls the coat tighter around himself, frowning up at the sky before he makes his way to the bus stop close-by. Usually, Sam picks him up from work, even though Barry insists that it's not necessary. He still has the annual pass for the public traffic system he got from Jay and Joan for his birthday, and having Sam get him to and from work makes it difficult to use it, which in turn makes him feel ungrateful, like he is wasting such an expensive gift. Unfortunately, it doesn't matter how often he tells Sam about it, the man still usually ends up waiting for him at the end of the workday to either get him over to the current hideout or to Barry's apartment.
Barry is pretty sure that Len is behind it, but his partner usually feigns ignorance when he tries to talk with him about it.

Despite his complaints, Barry does appreciate his friends looking out for him in that way, and on a night like tonight, as Barry crosses the street, shivering slightly in the chilly drizzle that feels more like mist than actual rain, he really wishes he had Sam's mirror-dimension travel service at hand.

Things have picked up once more at the bar, and Barry feels exhausted after his last shift, and the prospect of having to wait for the bus in this weather is kind of disheartening.

The Rogues are currently in Lima, Peru, though, meeting with one of Gael’s friends about their first job as bounty-hunters, and thus not within reach for at least another couple of hours.

The notion of his friends trying their luck with that profession still doesn’t sit well with Barry, but he agreed with Len to wait and see before unnecessarily worrying himself sick over something that may not even happen.

Len gave him his words that he will only agree to work for the man Gael recommended to him if he can be sure that they’ll stay safe, or, at least, as safe as they were when doing their usual heists.

Barry still doubts that that is even possible, but he can understand Len’s decision to look elsewhere for a living due to the current heat criminals are experiencing because of the new regulations people like Luthor or Alvares want to introduce. The thought that someone like Lex Luthor wants to get rid of or at least significantly reduce crime in the whole country still sounds like a bad joke to Barry, but according to the last polls, he seems to be ahead of his opponents. That is mostly thanks to his rather ruthless ideas about how to handle the US ongoing problem with their increasing crime rate, especially when it comes to supervillains and the destruction they cause.

All the talking about harsher penalties and allowing the police to use more forceful, violent ways to deal with criminals has set criminals on edge. The fact that some of them seem to have suddenly disappeared off the face of the earth is not helping either, and it also causes a nagging worry to follow Barry around wherever he goes when his friends are out doing a job.

Not wanting to think about politics or the possible dangers his friends put themselves in, Barry pushes those thoughts aside as he comes to a halt at the bus stop.

Things aren’t all as dour as they appear just now, he knows. It’s just that the last two weeks have been rather taxing on him since his unplanned run-in with Wally.

The Saloon is doing better again, so much so that Barry’s worry about losing his job has started to diminish, and Charlie seems satisfied with his work, going even so far as to allow him to take over more of his responsibilities at the bar.

Maybe, a little too much so, Barry thinks with some unease as he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, pulling his coat tight around himself as the cold seeps through the fabric.

Charlie left for Israel two days ago to attend the funeral of an old family friend, who seemed to be a lot like actual family to the man judging by how stricken he was by learning of his decease.

Barry was surprised to find out that his boss’ family originates from Jerusalem, and that he has still family there and had a Jewish upbringing while growing up. He also overheard him talking on the phone in what must have been fluent Arabic the day before he left for his journey overseas. His curiosity getting the better of himself, Barry tried to ask Charlie about his family, but it quickly became clear that it is a sore point for his boss so he decided to leave the topic alone.
Still, last night, when he and Len were in bed but not asleep yet, he inquired whether his partner had known about Charlie having family in Jerusalem. Len gave him a crooked, amused smile in return, which Barry didn’t get at first.

“In all the years I’ve known him, I don’t think Charlie ever told anybody anything about himself other than how his former wife took his last pair of socks with her after their divorce,” Len explained, amused, before his smirk was replaced by a frown, and he muttered under his breath, “Should have known that stingy bastard is a Jew.”

The last two days were quite stressful due to Charlie’s absence, and it is still hard for Barry to grasp that the man is really okay with him being in charge of the bar during his absence. While his job has become more or less routine by now, Barry still doesn’t think he is capable of handling the business on his own.

What if Tell turns up again or another tormentor from his past who wants to mess with him?

Barry presses his lips into a thin line and absentmindedly watches the puddle of water on the ground in front of him.

He will have to deal with it on his own, he will have to make it work.

Len and the others can’t always be there to help him out, and while it scares him, he doesn’t want to depend on them to such a degree.

Barry told Len so when he offered to have Mick stay at the Saloon tonight while the rest of them are at the meeting. While Len was less than impressed by it, he didn’t put up a fight even though he apparently didn’t think much of his intention to deal with any possible trouble on his own.

It’s more than likely that Len is merely humoring him since Barry knows that he sent Sam to check up on him anyways since he spotted a glimpse of the man in the mirror behind the bar tonight.

Barry should be angry about it, about how little his friends seem to trust him and his capability to take care of himself, but he can’t bring himself to. He isn’t there yet. He can’t face his past alone just now, and maybe he will never reach that point.

The thought is disconcerting.

But maybe he doesn’t have to. Not yet, anyway.

He doesn’t want to be weak, but, despite the nasty little voice in the back of his mind which calls him just that for relying on his friends, he tries to believe that they merely help him to move on and get better.

Barry wouldn’t have come this far without them, he knows that for certain, and he is working towards being able to face the nightmares of his past on his own should he have to, but for now he will accept the help of the people in his life.

Even if it makes him feel weak at times.

Taking a deep breath of the fresh air, Barry feels some of the anxiousness leave him and a soft smile touches on his lips.

He is lucky to have his friends in his life, he can’t forget that.

Something warm settles in his chest as he thinks back to how Len stayed with him till closing last
night, a mostly quiet but reassuring presence at his side.

His smile slips off his lips when he remembers the brawl Mick and Digger started with two other guys over a game of pool earlier that night. Barry is not looking forward to explaining to Charlie why the billiard table is now missing a leg.

“At l-least, it’s s-still s-standing,” Barry murmurs to himself as he turns to look down the street from where his bus is supposed to arrive. He glances down at his watch and wrinkles his brows when he notices that it is already ten minutes late.

A shiver runs down Barry’s spine, and he isn’t sure whether it is due to the unease or chilly temperatures. Probably a mix of both, not that it really matters. He pulls his coat tighter around himself and glances to the shop window on the opposite side of the street where he can see himself in the light of the lantern. He half expects to catch Sam’s glance, but there is nobody other than himself looking back at him.

Despite his discomfort, he can’t deny that it is kind of nice not to be shadowed all the damn time. It has become sort of commonplace these days that he finds Sam checking up on him from any kind of reflective surfaces around him.

It is intrusive, annoyingly so, and Barry usually makes no secret about it to Len, but right now, as he stands alone in those hardly lit, dingy streets, waiting for a bus that may or may not arrive, he probably would feel safer knowing someone was checking up on him, just in case. The Keys are notorious for their high crime rate, especially this part.

Barry looks up when the slight drizzle starts to get worse, and he once again could kick himself for leaving his umbrella at home. Glancing back to his watch, he sees that another two minutes have passed by, which means that he’ll probably have to wait for the next bus to arrive, which isn’t scheduled for another forty minutes.

His eyes go back to the window across the street, unsure whether he should go back to the Saloon to escape the rain and wait there, or stay here, just in case his bus turns up.

Len would undoubtedly want him to return to the bar, worried that he could catch a cold, something Barry is prone to do.

Barry smiles slightly and reaches up to rub his tired eyes, fondness filling his chest as he thinks of his partner. The warmth is quickly replaced by an uncomfortable heaviness, causing him to shift uneasily.

During the last two weeks, after Barry’s disastrous run-in with Wally and his breakdown in front of his friends, he sometimes wishes they would just back off.

The way they treated him hasn’t changed dramatically per se, but Barry is an observant person, and he doesn’t miss the looks they give him when they think he is not looking. He noticed how they seem oddly reluctant to raise their voices around him, as if they are afraid to scare him, and it is just so off, so unnatural compared to how things usually are between them.

Or maybe it is nothing, and he is just imagining things because he still feels so damn humiliated about the whole ordeal.

“I-wish y-you’d s-stop th-that,” Barry told Sam in frustration a few days ago, after he has caught him spying on him once again. “I’m n-not th-that w-weak th-that I c-can’t g-go w-without an h-hour o-of y-you sh-shadowing m-me.”
The Rogue watched him silently for a moment, his brows furrowed before he huffed a laugh that sounded more annoyed than amused.

“That’s not that, Barry,” Sam assured him and climbed out of the mirror Barry had noticed him in.

Barry, who had averted his eyes, heard his friend step closer to him and shot him an incredulous, unhappy look.

“Look,” Sam said, sounding a little frustrated, “can you honestly say that you wouldn’t do the same if, for example, Len’s and your positions were reversed? Because I think I know you well enough by now to say that you’re just as much of a worrywart as our dear Captain is.”

Barry tensed up when Sam, after hesitating for a long moment, awkwardly reached for him and lightly touched his shoulder but he didn’t pull away.

“We’re friends,” Sam reminded him, sounding as if that alone was reason enough for his actions, and it probably was. “And it’s a rule that we Rogues stick together and look out for each other.” The other man gives his shoulder a comforting squeeze. “Even if we can’t always appreciate it.”

Barry bit his lip at that and asked the other man doubtfully. “When have I become a Rogue, Sam?”

Sam, in response, lifted both of his eyebrows in a clearly incredulous expression, and Barry didn’t know what to say in return.

Barry watches the puddle in front of his feet, noticing the faint reflection of the streetlight behind him, and wonders how his friends are doing.

Are they already after the unlucky guy who is their first target?

The idea of them trying their luck with bounty-hunting still doesn’t sit well with Barry, especially since Len intends for any possible job of theirs to take place out of the US borders, and while that may be smart in a way, it worries Barry in case something goes wrong.

To his surprise, none of the other Rogues seem that averse to the idea of trying their luck with a new occupation, and Barry can’t help but wonder whether this is because of what is going on in politics or Blacksmith, or possibly because they know of something they aren’t inclined to share with him.

Most likely, his friends are just growing restless. Their number of heists has drastically decreased over the last two years, and they don’t seem to get the same kind of thrill when they pull a job in another city or country, or team up with someone else.

It’s likely that they just miss doing the big jobs of the past, working off each other.

“Stealing stuff without the thrill of the red jackass catching you isn’t the same,” Mick told him about a week ago when Barry touched on the topic while they were playing cards.

“Th-The p-police p-possibly c-catching y-you isn’t th-thrilling en-nough?” Barry asked incredulously, which caused the other man to scoff and shake his head.

“Nobody takes those bozos seriously,” Mick points out, smirking. He looks a little uncomfortable a moment later as he adds, “No offense.”

Barry waved him off, though he couldn’t help but feel somewhat annoyed on behave of his former colleagues.
“Y-You l-liked d-doing j-jobs on y-your own o-or w-with oth-thers in th-the p-past,” Barry reminded him, shuffling his cards around absentmindedly. “M-Maybe you c-could d-do s-someth-thing l-like th-that ins-instead of b-bounty-h-hunting?”

“Doing an occasional heist of that sorts is okay, but it’s not the same working with other thugs,” Mick explained, putting another fifty cents wager down. “Some of us have been working together for nearly 20 years by now, and while we butt heads every day, it’s still reassuring to know that someone you’ve known that long watches your back.”

Barry couldn’t argue with that nor with what Mick said next.

“Apart from that, we also pull off the most lucrative jobs when we’re working together.” Mick took a swing of his beer before adding with a slightly crooked smile. “Len and I maybe don’t see eye to eye most of the time, but the jerk has a good nose when it comes to detecting the best jobs.”

Barry can understand where Mick is coming from, but that doesn’t mean that has to like it.

This afternoon, shortly before Barry had to leave for work, he saw them off for their first bounty-hunt. The mood was mostly relaxed among his friends, though there was palpable excitement in the air, making it clear that none of them expected anything to go wrong, which in turn put Barry somewhat at ease, even though the worry kept nagging away at him.

Lisa, who knows as well as the others how much Barry dislikes the whole bounty-hunter idea, gave him a comforting hug as he stood somewhat forlorn at the side, watching them quietly as they got ready.

“Don’t worry so much, Bear. We’re going to be fine,” Lisa assured him. “Gael’s a good friend of Len’s, he wouldn’t let us run into some trap.” She shoots him a smirk then and adds, “I’ll make sure that my stubborn mule of a brother is coming back to you in one piece, ok?”

Barry’s cheeks grew hot at those words, and he ducked his head while thanking her quietly with a weak smile.

Len came up to him after that, and it was kind of funny to see how the other men suddenly seemed intended to look anywhere but at them.

“It will be fine, we’ll be back tomorrow morning if everything works out and with all the planning we put into this, I don’t doubt it’s going to.”

Barry nodded quietly. He didn’t meet Len’s eyes, he couldn’t.

“Barry…” Len’s voice didn’t sound gruff anymore, not like when he addressed the others just a few minutes ago. Instead, it gained a low but warm quality, causing a shiver to run down Barry’s spine. Then, he cupped the back of Barry’s neck in that by now familiar and reassuring gentle way of his. “It will be fine.”

Barry let Len pull him closer, his eye slipping close on their own accord as he felt his partner’s warm lips briefly touch his own. It didn’t frighten him anymore, not with Len.

“Don’t worry, Baby.” The endearment was something Barry started to enjoy in the privacy of their room or his apartment, but it still made him feel slightly embarrassed, seeing that the others were present as well. Thankfully, nobody said anything or made it otherwise known whether they thought the nickname was ridiculous when Barry glanced over to them.

“C-Come b-back s-safe,” Barry murmured against Len’s jawline, feeling his stubbles against his
lips, and shivered when he got another kiss in response.

Len and the others left after that.

Barry shakes the memory off, pulling his mind back to the present, and throws another unhappy look at his watch. By now, it is out of question that the bus will turn up.

As if on cue, like the weather itself noticed his situation and wanted to be a spiteful dick, the rain starts to get worse and turns into an outright downpour.

Barry bites down on a frustrated huff, silently cursing his luck, and is just about to look somewhere for coverage when the rain suddenly stops drenching him.

For a second, he freezes in surprise which quickly turns into anxiety as he realizes that someone must have put an umbrella above his head.

Snapping his head to the side, Barry's eyes fall onto a stranger whom he hasn't noticed before, and the notion that someone could have just snuck up on him like that causes his heart to drum anxiously against his ribs.

The stranger meets his gaze calmly, an easy smile on his lips, which is replaced by a slight frown when Barry stumbles away from him, back into the pouring rain.

The man lifts his eyebrows but seems more amused about his reaction than anything else.

“Excuse me, it wasn't my intent to scare you.” The stranger gives him an apologetic smile, seemingly somewhat embarrassed about accidentally frightening him, and with that, the fear that has latched onto Barry so easily starts to subside.

“N-No, i-it's alr-right, I-I…” Barry breaks off, unsure what to say to the man. Usually, strangers around here aren’t necessarily the nicest people, and Barry is aware that he can count himself lucky if he doesn’t get mugged on his way home on a night like this.

“It’s okay.” The man chuckles and shrugs. “I startled you, that’s not something you need to justify.” He glances up at the night sky that is covered by thick clouds and hums. “I just thought you could use the umbrella.” He shoots Barry a sympathetic look. “Your summer coat doesn’t seem to do a lot to protect you against the rain.”

Barry studies the other man with a frown while blinking the rain out of his eyes. He is unsure why, but the stranger seems oddly familiar now that he had the opportunity to take in his features. He is taller than Barry, about Eddy’s size, but with broader shoulders, wearing a grey raincoat, his blond hair – seemingly a shade lighter than Barry’s own, though it is hard to tell in the dim light – are mostly hidden under the hood, and he has blue eyes.

Barry isn’t sure where exactly he could have seen the man before, but he is pretty sure he has.

“H-have w-we m-meet?”

The smile on the other man’s face speaks of surprise, but, at the same time, he also looks oddly pleased by his question, and while something in Barry tells him to stay attentive around that guy, he can’t help but relax a little.

“I don’t think so,” the man explains, studying Barry with an amused glint in his eyes that doesn’t make him appear like he is laughing at him but has a much more pleasant feeling to it. “I’m new in the city, moved here just a few weeks ago.”
“O-oh, I s-see...” Barry wonders why he feels disappointed by that but shakes the feeling off as he gives the other man a small, apologetic smile. “S-Sorry ab-bout…” He chuckles awkwardly, nodding to the umbrella.

There is no reason for him to apologize for getting startled, but he still feels silly for how he reacted, even if it was understandable.

Then again, Barry gets spooked so easily these days that it is becoming hard for him to discern what is an appropriate reaction and what isn’t.

He is a little surprised when the other man laughs softly in response and shakes his head. “Nah, it is fine. I’ve been told before that I can come over as quite intimidating at times.”

The friendly smile he gives Barry at that, makes it hard for the blonde to believe that, but something in him urges him to be cautious which is why he keeps his distance.

“Look at me and my manners, I haven’t even introduced myself yet.” The stranger chuckles and Barry can’t help but think that this man must be of the joyful kind by nature, judging of his cheerful demeanor.

“My name,” the man says, he raises his hand in a sweeping motion and actually bows before Barry, “is Eobard Thawne.”

Barry huffs a surprised chuckle, caught off-guard by that odd behavior that thankfully doesn’t set off any additional alarm bells in his mind. It even seems somewhat endearing, and Barry lifts his eyebrows in response, amused and less worried. He can say with certainty that he hasn’t met such an odd fellow in a while and considering who his friends are, that says something.

“Eob-bard?” Barry really doesn’t want to be impolite, but the name does sound kind of unusual. Maybe he is from another country?

Eobard grins at that in a fashion of someone who has expected this sort of reaction and cups his neck in a somewhat embarrassed way. “Yeah, I know, it’s a strange name, but I was named after my father, and you could say that his parents were quite ahead of their time.” His eyes crinkle up at that as if he has just said something particularly funny, and Barry can’t help but smile, even though he finds the wording the other man just used a little strange.

“W-well, it’s n-nice t-to m-meet y-you, Eob-bard. M-My n-name is B-Barry Al-len.” Barry gives Eobard a friendly nod and realizes just then, that the umbrella has been put over his head again sometime during their conversation which leaves the other man proverbially in the rain.

“D-Don’t,” Barry protests, “Th-That’s n-nice o-of y-you b-but you r-really sh-should use it y-yours-self.”

“I’ll be fine with my coat,” Eobard assures him, shrugging, and offers Barry the umbrella. Barry hesitates but eventually accepts it, grateful for the protection from the ongoing downpour. He should be going back to the bar, where it is warm and most of all dry, but something keeps him from moving.

“Don’t worry,” Eobard tells him, possibly misinterpreting his frown. “I like rain, it’s calming.” He glances up, lifting a hand, palm facing towards the sky as if he were trying to catch some of the rain, musing, “It’s as if the whole world gets a shower.”

Barry watches the other man, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lip, and he doesn’t understand
why he doesn’t feel the same amount of unease around him he usually does when it comes to
strangers. Especially men like Eobard, who could easily overpower him if he wanted to.

_Not every man I meet is a rapist_, Barry thinks tersely, annoyed at his own tendency to always
assume the worst of others in situations like this one.

“You’re waiting for your bus?” Eobard inquiries, pulling Barry out of his thoughts.

“Y-Yes,” Barry agrees and glances down the street, where he still can’t make out the approaching
headlights of a bus. “B-But it s-seems th-the one I-I w-wanted t-to t-take isn’t c-coming.”

“That sucks,” Eobard remarks while he too turns his attention down the street, looking like he too
was searching for any approaching vehicle. “When’s the next one supposed to come?”

Glancing down at his watch, Barry answers, “In a-about th-thirty m-minutes.”

“That’s public traffic system at its finest.” Eobard snorts, sounding very unimpressed.

Barry hums in agreement, though he secretly hopes that the reason for the delay is not an accident or
something of that sorts.

“You’re t-taking th-the b-bus, t-too?” Barry asks as he turns back to his new companion, though it
seems unlikely that this is the case.

“Nah, I’m just taking a stroll,” Eobard explains. “I’ve trouble sleeping, and I like the rain.”

They spent the next ten minutes talking, and Barry is surprised how comfortable he feels around the
other man and how easy it is for him to have a conversation with him even though the man is still
nothing more but a stranger.

The bus Barry initially planned on taking turns up, eventually, with over half an hour delay, and
Barry is looking forward to getting out of the rain. He hands the umbrella back to Eobard, giving him
a grateful look. “Th-Thanks, y-you p-probab-bly s-saved m-me from a c-cold.”

“No problem,” Eobard returns with a grin. “It was nice talking to you, Barry.”

“Likewise,” Barry agrees and wishes him goodbye before getting on the bus.

As he takes a seat close to the back exit, he watches Eobard turn around and walk down the dark
street through the slightly fogged up windows, just as the bus starts moving along.

A strange meeting, Barry decides, but not a bad one.

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The man is watching him again, his eyes glowing in the dark while the rest of his features are
covered in shadow.

He scares Barry, even though he never comes any closer. He just stands there, watching him,
surrounded by an aura of danger that seems to get worse and worse every time he spots him in his
dreams.

Even though there is no way to see his face, Barry knows that he would see menace on it if he could.
That as well as hate, which leaves him with a horrible feeling coiled up at the pit of his stomach.

Then, the dream suddenly shifts, and Barry is back in his cell in Iron Heights. Men are surrounding
him, but he is unable to make out their faces either, though he doesn’t need to, he already knows all too well who they are and what is about to happen.

He is being held down, and although it won’t do him any good, he can’t stop himself from starting to try and fight them off.

Michael’s voice suddenly cuts through the cold, stifling air surrounding him, so close to his ear that he can feel the man’s hot breath on his skin. “My, my, what a feisty little bitch we have at our hands tonight. I think another lesson is in order, we can’t have you getting too bold, can we?”

Barry is forced on his knees, onto the cold, hard tiles, while someone is holding his hands in a painful grip behind his back. The faceless men around him cheer and laugh, calling him degrading names, telling him what a whore he is and what they plan to do with him.

It is terrifying, and Barry is shaking like a leaf, tears running down his hot cheeks, as he tries to get free and away from them.

He doesn’t want to endure this any longer.

He is so tired.

Why can’t they just leave him alone?

Michael steps in front of him, a smug smile on his face as he meets his wide, frightened eyes, and Barry wants to beg, ask him to stop, but he can’t speak, can’t even get a single word out.

“Show me, Barry.” Michael steps close to Barry and starts to unzip his fly. “Show me how well you can use that little mouth of yours.”

Barry suddenly feels like he is torn apart by the feelings of dread and humiliation, and he starts to fight once more, shaken out of his stupor by the horrifying prospect of being used once more, even though he knows that he won’t succeed.

He can never stop them.

Some other guard grabs his shoulder in a painfully tight grip, but Barry can’t concentrate on anything else but Michael’s hand in his hair that is now urging him forward.

“Open your lovely lips wide for me, my little bitch,” Michael says, an absurdly warm quality to his voice that makes Barry sick to his stomach.

The hand in his hair is nearly tender for a moment before its grip changes and causes hot pain to go through his skull.

“We have all night for your lesson, bitch.”

There is laughter, and Barry feels someone else’s hand slide into his pants.

A whimper finds its way past his lips, desperate and frightened, and he finally finds his voice again as he feebly protests, “N-no, p-please… I-I-c-can’t, p-please… d-don’t”

Someone grabs his shoulder, an odd sensation since he thought he is already held in place there, and the feeling of being lightly shaken overcomes him, which causes a nearly smothering disorientation to grip him.

The room around him moves, slips from focused to smudged, and Michael, thank god, suddenly is
no longer real but only a distorted shadow.

“Barry,” Someone calls his name, and Barry tries to answer, though a part of him is still afraid of who else is there.

He is dreaming, he thinks, and the realization is like salvation, like the first breath one takes when finally breaking the surface of a sea after nearly drowning.

“You’re safe.” The voice is still there, still speaking, and it sounds familiar, comforting so. “It’s okay, baby, you’re safe.”

Barry whimpers and digs his fingers into someone’s arms, holding onto them like his life is depending on it.

“P-Ple-ease,” Barry whimpers, still so very afraid, and he doesn’t even know what he is begging for.

The voice keeps talking to him, in a low and calming tone, and slowly Barry shakes off the nearly smothering embrace of sleep.

“I’m here, I won’t let anything happen to you,” Len promises, and Barry wants to believe him so badly.

“P-Ple-ease,” Barry says, voice raw and hurt. He hardly notices that he is crying.

“Shhh.” Len moves his hands to Barry’s back and pulls him up to his chest, so that he can rest against him. “You’re okay, Barry. I’m here, you’re safe.”

Barry presses his face into the crook of his partner’s neck, and inhales his scent deeply, the familiarity of it is calming. He puts his arms around Len’s back and holds onto him, absorbing his warmth and calm.

They stay like this for a while, Barry leaning into Len who keeps stroking his back comfortably, and slowly the terror seeps out of him, leaving only exhaustion and dull sadness.

“L-Len,” Barry croaks, his forehead still resting against his partner’s shoulder, and he wishes they could just stay like this forever. Only the two of them.

Len hums, cupping Barry’s neck with a hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. “I’m here.” He kisses the side of his head, lips brushing against his hair. “Do you know where you are?”

“Y-Y-Yes,” Barry agrees and sighs, eyes closed as he enjoys his partner’s presence.

Len hums once more and rubs Barry’s back comfortably. “Good.”

A few more minutes tick by, and Barry starts to feel safe once more, relaxed, and so tired. He probably could drift off if he let himself, but he fears what his mind holds in store for him if he allows it.

“Do you want me to get you some water?” Len sounds calm, and it helps a little.

Barry nods tiredly.

“OK, I will be right back.” Len lets go of him and patiently waits till Barry does the same.

Len leaves the bedroom door open so that Barry can hear him move around in the other part of his
apartment. It is then that Barry notices that it is already bright outside, and he glances over to the clock next to his bed. It’s half past eight.

He only slept about three hours. Great.

Frowning, Barry reaches up to rub his slightly burning eyes that feel swollen and wonders whether he should try to catch some more rest or not. Tonight, the Saloon will be busy, and he could need the extra sleep.

He doesn’t want to face Michael again, though, nor that stranger in the shadows.

When Len returns a moment later, Barry realizes that his partner is still wearing his Captain Cold outfit, minus the glasses. It means that he came directly over after ending their first job as bounty-hunters.

“Here.” Len offers him the glass, but it quickly becomes apparent that Barry won’t be able to hold it on his own by how his hands are still shaking.

“Let me help you.” Len cups Barry’s hand with his own, assisting him in keeping the water from spilling while he takes a couple of smaller sips.

It helps to ease the rawness of his throat, and Barry lets himself fall back onto his pillow with a soft sigh after his thirst is appeased.

“Th-Thanks.” His voice still wavers a little as he speaks, but he feels less shaken up and more like himself again.

Len puts the glass onto Barry’s bedside table before studying him with a somber expression. “Are you okay?”

Barry nods and gives his partner a small, weary smile. He is doing okay again, thanks to him.

A light shiver runs through Barry when Len lays his hand onto his belly and starts to rub it lightly.

“Did something happen at work?” Len inquires, his face mostly stoic, though the concern is hard to miss.

“N-No.” Barry shakes his head. “E-Everyth-thing w-went alr-right.”

“Good.” Len nods, relaxing somewhat.

“How w-was y-your f-first j-job?” Barry asks, starting to feel drowsy again now that Len is with him, accompanied by the sense of safety that tends to come with that.

“It went down without a hitch,” Len informs him, smirking slightly, and Barry can read by his pleased expression alone that he liked it and that the others probably did, too.

Huh, who would have thought that the Rogues could become bounty-hunters one day?

“I-I’m g-glad,” Barry tells him with a relieved but tired smile.

“So am I.” Len moves his hand up to cup the side of Barry’s throat lightly.

“Is e-everyb-body b-back at th-the h-hideo-out?”

“Yeah…” Len frowns, then, looking slightly annoyed.
“Wh-What i-is it?” Barry asked, concern rearing its head once more.

Len studies him quietly for a moment, eyes thoughtful as he seems to ponder whether he should tell him right now or wait till he got some more rest.

It worries Barry. “L-Len?”

“It seems we got a new addition,” Len eventually settles on, causing Barry to furrow his brows in confusion.

“What?”

“The parasite you let sleep on your couch a couple of times a few years back,” Len explains, and, at first, Barry has no idea who he is talking about before realization dawns on him.

“E-Evan?” Barry stares at Len with wide eyes.

“Yeah, McCulloch,” Len agrees tersely, apparently less than excited about that turn of events.

“Wh-Why?” Barry asks, pushing himself up, so he is sitting. “Y-You d-didn’t s-say anyything…” He breaks off, unsure how to go on since this comes utterly out of the blue.

“Well,” Len grouses, frowning, “I didn’t know about it either till we met with Cardoso, and he informed me that we’ve to work with that jackass for the foreseeable future.”

“Wh-What b-busin-ness d-does E-Evan h-have w-with th-those g-guys?” The last time Barry saw Evan, he was living on the streets, a small-time criminal with a nasty drug problem.

“A lot happened in the last couple of years, it seems,” Len says and rubs his eyes, exhaling a tired sigh. He meets Barry’s eyes again, obviously not very happy about the recent turn of events. “McCulloch worked for Amunet for a while, got his gadgets from her before he saved some guy’s ass who was close to Cardoso which is why he changed employers.” He scoffs, sneering. “Little shit tried to get me to let him be part of our group for a while now, and it seems he finally got his wish.”

“What d-do y-you m-mean?” The more Barry learns, the more confused he feels. “Wh-What g-gadgets, and wh-why w-would Evan w-want t-to b-be p-part of th-the R-Rogues?”

“He was Amunet’s new Mirror Master.” Len huffs a humorless chuckle. “You can imagine how excited Scudder is to have a copycat around.” He pinches his nose, grimacing as if he had a headache. “Fucking shit like that always has to happen when things start to look up.”

Barry reaches for his partner, cupping his upper arm and giving it a reassuring, comforting squeeze. “C-Can’t y-you t-tell C-Card-doso th-that y-you d-don’t ac-cept new t-teammates?”

“We’re his team right now,” Len points out, looking like he was sucking on a particularly sour lemon. “And if we wanna keep doing business with him, we’ve to play along.”

“M-Maybe E-Evan w-won’t b-be s-such a b-bad ad-dition,” Barry suggests, though he doubts that Evan’s presence will aid the Rogues’ dynamic, especially if his membership is forced onto them.

“He’s an addict.” Len grunts. “One of the rules we follow is no drugs, and now I’ve got a fucking junky on my hands who’s clearly not liking the idea of going cold turkey.”

“If h-he w-wants t-to b-be p-part of th-the R-Rogues h-he’ll h-have t-to,” Barry states firmly, and he doesn’t like the idea of Evan using drugs while living with the others. Axel tends to pass by at their
hideouts these days, and while the boy probably would never do any drugs, the notion of him being tempted to doesn’t sit well with Barry.

“I told him so,” Len agrees but it doesn’t appear like he thinks that did a whole lot of good. “He agreed to stay off the stuff while he works with us, but I doubt he will. I know people like him, they usually only mean trouble for themselves and anybody involved with their sorry asses.”

“I-Is h-he s-staying w-with y-you?” Barry asks.

Len scoffs. “No, I told him that I’ll work with him, but that doesn’t mean that he can live with the rest of us.”

“S-So h-he’s s-staying w-with C-Card-doso?”

Len shoots Barry an amused look. “I highly doubt that Cardoso lets someone like him stay in his home.” He shrugs. “No idea where McCulloch is currently living, and I really don’t care.”

Barry frowns and even though he dislikes Evan’s drug habit, he can’t help but feel a little worried about the man, who doesn’t seem able to take care of himself.

“You look tired,” Len remarks, meeting Barry’s eyes calmly once again. “You should try and catch some more sleep. Friday nights are one of the worst at the bar.”

That’s true, and Barry does feel exhausted, but he can still feel Michael watching him from a dark corner of his mind.

Shivering slightly, he grabs one of Len’s hands. “S-Stay.”

Len’s eyes soften, and he leans forward, giving Barry a peck on the corner of his lips.

“Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

So, it’s Eobard. Who would have thought? ;)

Though, before any of you come to the wrong conclusions, I’ve to tell you that things are not as they seem and there is more going on with this Eobard than one may think. Has anybody of you picked up on it?

Also, Evan is going to return which means so will his thick Scottish accent! Are you as excited as I am about that? :D No? ... well, too bad! xP

I was planning for a longer note here, but I got a stomach bug and feel a little sick, so I'll mostly leave it at that. I just want you to understand that this Eobard than one may think. Has anybody of you picked up on it?

I sent my editor the chapter to read over it, and he got quite depressed over what occurred in it (I still feel bad about it, sorry Quintessenza!).
I'm prone to write sad/depressing stuff, mostly because I honestly enjoy writing it. Singularity started in a time where I had to deal with a lot in my life, though, and you can certainly feel that in how I wrote it and what topics I dealt with in it back then. Even so, the tone of the story will change somewhat in the second part, it will lighten up and become overall more hopeful/adventurous. So be patient if you are not the biggest fan of reading about sad and depressing stuff (though, should that be the case and you haven't stopped reading until now regardless, probably points to you being a closet-masochist, so don't fault me ;). Since the chapter I'm talking about (it will be chapter 121) is rather graphic at times, I've decided on posting a short summery at its end notes so you can skip it if it's too harsh for your taste.

There is more I wanted to touch upon, but I think I'll do so the next time.

If you liked the chapter, leave a comment, I always love reading your thoughts/ideas. :)

Next chapter we'll see Guy again, and Evan will have an opportunity to prove himself.

See you in two weeks! <3
Waffles And Guns

Chapter Summary

Everybody knows Batman is always right. Guy knows everybody is full of shit.

... and troubles at the Saloon. Again.

Chapter Notes

All the thanks to my amazing editor Quintessenza, who did a great job editing this chapter (as usual)! :D

Warning: Strong language, violence

Also: There will be a translation from Evan's Scottish to good old plain English at the end of the chapter for people (probably about anybody) who can't understand him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Seriously, how can you get a Burger when they have waffles on the menu?” Guy throws Kyle a reproachful look as he watches his friend take the seat next to him in the Watchtower cantina.

“I prefer to eat something with substance for lunch, not dessert,” Kyle replies, ignoring the glare he earns in return.

“Burgers hold no substance. They’re the embodiment of fat and carbohydrates.” Guy takes a bite of his food and rolls his eyes back with an obscene moan.

“And waffles are a glorified dessert,” Kyle points out but he can’t hold back on an amused smile over his friend’s silly behavior. “And turn it down, you’re not at home.”

“What are you talking about? Nobody else is here, I could put on some porn, and nobody would know.”

“Please don’t.”

“You’re no fun, Rayner, you know that?”

“That’s not true. I just outgrow my teens unlike you.”

Guy scoffs and takes another bite, enjoying the fluffy texture and sweetness of his food. Whoever Batman hired to make their food, the person seriously deserves a raise. Waffle-Fridays are the best.

“How’s your back?” Kyle asks after taking a sip of his water, shooting Guy a look, who in turn shrugs.

“’s good as new.” Guy leans back in his chair and tries not to grimace when a brief but sharp pain
flares up just below his left shoulder blade.

Fucking space wizards and their magical pets.

“You probably should have stayed on Oa for another day or so,” Kyle remarks. “I could have gotten here without trouble on my own, you know?”

“But I like being your babysitter,” Guy protests, snorting when the younger Green Lantern aims a French fry at his head in return.

“I can pull my own weight,” Kyle says, and Guy feels his good mood dim a little at how morose his friend suddenly sounds.

“I know,” Guy assures him, frowning. “I wouldn’t let you have my back if I thought you couldn’t.”

Kyle hums, looking still somewhat sullen. He picks up another piece of fries and studies it darkly.

“You wanna go to the movie night tomorrow?” Guy asks, hoping to distract Kyle from wherever his thoughts have taken him to. His friend has been somewhat depressed since Jade[1] and he decided to take a temporary break from each other, something Guy can understand too well. He isn’t good with women, and usually, it is them who end things with him, which often starts with them proposing to split for a time to clear things up. Stuff like that just sucks.

“I don’t know. I probably should pass by my apartment and see whether it’s even still mine.” Kyle grimaces. “My landlord has probably sublet it to someone else by now.”

“What a jackass,” Guy remarks with sympathy, and it is at the mention of Kyle’s apartment that he realizes that he probably should check up on his own and whether he even still owned the place since it has been about four months since he visited it. Usually, he stays with Gloria[2] if he stays on Earth for a day or so.

“Can’t hold it against him.” Kyle sighs. “I don’t even know whether I’ve still enough money in my account to cover my rent.”

“The League covers for that stuff,” Guy reminds him.

“Yeah, but they don’t have the data for the new bank account I opened when I moved.” He lets his head drop back in his neck and huffs. “I didn’t have time to update them on it.”

“Being this busy sucks,” Guy agrees with a frown before he pauses for a second and glances over to the other man. “So, I guess you haven’t had any luck with your mom’s painting?

Kyle shakes his head. “No, and I don’t think there’s any point in looking for it. It’s been nearly half a year, and I’ve still no clue where it could be.” He rubs his eyes and sighs wearily. “If things with Parallax hadn’t come up, I probably would have found it, but with all the time that went by, the chances for me to find it are next to zero.”

“Maybe whoever stole it has realized by now that he didn’t grab the next Rembrandt and just gave it up? It’s likely at some lost-and-found office,” Guy offers.

“Or in some garbage can,” Kyle counters morosely. “I still don’t get why someone would steal it. It has no worth to anybody else.”

“It was a nice-looking painting.” Guy points out and once more wonders whether he should tell Kyle about having traced the art piece down to the Gems. He doesn’t want to get his friend’s hopes up,
though. Kyle has been depressed since his mother’s death, and he would undoubtedly feel awful if Guy’s sources turned out to be wrong.

Not to mention that he would have to bring up Allen and probably the man’s connection to the underworld, and despite not being especially fond of that guy, the thought of doing so doesn’t sit well with him.

Now that he is back on Earth, he will need to seek the man out once more anyway. It’s been quite a while since he gave him the information about Kyle’s painting. Hopefully, he’s been able to learn something about its whereabouts by now.

The sound of the cantina doors sliding open gains Guy’s attention, and he glances over his shoulder to see who else decided to eat some snack at two in the morning.

His mood pummels the moment his eyes fall on Batman.

Great. Just the jackass he needed.

Frowning, Guy turns back to his waffles that have started to grow cold. The melted whipped cream made them soggy. He hopes that walking pain in the ass will be his usual antisocial self and stay away from their table.

Of course, against all odds, he doesn’t.

“I’ve read your report about your run-in with a foreign magical entity on your way back to Earth,” Batman says in place of a greeting as he takes a seat at the table, opposite to Kyle.

“Hello to you too, Bats,” Guy grumbles, and he can already feel his blood pressure go up. He just wanted to enjoy his waffles in peace, is that too much to ask? Then what the other man said dawns on him, and he shoots him an incredulous look. “We handed that report in like five minutes ago. Are you stalking us?”

Batman ignores him and instead keeps his attention on Kyle, who, of course, is more than willing to play along.

“Yes, it was a humanoid creature resembling a boy around twelve years old,” Kyle explains. “He was rather adept at magic and insisted that he was a god of some sorts.”

“A little brat is more like it,” Guy throws in, still damning the little shit for siccing his pet-snake or whatever that thing was on him. It would have bitten his spine in two if Guy had acted any slower.

“It didn’t initiate the attack?” Batman inquires.

“No, it was zipping around in an asteroid cluster, causing explosions that got our attention. It appeared like it had been in a fight with someone else since it was bruised up when we reached it, though there was no one else around,” Kyle says. “It seemed surprised when it spotted us but it didn’t attack initially.”

“You wrote that it knew who you were,” Batman mentions, studying Kyle with an attentive, calm look that didn’t lose any of its intensity despite the white lenses of the cowl hiding his eyes.

“Yeah, the little shit knew our actual names and started cackling about us messing up the time-space-continuum. It seems a big reckoning is going to be upon us in no time.” Guy scoffs and picks up his root beer to take a sip. “It spewed a lot of nonsense, said I was wearing the wrong ring and such stuff.”
“The wrong ring?” Batman turns his attention to him for the first time, and Guy scoffs, shrugging. “Yeah, it said something about my color should be red.” He frowns. “No idea what it meant by that.”

“There are no Red Lanterns,” Batman states.

“No,” Kyle agrees but adds more uncertain, “None that we know of, at least.”

“Fuck that,” Guy interject, throwing his friend a glare because they don’t need any other group of crazy wannabe space sheriffs next to Sinestro and his rambunctious group of psychopaths.

“It mentioned the Flash, too.” Batman focuses back on Kyle, who nods as he leans back and reaches up to rub his neck.

“Yes, it said something about how he missed his chance, and that everything was his fault.”

“His fault?” Batman leans a little forward at that, fixing Kyle with his gaze.

“Yeah, but I’ve no idea what he meant by that. He seemed to get pretty upset as he said that and added that the Flash should be on the lookout because the multiverse always gets what belongs to it.” Kyle glances at Guy as if to confirm that he isn’t mistaken.

“Seems that West was lazing around too much.” Guy shrugs and expects the dirty look he gets from the younger Lantern in return since Kyle and West are rather good friends.

“Did it elaborate what it meant with the multiverse?” Batman asks, ignoring Guy’s statement.

“No, it didn’t have the opportunity. Things got a little rough.” At that, Kyle throws Guy a rather annoyed frown, which causes him to protest, “Hey, the little brat was using its magic to pull my ring off.”

“I doubt it meant us any harm, I think it really was just a child,” Kyle argues. “It probably was simply curious; you didn’t need to go after it with a construct of an oversized fly swatter.”

“That was funny,” Guy insists, smirking, which causes Kyle to roll his eyes.

“Did it say anything more about the Flash?” Batman brings them back to the topic at hand. Guy fights down a frustrated huff, he would prefer to go back to eating his very late dinner in peace, even if said late meal was cold and soggy by now.

“Not anything I can think of,” Kyle says, glancing over to Guy, who only shrugs.

Batman seems to consider that for a moment before he turns to Guy, his mouth a grim line. “The report you handed in was as sloppy as usual; you left out the details about what the creature told you. I should not have to run after you to get a complete report, Gardner. This isn’t high school.”

“Fuck you.” Guy glowers at the other man who is really starting to grind on his nerves. “Since when do we have to write down word for word what someone we encounter says?”

“You don’t, but I would have assumed that you can differentiate from unnecessary chitchat and crucial information,” Batman replies coldly. “But you’ve proven me wrong once again.”

“Go jump off one of your ugly-ass gothic building, will you?” Guy grunts, hating how Bruce always succeeds in getting under his skin.

“Guy.” Kyle sighs, rubbing his forehead and looking infuriatingly exasperated with him of all people. Why is everybody always picking Batman’s side? Seriously! That dude is a complete tool,
how does nobody else realize that?

Thankfully, Batman seems to decide that he has spent enough time among mere mortals and gets up.

“I want you to go over the report once more and complete it, Green Lantern,” Batman tells Guy and
turns to Kyle before he can protest. “Maybe it is a good idea if you assist him there.”

“What?! Why don’t you go and fu-”

“Of course,” Kyle agrees, cutting Guy off once more.

Batman nods, but instead of turning and finally leaving, he faces Guy again, his expression grim.
“Stay away from Keystone City. If I find out that you’ve contacted him again, you can be sure that
there will be consequences.”

This comes pretty much out of nowhere, and Guy, who is utterly blindsided, only returns Batman’s
warning glare with a confused look. The man leaves, then, apparently satisfied with Guy’s reaction.
That prick.

“What have you been doing in Keystone City?” Kyle asks, his voice lowered since Batman hasn’t
exited the cafeteria yet.

“Nothing.” Guy shakes his head, and while every part of him balks at the idea of listening to Batman
and doing his bidding, he understands he is moving on thin ice when it comes to Allen. He knows
that Allen breached his parole restrictions, and he hasn’t informed anybody about it. This can get him
in trouble as well, especially with the Justice League who aren’t exactly the biggest fan of the former
Flash.

So, it seems that someone else is keeping tabs on Allen, not that it should surprise him. Batman is
one paranoid fellow; Guy should have thought of that.

Poor sod, if Batman were really on his case, Guy would bet his ring that he is going to end up back
in prison within the coming month. Not that it concerns him or anything.

Still, Guy frowns down at his half-eaten waffles and can’t help but remember how miserable and
scared Allen looked when he visited him in that bar. He looked like someone life has beaten down
and never stopped punching.

Fuck, Allen and his life are a worse mess than he initially thought, maybe it is the right idea to stay
away.

There is a nagging voice at the back of his mind that tells him that there is more going on, that
something is-

“You’re alright?” Kyle asks, eying him somewhat concerned.

“Sure,” Guy agrees and shoots his friend a smirk. “It’s just the Bat, he leaves a nasty aftertaste in my
mouth whenever he decides to crawl out of his hole.”

“Stop locking horns with him. It doesn’t pay off,” Kyle reminds him with a sigh and turns back to his
burger. “And it hardly helps your case that he is always right, anyway.”

“That jerk isn’t always right!”

“He is, he’s the Batman.”
“Oh, shut up.”

***

“You sure you can handle it on your own?” Charlie asks for what must be the third time, shooting another doubtful look towards the packed bar.

Barry fights the urge to roll his eyes but can’t help the smile that is tugging at his lips.

Charlie can be such a mother hen.

“Y-Yes, I’ll b-be f-fine,” Barry assures him once more. He nods to the door leading to the back of the building. “J-Just g-go and l-lie d-down. Y-You kn-know th-that y-your h-head w-will only g-get w-worse i-if y-you s-stay h-here.”

The frown on Charlie’s face deepens, he probably know just as well as Barry does how right he is about that. His head has been bothering him since the beginning of the week, perhaps because of the weather, which has rather abruptly changed from the lower 50’s to the mid 80’s and back again within a couple of days. Even Barry is starting to get tired of the constant ups and downs. He doesn’t have to battle with migraines as his boss does, but he can still feel it in his joints and scars. It makes him feel ancient at times.

“Your buddies are currently not around,” Charlie observes, causing Barry’s relaxed demeanor to tense up in response.

Mick and Sam were here until about half an hour ago but decided to call it an early night. Len would have come as well, but he is currently resting, having a fever since a nasty bug is making its round among the Rogues that has pretty everybody down. While Sam and Mick tried not to let it on, it was apparent that they were feeling under the weather as well, which is why they left early.

The reason they turned up here in the early evening despite being sick was to have an eye on him since the bar has started to become crowded on the weekends again, and Barry isn’t sure whether he is glad his friends decided to do the sensible thing or not.

After the mass jailbreak from Iron Heights a week ago that happened during a confrontation between the Flash and some unknown new villain, Len has gotten paranoid about Barry’s safety. The whole situation has Barry’s teeth on edge, even though he tries not to let it on.

So far, there has been no trouble the few times some of the bigger names like Woodward, Amar, or Monteleone have turned up, at least.

He hopes it will stay that way tonight.

“E-Evan i-is h-here,” Barry points out, nodding to the man sitting in the corner of the bar, nursing his second beer with a grim expression on his face, staring at the tv without paying it any mind.

Sam told the second Mirror Master of their team that he should keep an eye on Barry, and that they would kick his ass if he let anything happen to him. The animosity between those two is so thick that Barry is sure one can cut it with a knife, and while he understands Sam’s dislike for the other man, he can’t help but feel a little sorry for Evan. The newest and not entirely welcome addition to the Rogues is clearly not happy with how the others give him to understand that they would rather have nothing to do with him. At least they stick mostly to ignoring him when he is around at the bar at the same time as them.

Charlie follows Barry's gaze and studies Evan for a moment before he snorts and shoots him an
unimpressed look.

"The wannabe Rogue?" Charlie asks, and Barry doesn't miss how Evan moves his eyes from the TV to the bar owner, shooting him a nasty glare.

Charlie doesn't seem to think much of Evan either, which is likely because it slipped out that the new Mirror Master is a junky. It turned out that Charlie really can't stand drugs or drug users in general, something Barry was not really surprised to learn since he noticed a while ago that the people who usually frequent the Saloon tend to be clean, despite how infamous the location is.

"S-Sam t-told h-him t-to s-stick ar-round and k-keep an eye o-on th-things," Barry points out.

"Yeah, because that shithead is known for making the best decisions." Charlie scoffs which causes him to flinch a moment later, probably due to his head getting more upset with him and the fact that he hasn't moved somewhere much quieter and darker yet.

"Get me if anyone stirs up trouble," Charlie tells him, grimacing as he rubs his right temple. It seems that his migraine won out over his worry, for which Barry is quite glad since the man clearly belongs in bed and not in a crowded, noisy bar.

"Of c-cOURSE," Barry assures him and watches Charlie throw the bar another glare before turning and leaving without another word.

The next hour goes by swiftly and, much to Barry's relief, without any trouble rearing its head so he allows himself to relax a little as he takes orders.

It is then, of course, that Barry, after handing two beers to his latest customer, moves on to the next and finds himself staring in the smirking face of Tell.

It catches him utterly off-guard, and he ends up freezing for a second, eyes wide as his stomach makes an uneasy lurch.

The smirk on the thug's face grows wider so that he ends up showing teeth. He chuckles. "Hey, Barry, long time no see." He then glances around, a mean glint in his eyes, before he turns back to him, arching his eyebrows. "No bodyguards around tonight?" He snickers. "Did Charlie decide you're grown-up enough for the big-boy pants now?"

"Hey," a guy next to Tell interrupts, some thug Barry sees around regularly, who has at least a head-on Double Down, "You wanna catch up with him, buddy, you can do that after the rest of us get our drinks, okay?"

It is clear that the man has no idea who Tell is, though most of the others waiting around don't seem to have that knowledge gap as they have started to back off a little.

Tell's grins grows wider until it is all teeth, and he turns so that he can look over his shoulder at the man who interrupted him.

Barry gets goosebumps as he watches a slip of skin peel off Tell's face, and he isn't the only one who is intimidated by that display, since the thug who glared at him until a moment ago is now taking a step back as well, lifting both of his hands. "Sorry, man."

Double Down is just as infamous as the Rogues among the lowlife in the Twins, like all the criminals are who are crazy enough to go up toe to toe with the cities' protectors. Unlike the Rogues, Tell has no real moral codex, and everybody knows that.
“Eh, no problem.” Tell shrugs, still grinning, at the other thug before turning back to Barry, winking at him. "We don't wanna cause any trouble here now, do we?"

Barry doesn't say anything. He feels frozen like he has taken roots at the spot, and a small, scared voice in his head wonders whether Tell is going to make a show now, trying to humiliate him in front of the crowded bar. The notion is pushed aside quickly, though, since Barry knows it won't do him any good if he starts to imagine such things.

Instead, he forces himself to speak, his voice a little craggy. "Y-Your o-ord-der?"

Tell considers him quietly for a couple of seconds before snorting. "You still sound demented."

Barry's cheeks heat up, and he seriously considers getting Charlie, even if the man isn't feeling too well.

Out of the corner of his eye, he notices how someone gets up from a barstool, then. Glancing in that direction, he sees that it is Evan. The man is not moving, only standing there, but he is looking between him and Tell, brows creased into a frown. It is then that the unease Barry feels is replaced by alarm since there is no way Evan could get into a quarrel with Tell without being severely injured, especially without his mirror gun.

It hits Barry, as Evan's eyes stay on Tell and narrow, that the man probably is not aware of who Tell is or how dangerous he is.

"Ah." Tell huffs a chuckle, causing Barry to look back at him. "You've got a babysitter around, after all." He shrugs. "Should have expected as much."

Barry watches Tell turn to Evan, shooting the man a brief, considering look, before smirking and nodding to Barry. "Is our wench here still that good at sucking cock?"

The words are humiliating, like a punch in his guts, but Barry expected the man to say as much. He lowers his eyes, his face burning in shame, and he is hit by the urge to look for a hole to hide in till this is over and Tell is gone again.

He didn't think Charlie's or the Rogues' warnings would really work on the man and his horrible ego, but he hoped it would keep him from a stunt like this one at least.

The bar has considerably quietened down, and Barry knows that everybody's attention is on them now.

He should get Charlie, he knows, but he can't bring himself to move. He can feel all those eyes on him-

"Aye, a'm sure ye wid ken a' aboot how tae sook cock, widn't ye?" Evan says with a scoff, cutting through Barry's thoughts. He turns to the man in surprise, before shooting a glance at Tell, who doesn't look as amused anymore but watches the others man with a mixture of annoyance and confusion.

"What the hell did you just say?" Tell demands but snorts a second later and meets Barry's gaze. "Is your speech impediment contagious now?"

"Aye said ye ur a cocksucker," Evan repeated more clearly this time, which gets him a glare from Tell in response.

"You wanna get funny with me?" Tell asks, voice low and dangerous, though there is a certain
excitement to it that worries Barry.

Evan doesn't seem particularly impressed and just shrugs as he starts to make his way over to where Tell stands. His path is free since all the other customers have backed away.

"Na, ah wid rather giravage mah heavy in peace. Bit ah cannae dae sae as lang as ye keep harassing him." Evan holds Tell's piercing glare as he steps closer to him, but due to him not looking aggressive in the least, Tell seems content to wait and listen.

"That's drolly," Tell replies, his grin wide enough that his eyes crinkle, and he shoots Barry an amused look. "I think he believes you are a dainty flower who needs a strong man like him to look out for you, Allen." He lifts an eyebrow at that, challenging. "Is that true? You can't look out for yourself?" He cackles. "You're really just a pussy after all-"

Tell is cut off by Evan smashing the barrel of a handgun into his left temple with enough force that his legs give out under him for a second.

Barry is so caught off-guard by Evan suddenly pulling a gun on Tell, that he is shaken out of his stupor and makes a step back, just like the crowd of onlookers.

Due to Charlie's no-guns policy, it is unlikely that anybody else has one on them, and Barry is grateful for it because he doesn't need this to turn into an actual shootout and bloodbath.

Despite how Charlie's rule for their clientele to leave their guns at home seemed laughable to Barry at first, considering who tends to visit the Saloon, he has learned by now that it actually works, and nobody seems willing to draw the man's ire.

If Charlie learned of Evan bringing one in regardless, he would undoubtedly ban the criminal for at least a couple of months.

"You fucking-" Tell hisses, but his words are cut off when he is gripped by his throat and pushed onto the bar, with the muzzle of the gun pressed under his chin.

Getting a better look on the weapon, Barry recognizes it as a Glock 19, a common enough model even some of the Rogues keep around, despite their preference to use their own weapons.

"Listen tae me, ye dumb bugger. Ye'r richt, a'm th' man's bodyguard, 'n' ah will pat a bullet in yer ugly mug if ye dinnae stoap bein' a lil' shit." Evan sounds calm, staring Tell down, whom he is still holding in place on top of the bar.

Tell's glare turns from angry to furious, and Barry watches with horror how skin starts to peel off the man's face. "E-Evan-"

Evan pushes the muzzle harder against the other man's chin, with enough force that it will undoubtedly leave an imprint. "Canny thare, buddy, ah doubt yer neat wee powers ur quicker than a bullet."

Tell looks utterly livid then, and Barry is sure that he actually considers for a second to try his luck against Evan and his gun. He isn't an idiot, though, and the skin eventually starts to fold back onto the wet muscle tissue.

"Aye, ah thought sae tae." Evan smirks down at the other man pushing him off the bar top so that he gets onto his feet again. The man is not moving the gun from its spot below Tell's chin.

"C'moan, let's git ye oot o' ere. A'm sure ye'll fin' a crakin' lil' steid tae pish fowk aff somewhere
else, jackass." Evan forces Tell to turn, so that Tell is standing with his back on him and the muzzle of the Glock 19 ends up being pressed against the base of his neck.

Barry watches the whole thing pretty much speechless, that is, until he realizes that Tell will likely try to retaliate the second Evan turns his back to him, and he is sure Evan must know so. Which means that the man doesn’t plan to just throw the guy out onto the streets.

Without hesitation, Barry turns and runs to the back of the bar, up the stairs to where Charlie's apartment lies.

The entrance door is locked like usual, but Charlie hardly needs ten seconds to open it after Barry started to knock urgently.

"What the hell is going on?" Charlie barks, squinting down at Barry with a glare.

"T-Tell i-is h-here a-and th-there's a-a g-g-gun," Barry utters, feeling his face heat up once more since he knows that he doesn't make much sense and has to sound stupid, but Charlie still gets the gist and is past Barry and on his way downstairs just a moment later.

Barry follows close behind, and he is equally worried and relieved when he watches Charlie duck into his office for a moment to get his rifle.

When they enter the bar a second later, Evan and Tell are already outside, and Barry's heart starts to beat against his ribs like crazy as he hopes that it’s not too late.

Charlie pushes his way through the crowd without any trouble, and Barry follows, even though he dreads what he is going to find.

"You fucking wankers!" Charlie bellows the second he steps outside, and his eyes fall onto Evan and Tell, both still no worse for wear much to Barry's relief.

The air outside is crisp and smells of rain, and it helps Barry to clear his mind somewhat as he watches his boss scream at the two thugs, clearly furious.

"I told you, I'd ban your fucking ass for good if you pull such a show again, Tell!"

"I didn't do shit! I was just talking to-"

"And pigs can fly, you little motherfucker!" Charlie cuts the other man off. "You can look for another bar to piss people off from now on! I had it with you!"

"Fuck you! You think you can throw me out for good?! Because of your fag of a b-"

A shot cuts through the air, followed by high-pitched screaming as Tell drops onto his side, pulling his right leg close where he ends up clutching his bleeding knee.

It happened quickly, too quickly for Barry to even really follow, and he feels his stomach drop as his mind catches up with what just happened.

Charlie walks over to where Tell is lying on the ground, hissing a string of profanities while he is trying to bear the pain. His skin starts to peel off his face and arms, but just as he forces his eyes open to shoot Charlie a hateful glare, he is kicked onto his back by the bar owner, with the muzzle of the rifle pointing between his eyes.

"Try it, you little shit." Charlie grunts, meeting his eyes in challenge. "Let's see who’ll get away
alive."

There is pure, blatant hate in Tells eyes as he glares up at Charlie, and Barry is positive for an awfully long moment that this will, after all, end in someone's death.

When another minute or so ticks by, Charlie snorts, glaring down at Tell. "Yeah, not so dumb, after all."

He takes his foot off Tell's chest and steps back but keeps the muzzle pointed at his face.

"You're no longer welcome in this bar, jackass." Charlie declares, and Barry finds it a little strange that he does so once more, but his confusion is quickly replaced by alarm when his boss pulls back his right leg before giving Tell's head a hard-enough kick to knock him out. At least, Barry hopes it just knocked the other man out.

"Fucker," Charlie grumbles and studies the unconscious thug for another second before turning around, glaring at the crowd of onlookers who have been watching the whole spectacle so far. "The bar is closed for tonight. So, scram."

An unhappy, annoyed murmur makes its way through the crowd, but nobody dares to outright protest, and Barry is secretly glad for that decision, though it's already close to one anyway.

No ten minutes later, the bar is empty other than for Evan and Barry. Charlie went upstairs again, and is probably back in bed, by now. He failed to confront Barry or Evan about what was going on earlier, likely due to being in too much pain.

Barry is glad for it, despite feeling bad for his boss. He knows he mishandled the whole situation once again, and it could have gotten a lot messier if his stupor hadn't let go of him the moment it did.

It is more than likely that he will get a dress-down from Charlie tomorrow night, and he doesn't look forward to it.

Even so, he can't deny that he is happy about how things turned out with Tell and that he won't have to worry about the man turning up again in future. He still doesn't understand how exactly Charlie will make sure the man won't be able to return, but right now he just takes the situation at face value.

The whole incident left him exhausted, and he just wants to finish closing and get back to Len.

A part of him keeps worrying about Tell, not about the man's possible revenge, but the fact that he was shot and left outside on the damp street. Reluctantly, Barry keeps shooting glances to the now locked entrance door, and he could kick himself for caring because Tell is a horrible person, someone who gets joy from hurting and demeaning others, but part of Barry still feels concerned, and he can't help it.

There is also the little fact that the police would likely be called should the man end up bleeding to death in front of their bar.

In the end, Barry finds himself walking back to the door. Evan is close behind, probably sensing what he is planning to do.

"Dinna fash yirsel aboot that guy, a'm sure he's gaen awready," Evan tells him, and in Barry's current state of mind, he has trouble to understand what the man is saying. He gets the gist, though.

And Evan is right. Tell is gone when he opens the door to look for him. There is only a puddle of blood left along with a trace leading away.
Barry wonders whether someone of the other criminals helped him or whether he made it on his own.

It doesn't really matter in the end.

They return to the bar, and Barry finishes closing, after handing Evan another beer, without the man asking for it. Evan accepts it readily, of course.

When Barry is done with everything, he takes a seat next to Evan.

"Th-Thank y-you."

Evan shrugs. "Na kinch. Th' guy wis a eejit."

"Eejit?" Barry asks.

"Jackass," Evan explains, sending Barry a smirk.


They fall silent for a little while before Barry turns to Evan once more, considering him with a frown. "D-Do you h-have s-somewh-where t-to s-stay?"

Evan shoots him a surprised look and ends up grinning when he gets what Barry is offering.

"Dinna fash yirsel, ah bade wi' a classy lassie ah git tae ken a while back. A'm guid. Bit cheers," Evan says and snorts when Barry shoots him a confused look at that. "Am Ah really that bad?" He chuckles and repeats. "A'm guid. A'm staying wi' a lady friend, sae dinna fash yirsel."

"Fash yirself?" Barry shoots him an apologetic look, but Evan only grins.

"Worry. Dinne worry."

"I see." Barry nods and is relieved that the man seems to have someone he can stay with and doesn't have to live on the streets again.

They end up sitting together in silence until Evan's beer is finished and the other man takes him over to the hideout.

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Additional notes:

[1] Jade is another Green Lantern Kyle had a relationship for a while.

Na, ah wid rather gilravage mah heavy in peace. Bit ah cannae dae sae as lang as ye keep harassing him. - No, I would rather enjoy my beer in peace. But I can't do so as long as you keep harassing him.

Listen tae me, ye dumb bugger. Ye'r richt, a'm th' man's bodyguard, 'n' ah will pat a bullet in yer ugly mug if ye dinnae stoap bein' a lil' shit. - Listen to me, you dumb fuck. You're right, I am the man's bodyguard, and I'll put a bullet in your ugly face if you don't stop being a little shit.

Canny thare, buddy, ah doubt yer neat wee powers ur quicker than a bullet. - Careful there, buddy, I doubt your neat little powers are faster than a bullet.

Aye, ah thought sae tae. - Yeah, I thought so too.

C'moan, let's git ye oot o' 'ere. A'm sure ye'll fin' a crakin' wee steid tae pish fowk aff somewhere else, jackass. - Come on, let's get you out of here. I'm sure you'll find a nice little place to piss people off somewhere else, jackass.

Dinna fash yirsel aboot that guy, a'm sure he's gaen awready. - Don't worry about that guy, I'm sure he's gone already.

Na kinch. Th' guy wis a eejit. - No problem. The guy was a jackass.

Dinna fash yirsel, ah bade wi' a classy lassie ah git tae ken a while back. A'm guid. Bit cheers. - Don't worry, I stay with a classy lady I got to know a while back. I'm good. But thanks.

A'm guid. A'm staying wi' a mukker, sae dinna fash yirsel. - I'm good. I'm staying with a friend, so don't worry.

Chapter End Notes

So, we had Guy, Kyle, Bruce, and Evan appear in this chapter. Yay! All characters I really enjoy writing and am so looking forward to doing so more in the future. :) I kinda feel bad for Evan. The other Rogues aren't happy to have another member forced onto them, and Evan gets to feel that. Maybe, after this little stunt with Tell to
cover Barry's back, things will change for the better when it comes to the Rogues' opinion of him, though.

It felt quite satisfying having Evan sucker punch Tell, the jerk certainly deserved it with going after Barry once again despite Charlie's warning. Poor Barry froze up like a deer caught in somebody's headlights. It was just too mortifying for him what Tell said in front of the crowded bar, but it wasn't the best reaction. Not that I think I or most other people would have reacted much differently in that situation.

Also, a slight hint from my side regarding what happened towards the end. Charlie's words aimed at Tell about him no longer being welcome at the Saloon have a deeper meaning. They are connected to why the Speedsters or the cops and most heroes were and are not able to find that place. The world is vast and has many secrets. ;)

Poor Guy, he really can't stand Bruce and his superiority, at all, and it does not help that Kyle (like most other heroes) are quite dazzled by the Batman's badassery. This is taken straight from the comics. Guy clashes with about anybody due to his ego and temper, but he and Batman lock horns nearly all of the time. It is quite entertaining.

There is something else I wanna briefly touch upon again regarding the last chapter. In the author's notes, I mentioned that there is something going on with Eobard, and a number of you have some interesting ideas about that. I'm not entirely sure how much I wanna give away (and how easily it is to spot or not), but if you feel bored you can look up Eobard's eye color in the comics (pre New 52 - I honestly have no idea how things currently are since I'm only sporadically following the Flash right now). Just to remind you, this takes place in the comic version of the DCU, the pre New52 (for the most part).

Thanks to all of you who left me feedback for the last chapter. I'm always excited if I get a comment notification, they tend to brighten my mood way better than any coffee ever could! ;)

Next chapter will be a little bit of a game changer. :)

Hope you all are doing well, until then! <3
And The Past Catches Up

Chapter Summary

Barry just wants to go straight to bed after arriving home after a long night at the Saloon. Too bad someone else has other plans for him.

Chapter Notes

My wonderful friend Quintessenzza edited this chapter. He never fails to do an amazing job and to make this story into a much more pleasant read. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry absentmindedly hums to himself as he climbs the stairs to his floor, glad that his latest shift is over, and he can soon go to bed and leave the day behind him.

The lights in the staircase are dim with most bulbs either broken or on their way to be. It causes unease to crawl all over his skin like icy cold fingertips he is all too familiar with, triggering goose bumps to run down his arms and neck. It is a feeling that accompanies him whenever he can’t be sure someone isn’t laying in wait for him somewhere in the dark nooks he is passing. It’s the fear that was beaten into him, at first when he was a child and then all over again when he was put into the Heights, and after coming face to face with Tony Woodward tonight, his mind keeps conjuring up faceless horrors that are watching him wherever he goes.

Barry pulls his light coat firmer around himself, even though the air surrounding him isn’t cold, and fights off a shiver. He really wishes the Rogues weren’t currently doing a job somewhere in San Francisco so that Sam could have picked him up after work as usual.

Barry doesn’t mind traveling home via the public traffic system, especially since it allows him to make use of the annual pass he got from Jay and Joan which he hardly ever does as it is. Tonight, he would have given a lot to just slip away through the mirror in the men’s restroom, though.

Woodward has visited the Saloon a couple of times already, but for some reason, he kept watching him during his whole stay from the moment he spotted him behind the bar tonight. Barry had been sure he would have to deal with the same kind of harassment he had to put up with when Tell passed by before, and a part of him worried that it was due to the other criminal that Woodward was keeping his eyes on him. Double Down and Grider got along well enough, they even tend to team up every once in a while when pulling a bigger thing, and it probably didn't sit well with Woodward that Tell was now banned from the Saloon because of Barry.

Surprisingly, Grider didn’t start taunting him the moment Barry forced himself to face him and asked him for his order. Then again, it is likely that was due to Charlie being there as well, since they had an unusually packed bar tonight, and his boss kept a close eye on them after he noticed the change in Barry’s demeanor.
It is still humiliating to think that Charlie knows about what happened to him in prison, what people like Tell or Woodward did to him, but it offers him some form of additional protection for which he is grateful. Especially after the last incident with Tell a little over a week ago.

Since Charlie touched upon Barry's abuse in prison after Tell’s first disastrous visit, the bar owner made true on his offer to stick around whenever guys who used to go after Barry at the Heights turned up.

Other than for Tell, there haven’t been too many occasions so far. The Saloon turned out to be a bar where rapists don’t tend to frequent, and while Barry never directly asked Charlie about it, he is pretty sure that it is an unspoken rule of his, like the one that criminals aren’t allowed to bring along any weapons or use drugs when coming there.

The big names seem to be an exception, and Barry wonders whether this is due to them being too dangerous for Charlie to tell them to piss off, which seems unlikely considering that he had no problem banning Tell after his last visit.

Frowning, Barry pushes that thought out of his mind, since he is too tired to mull over anything that happened at work, and pulls his keys out to unlock his door.

It has been a long night, one he just wants to forget about.

His apartment is dark and quiet when he enters it a moment later, and he welcomes both after the long shift at the too crowded bar. Pulling the door shut and locking it, Barry lets the serenity of it sweep over him as he leans back against the wood, closing his eyes with a soft sigh.

Finally, now surrounded by his own four walls and a door shutting the rest of the world out, he can feel the strain leave his body and the anxiety ease off a little.

A part of him had been confident that Woodward would come after him. The man stayed till closing came, eying Barry with dark eyes, a nasty smirk on his lips Barry knew all too well, but while the feeling of someone following him, watching him on his way home persisted, he now believes that it was nothing but his nerves.

He just needs some rest, he will feel better after some sleep.

After rubbing his eyes and exhaling a soft, frustrated huff, he reaches for the light switch and freezes.

Someone is standing next to his couch, a familiar figure, clad in black, nearly merging with the dark of his apartment. Even now, that his eyes got somewhat used to the lack of light, it is hard to tell the man apart from the shadows surrounding him, and Barry briefly wonders whether it would have been any easier to spot him if the street light below his kitchen window wasn't broken.

Probably not, the Batman knows how to stay hidden, no matter his surroundings.

Barry feels how his knees go weak, a nearly stifling terror overcoming him for a second before a bone-deep resignation and exhaustion replace it, and his hand that was going for the light switch drops back to his side.

He lets his head rest against the door, watching Bruce through half-lidded eyes and knows he should be more terrified, but he can’t bring himself to be.

It is over. He is going back to prison.

Unlike Jay, Bruce won’t be willing to listen, not to a criminal like him.
A numbness settles over Barry, and he is glad for it because it silences the tumbling, petrified thoughts in his head.

They watch each other in silence; Barry can make out the faint glow of white lenses in the darkness, the familiar coldness that looks back at him from behind the mask.

“What you’re doing is ridiculously reckless, Barry.” The Batman’s voice cuts through the silence and breaks it like a stone would break thin glass.

Barry says nothing, since what is there for him to say?

There is another moment of silence, and even in the dark Barry knows that Batman is frowning, possibly unsatisfied by his lack of response, perhaps just angered by the situation itself.

Damn it.

He should have known that things can’t last, nothing good can last, everything will eventually fall apart and be taken from him.

“I-I c-c-can’t…” Barry’s voice is feeble, strained, and he is surprised to hear it at all since he didn’t say those words consciously.

His legs give out under him, and he slides down the door, feeling lost and helpless as the weight of the world around him seems to press down on him mercilessly.

There is a cell in the Heights with his name on it, has been the moment he left that horrid place, and a part of him has been waiting for this to happen.

“I-I…” Barry glances up, meeting Batman’s eyes who has quietly made his way closer to him so that he is now only about two feet away. He towers over him, dark and broad, intimidatingly so, and for a second Barry tries to make out Bruce behind the mask but fails.

Then, something unexpected happens.

With a soft sigh which sounds just as tired as Barry feels but holds much more frustration, the Batman reaches for his masks and pulls it back.

They stare at each other quietly.

“What the hell are you doing?” Bruce asks, his voice low but not cold or angry. The annoyance still lingers but, much to Barry’s surprise, he also sounds concerned. It seems more like he is talking to himself than to Barry, though.

“Get up,” Bruce tells him, and Barry watches him with a mixture of confusion and unease as his unwanted visitor offers him a gloved hand.

The other man’s frown deepens, and Barry is relieved when he lets his hand drop again and instead makes a step back.

“It will be more comfortable for you if we have this conversation at the table,” Bruce points out, and Barry stares at him, not sure what to make of those words.

“C-C-C…” Barry shivers, pulling his legs closer and glances over to his kitchen table in confusion.

Conversation?
Why would they have a conversation?

A sharp inhale escapes his lips as he realizes what Bruce must mean, what his visit must mean or possibly could mean.

*It’s like with Jay,* Barry thinks, and there is hope in him, though he does not know what he hopes for. A part of him balks at the idea of getting Bruce’s help if that is why he is here, the anger over what has been done to him just too intense, while an even more significant part just feels tired.

“You won’t end up in Iron Heights tonight, but we need to talk, and I need you to be honest with me.”

Not *tonight*…

Barry feels like crying like someone is twisting his insides in a painful grip, and he feels cornered once more, no escape available, not if they don’t want him to.

He only nods.

Getting up is difficult, his head feels light and his legs weak, but he gets to his feet and slowly makes his way over to his kitchenette, his heart is beating up his throat, and he is all too aware of the man behind him.

The offer to make some coffee crosses his mind, but it is only fleeting, and Barry doesn’t even consider it. His hands are shaking badly so he clenches them into fists, ignoring the pain that flashes through his joints. He stops next to the kitchen table, glancing nervously at Bruce.

“Take a seat,” Bruce tells him, and a part of Barry is annoyed because, really, the man has no right to order him around in his apartment. The brief flicker of rebellion surprises Barry since he knows that he is at Bruce’s mercy right now. He stomps down on it, doing as he is told instead with a morose bitterness clinging to him like a heavy weight.

The other man does the same, and for a long moment, neither of them speaks, though Barry, who keeps his gaze fixed on the table in front of him, can feel his former friend observe him. Bruce has always been excellent when it comes to reading people. He can gauge a lot from how a person holds themselves or their expressions, even if they try to school them. He isn’t one of the world’s best detectives for nothing.

Barry never liked it when Bruce studied him like that as if he was some thing to be examined, one of his criminals. There are too many secrets he doesn’t want to give away, and Bruce has no right to learn, not without his permission, not that that ever stopped the man before.

“Did you kill Iris?”

The question is so out of the blue, so unexpected that Barry stills for a long minute before throwing his companion a wary, confused look.

Did he just ask that? Or did Barry imagine it? His mind feels light, jumbled, and he doesn’t think he can trust it too much right now.

“Did you kill your wife?” Bruce repeats, meeting his eyes firmly, and Barry feels like his stomach is dropping as he realizes he has just been asked that question.

He feels tired.
“N-No,” Barry merely replies, his voice craggy and hardly more than a whisper, and breaks their eye contact as he looks back down at the table surface.

“Did you sexually abuse Wally?” Bruce’s voice is void of emotions, there is no accusation but also no sympathy, he sounds clinical, and Barry hates him for that just then.

An involuntary shiver runs through Barry. He fights the urge to sneak his arms around himself, too proud to show himself this vulnerable in front of Bruce.

He can’t answer, his voice gave out on him, but he shakes his head in a silent no.

A long pause passes as Barry keeps his eyes locked on the table in front of him, trying to ignore the traitorous itching in them or the lump that has formed in his throat, along with the desperation and humiliation that have started to eat away at him again.

Bruce had once been his friend, his closest friend, closer than Hal in some regards, and now he is nothing but a stranger whose motivations are a riddle to him.

A part of Barry can’t help but think that Bruce merely is here to taunt him and make him miserable, because why else would he ask these questions?

Swallowing with some difficulty, Barry closes his eyes and wishes the other man would finally tell why he has come. He doesn’t want to go back to prison, there is probably nothing he wants to do less, but sitting here in this oppressive silence with Bruce wordlessly watching him is getting harder to take by the second.

“What was done to Iris and Wally speaks of someone who holds a personal grudge against you or them,” Bruce elaborates, “and while it is possible that they could have been the prime targets, I doubt it. It seems much more likely whoever did this wanted to get to you.”

Barry is speechless. He stares at Bruce, unable to formulate a single word and hardly aware of what he is saying in the first place. His mind feels slow, thick, like molasses, and he is still stuck with the revelation that Bruce could be open to the possibility of someone else being responsible for what was done to his family.

At the Watchtower, before Barry was sent back to the harbor, Bruce asked him whether he was doing okay, an absurd question that nearly felt mean-spirited to Barry back then, but now he wonders whether the other man has been honestly concerned.

“I have been looking into your case for a while now,” Bruce says, a grim expression returning to his face as he clasps his gloved hands and keeps studying him carefully. "And I have started to doubt that we made the right conclusion concerning you and the role you played in that whole miserable affair.”

“Wh-What…” Barry swallows, his throat feels too tight and dry, and the urge to cry and to laugh starts to play a tug-of-war with him.

Bruce’s eyes are sharp and hard as he observes him, his lips pressed into a thin line, and he seems hesitant for the briefest moment before he eventually goes on, “I think we made a mistake, Barry. I
don’t think it was you who killed Iris or went after Wally. I believe there is someone or something else at play here, and their actual target was you from the very beginning.”

Barry blinks, still unable to make heads or tails of what he has just heard.

Does Bruce believe him? Does he believe in his innocence?

“I will speak to Diana and Clark, we need to repeat the questioning with the lasso, but I want J’onn to be there as well. He will be able to tell whether something is interfering with your mind while you’re answering.” Bruce frowns then, looking annoyed but sorry at the same time, which is an odd combination on his face. “I need you to stay away from the Rogues, though. You being in contact with them only makes this whole situation unnecessarily more complicated, and it will be difficult enough to convince the others to agree to another questioning.” His look hardens as he adds, “I don’t understand how you can be this stupid, Barry, even if this wasn’t about rehabilitating your name, you have to be aware of how dangerous it is to cozy up with Snart. Especially if Wally learns of it.”

Cozy up with…

How does Bruce know about that-

“Y-You’re sp-spying o-on m-me…” Barry whispers, suddenly feeling out of breath, and it is as if a bucket of cold water is emptied over him. Unconsciously, he glances around, trying to find possible spots where Bruce could have hidden surveillance cameras and other bugs as the realization that he could have been spied on for who knows how long really hits him. It is sickening.

Did he listen to the conversations he had with Len? To the ones, he had with Eddy and the others? To the one with Jay when he lost it?

The humiliation is nearly smothering, but only for a moment, because then he is overcome by anger that is almost painful in its intensity, and it is a good thing he has nothing close to him he could grasp since he would have chucked it into Bruce’s face.

“Y-Y-You…” His throat doesn’t want to work, his upset state doesn’t help there, and it is so damn frustrating.

He had no right!

“Y-You a-a-assh-hole,” Barry hisses, and he ignores how his eyes start to sting as he glares at the other man, feeling just as betrayed as he did back when Bruce turned his back on him.

“I had my suspicions that you weren’t following your parole restrictions,” Bruce calmly states, and he doesn’t look angry per se, but it is apparent that he doesn’t like Barry’s reaction.

What did he expect? That Barry will be okay with that?

“And it seems my suspicions turned out justified, considering who you decided to spend your free time with.” Bruce doesn’t sound sorry, not that Barry expected him to, but it is still infuriating and painful.

“You have to stop meeting with them,” Bruce repeats, “and you have to stop working at the Saloon-”

“N-No,” Barry protests, clenching his fists in frustration. “Y-You’ve g-got n-no r-right t-to a-ask th-th-th-that o-of m-me.”
“I’m not asking,” Bruce replies, watching him grimly. “You have to stop putting yourself in such a vulnerable position, especially now. If you want your name cleared, then you have to think about what you’re doing and what consequences it can have. The others won’t like the idea of giving you another chance to defend yourself as it is, should one of them learn that you’re buddy ing up with the Rogues, you can be certain that things will get a lot dire for you than they already are.”

Is Bruce threatening him?

The notion should terrify him, but Barry can’t bring himself to be scared, not now, not when it feels like he is going to rip at his seams due to the anger that is pulsing inside his chest.

“Wh-What ch-ch… ch-chance t-to d-def-f-fend m-mys-self?” Barry asks bitterly. “Y-You d-d-didn’t h-hear m-me o-out, y-you d-d-didn’t l-l-let m-me t-try a-and e-exp-plain m-mys-self a-at a-all. Y-You j-j-just p-put th-th-e l-las-so a-ar-round m-my w-w-wrist a-and l-locked m-me a-aw-way i-in…” He swallows when bile rises in the back of his throat at the notion of that horrible place.

“We mishandled the whole situation,” Bruce agrees, through a rather cold look has returned to his eyes, like he was locking Barry and the rest of the world out, unwilling to give away his actual emotions. “No matter whether you are guilty or not, we should have given you a chance for a fair trial, and I am truly sorry that we didn’t.”

Whether he was guilty?

So, Bruce doesn't believe in his innocence? Or is he just too damn proud to outright allow himself to be mistaken? Damn him and his arrogance! In moments like this, Barry regrets having met that man at all!

“I d-don’t n-need y-you t-to… t-to c-clear m-my n-name,” Barry says, talking around the lump is challenging but doable, and he ignores the tears he can feel in his eyes, the hurt and anger are too intense for him to care about anything else.

Bruce is a damn coward! He can’t even be there for him now that he knows that they were wrong, and Barry doesn’t doubt that he already made up his mind in that regard. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be here.

“Barry-” Bruce sounds surprised, incredulous even, clearly not expecting that, but Barry ignores him and presses on.

“M-My p-par-role e-ends i-in a-a y-year,” Barry reminds Bruce. “I-I w-will b-be a-able t-to l-live a-a n-n-norm-mal l-life a-ag-gain a-afterw-w-wards, a-a-and I-I d-don’t g-g… g-give a-a d-damn a-a-bout m-my n-name b-being c-cleared b-b-by y-you o-o-or a-an-ny o-of th-th-e o-oth-thers.”

“You will still be an ex-criminal who was convicted of murdering his wife and abusing his nephew,” Bruce points out, coldly. “Everybody will go on believing that, and even if the parole is over, this will follow you anywhere. Just because you’ve your parole behind you doesn’t mean that it vanishes from your records, people will still think-”

“I-I d-d-don’t c-c-care,” Barry yells, stumbling to his feet, knocking his chair off. “S-Screw y-y-you a-and e-ever-ryb-body e-els-se! Y-You l-lot m-me r-rot i-i-in th-that h-hellh-hole f-for s-sev-ven y-years a-a-d d-d-didn’t g-give a-a d-damn ab-b-bout wh-what h-hap-pened t-to m-me th-th... th-there! Y-You’ve n-n-no r-right t-to a-as-as-a-an-y-th-th… a-an-yth-th-thing f-from m-me, B-Bruce! Y-You a-a-and a-all th-th-e r-rest o-o-of y-you a-ab-bandoned m-m-me I-I w-was n-noth-th-th-thing...” Tears start to run down his cheeks, and Barry hates himself for it, for not being able to keep it together just now when it really counts. He doesn’t want Bruce to see how hurt and broken he is.
“L-Like w-we w-weren’t f-friends…” Barry grits out, squeezing his eyes shut, and tries to ignore the pain in his chest, the hopelessness and sadness that have settled there, enclosing his heart like icy sheets.

A tense, heavy silence follows in which Barry can only hear himself pant as he tries to regain control over his emotions.

“The Rogues aren’t your friends.” The words are calm and don’t hold ire or sharpness, but they still feel like a punch to his guts.

Bruce meets his angry glare quietly for a moment before he proceeds, “Maybe they treat you like that right now, but we both know that they will leave you behind once you become too much trouble or Snart grows bored with you.”

It hurts, being told that, and Barry feels his face grow hot in embarrassment and anger.

“Y-You kn-know n-nothing a-ab-bout th-them,” Barry returns, his voice hardly more than a whisper, and he hates Bruce this very moment, really hates him, because the man has always been good at finding another person’s insecurities and using those against them.

“They are criminals,” Bruce points out as if that was enough proof for his claim.

“Th-They a-are g-good p-peop-ple.”

“No, they aren’t. They are thieves and murderers; they don’t care about other people, especially ones like you.”

_They do_, Barry wants to argue but can’t bring himself to.

Bruce is right, but it is more complicated than that. The Rogues, Len, and the others are much more than just one-dimensional villains, and he is pretty sure Bruce knows so, too. The other man only wants to catch him off-balance, get him to doubt himself and maybe reconsider.

“It will be up to you who you spend your time with once things have been cleared up. I doubt that anybody will give you any grief over seeking out your Rogues gallery for comfort if you could find it there, Barry,” Bruce says, and while he doesn’t sound happy, he seems honest enough about it and not like he only says so to pacify Barry a little. “We’ll have more than enough to make up for to you as it is.”

Barry returns Bruce’s stern gaze and feels how the anger and fight slowly seep out of him as it is replaced by a mixture of disbelief and hope.

Is this actually happening?

Why? Why now?

Bruce knows something, Barry is sure of it, but he doubts that the other man will share his suspicion with him, no matter that this is about his life. It is infuriating, but Barry can’t bring himself to care enough to ask about it. He suddenly feels very, very tired once more.

“I-I w-won’t qu-quit,” Barry says and surprises himself doing so. “A-And I-I w-w-won’t s-stop s-s-seeing m-my f-friends.” The glare Bruce gives him in return should be intimidating, but Barry can only huff a humourless chuckle and shrug. “D-D-Don’t w-worry, I-I’ll m-make s-sure th-that n-none o-of th-them c-come o-over a-anym-more.” He averts his eyes and frowns into the darkness of his living room. “I-I’ll t-try t-to s-spend a-as l-lit-tle t-time h-here a-as I-I c-can.”
Bruce doesn’t respond right away, but Barry can feel his gaze, he knows that he is being studied. He wonders whether Bruce will persist in trying to get him to cut his ties with his friends, he hopes he doesn’t. If Bruce wants him to stay away from the Rogues or the Saloon, there is little Barry can do about it, no matter his bravado.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Bruce tells him. “You’d throw your freedom away for them?”

“My freedom…” Barry smiles sadly and shrugs. “It isn’t really mine to throw away or not, is it?”

Another pause, it lies thick between them, like cotton.

“I need to keep an eye on you,” Bruce insists, and Barry hears him shift and get up, which in turn causes him to tense up and shoot him an uneasy glance. The other man ignores the flicker of fear if he has noticed it, and instead goes on. “I won’t fight you over the Rogues and the Saloon, if you are innocent, I owe you this much, but I still need to keep tabs on you, especially now, so try to keep your time over at their boltholes to a minimum.”

Confused, Barry frowns and asks, “Wh-Why? Wh-What do you mean?”

Bruce doesn’t reply right away as he seems to consider his words.

“If there is someone else behind all of this,” Bruce finally says, “do you think they are just going to stand by and watch how all their work is undone?”

It takes Barry’s groggy mind a couple of seconds to understand what the other man just said, but when he does, he can feel the blood drain from his face.

“Y-You think someone…”

The mere idea is grotesque in its horridness, but it isn’t a stranger to him.

At times, when he felt particularly depressed and hopeless, he wondered whether something more than bad luck could be at play when it comes to what happened to him and his family.

“Considering what happened, it seems likely that someone singled you out,” Bruce agrees and reaches for his cowl. “I still think you would make all of this a lot easier for us if you stopped seeing the Rogues, at least till I convinced Diana and Clark about re-questioning you.”

Barry should say something, ask questions, there are so many in his head right now, enough that they tumble over each other and seem to become louder and more frenzied by the second, but he can only stare at the other man with a growing sense of detachment.

Is this happening?

Is Bruce in his apartment, offering to help him clear his name instead of dragging him back to the Heights for his relationship with the Rogues?

Did Bruce just tell him that there is someone out there who is responsible for what happened to him, Iris and Wally and that this person could still be after him? Someone dangerous and powerful enough to influence the likes of Zatanna and J’onn?

“Keep your head down and stay out of trouble,” Bruce orders him, and it is meant as an order, but unlike before, Barry can’t bring himself to feel angered by it. He only nods wordlessly.
“I need to know whether we made a mistake back then, Barry,” Bruce tells him firmly, “and if we did, I want you to get your life back.”

Barry doesn’t say anything to that.

What is there to say?

Bruce knows just as well as he does that he will never get his life back, not the one from back then, not the one in which he still had Iris and Wally. It was taken from him and is no more than a faint, painful memory.

“I’ll stay in touch.” Bruce walks around the table, past Barry, to the window above his kitchen sink, and Barry watches him as he climbs onto the fire escape, moving swiftly and quietly.

The Batman is out of sight a moment later, and Barry finds himself alone in his apartment once again.

A part of him wants to go to his bedroom and contact the others, ask Len to come over so he can talk with someone about what just happened, but he doesn’t know whether they are already done or still on the job. The thought of having any of the Rogues over while Bruce has his apartment bugged doesn’t sit well with him either, and as Barry considers the possibility of going over to Eddy instead to find some company, he realizes with a dreadful certainty that his friend’s secret is no longer a secret either.

“D-Damn i-it, B-Bruce,” Barry whispers and rubs his face in frustration.

Eddy is going to freak out when he learns of this, and Barry already feels like a jackass for being responsible for that, even if unwittingly so.

Exhausted and feeling a headache approach, Barry decides to go to bed. He will talk with the others tomorrow at work, after they are safely back from their job, and maybe then he can really work through what just happened.

What a miserable night.

Chapter End Notes

So, it seems Bruce decided to pay Barry a visit, after all. Huh. I wonder what Zatanna will think of that.

At least, the conversation between those two did not go as bad as it could have gone. Barry didn’t end up back in the Heights. Yay for that… though, he probably isn’t happy with Bruce’s demands either.

Bruce probably comes across a little bit like a jerk towards the end of this chapter. That is mostly due to him still not being entirely willing to face the fact that he messed up big times when it comes to Barry. If you think about it, Bruce is a little bit of a control-freak, and the idea of someone else manipulating him and the others in such a way is something he isn’t sure how to deal with. It does not help that he and the other league members pretty much doomed Barry to live through hell without any aid, and a part of him just doesn’t want or can’t deal with that kind of guilt. At least, right now, when
there is still the possibility of them having been right all along.

All in all, it was real fun to write this chapter, despite its rather dark tone. I’m glad we’ve finally reached this point of the story. Things have started to move, and it won’t be long before we’re reaching the finale of part one. It’s so weird to think that we’re nearly at the half-way point of the overall story…

Anyway, my notes are a little bit short this time around, but I’m still at work and wanna post this chapter now because I’m rather busy right now due to some upcoming exams.

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, and I’m always happy about feedback! :) 

Next chapter, Batman’s favorite GL will make an appearance again.

Until then! <3
Chapter Summary

With the status quo turned on his head, Barry finds himself feeling lonely and uncertain about his place among his friends. He also gets a visitor who doesn’t help with his anxiousness.

Chapter Notes

A shout-out and lots of thanks to Quintessenzza for editing this chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Barry quietly hums to himself as he walks the block that leads up to his apartment building, hardly picking up on the faint drizzle that has been accompanying him since he left his home about twenty minutes ago.

The weather has gotten a little cool over the last week, a break from the late summer heat that persisted for nearly two months since the beginning of July. He appreciates the slight drop in temperatures, like most residents of the Twins do, but it still makes going outside more uncomfortable for him than usual. The cold and moist air causes a faint but persisting throb in his joints whenever he is outside for too long, and even though his small shopping trip didn't take up too much time, he still has to shift the shopping bag from one hand to the other every once in a while.

Barry didn't really need to pick up anything, he still has another carton of milk in his fridge waiting to be opened, and he doesn't really feel like preparing anything that would require more than he already has at home. It is Monday, though, and he feels like he is going stir-crazy.

It's been a slow day so far, with him not having to go to work, he has mostly spent today on the couch, dozing and flipping through a couple of magazines Mary lent him about a week ago. His mind has been restless, though, and he couldn't really concentrate on any article so that he eventually decided to get up and go out. Barry really just wanted to get out of his apartment and get some fresh air, clear his head, his thoughts have felt oppressive more often than not lately, especially when he only had himself as company.

Barry tries not to feel too bitter over why he is alone right now, despite it being his day off. Usually, Len would be over, and they would spend the day together, or he would be at the hideout, being among people he started to consider family a while ago.

There is nobody in his apartment waiting for him, though, and nobody would pass by anytime soon, not even Mary or Eddy.

It is not like they didn’t want to come over. Well, Eddy certainly doesn’t like the idea of being spied on, particularly by the Batman, but even he assured Barry that this doesn’t change anything between them.
They are still his friends.

It is Barry who wants them to stay away. He is worried that this will somehow cause them all trouble in the long run, should things go south for him once more, and the cynical part of him is only waiting for this to happen.

Now, looking back at it, he sincerely regrets on letting Eddy in on his secret past. It worries him what this could mean for his friend if the wrong people learned of it. Barry can't help but think of what was done to him, the nanites and the pain, and he wonders whether Eddy would stand a chance any more than he did.

Barry chases that depressing thought out of his mind and instead focuses on the wet ground in front of his feet.

Mary, who initially didn’t understand what was going on when Barry asked her not to go by his apartment anymore, is clearly worried for him, especially now that he ended up telling her about his past as the Flash. She is her usual sweet and understanding self. She offers her support by briefly checking up on him every day, with them exchanging nothing more than a couple of words, and her ending up leaving him with some small treat, like a cup of hot chocolate or fresh cookies.

Despite everything, Barry is glad that Eddy had eventually convinced him that keeping her in the dark won’t make it any safer for her.

“She won’t use it against you,” Eddy pointed out, a little frustrated after Barry kept insisting on not telling her. He sought out Eddy the day after Bruce had turned up in his apartment and informed him about what happened, the guilt over giving his friend’s secret away by accident dragging him down like a lead weight.

“I-I kn-know sh-she w-won’t,” Barry told him somewhat irritated because he never even considered the possibility of her doing something like that. “I-I t-trust h-her l-l-like I-I t-trust y-you, b-but i-if I-I t-tell h-her sh-she w-will b-be p-pulled i-int-o a-all o-of th-this a-and I-I…”

He broke off, unsure how to express his worries over what potentially could happen to her in case the league came after him.

His conversation with Bruce left him feeling confused and shaken, and the possibility that some of the most powerful beings of this planet had been manipulated into seeing him as their enemy scares him to no end.

What if they decided that not only he was their enemy but so were the people he frequented with?

Eddy was a speedster after all, what would keep them from doing the same thing to him they did to Barry?

Mary might be around him a lot, but she didn’t know about his past, and this lack of knowledge could eventually keep her safe from severe repercussions.

“I understand, Bar, I really do,” Eddy assured him with a sad and grim look, “but Mary would want to be there for you as well, just like I do. Wouldn’t you want her to tell you if your positions were reversed?”

Barry averted his eyes to his lap at that, feeling guilty and tired.

Eddy, who was sitting next to him on the other man’s couch, heaved a sigh while rubbing his hand over his face.
“Damn, this is a messed-up situation,” Eddy pointed out, not for the first time. Even so, he had taken it surprisingly well when Barry had informed him about what was going on. He hadn’t freaked out at all despite how undoubtedly unsettling this revelation had been for him.

A small part of Barry expected his friend to kick him out, but Eddy didn’t.

Of course, he didn’t. But maybe he should have...

His friend only briefly blinked out of sight when he searched his apartment for any bugs that could have found their ways in there as well.

It hadn’t really come as a surprise when he came up with a couple in the end, but it infuriated Barry nonetheless.

After Eddy had made sure his home was clear of any unwanted eavesdropping, he offered Barry to search his apartment for him as well, but Barry declined, seeing that Bruce would not take kindly to his equipment being vibrated to dust by a speedster.

Despite Eddy making sure that there were no more bugs around, Barry kept feeling uneasy, like he was still being watched. It was most likely only his nerves, though.

He wished they could go to Mary’s place, but the nagging suspicion that Bruce didn’t keep from spying on her either wouldn’t leave him alone. Eddy had already offered to search her apartment as well, and the thought of him doing so without her knowledge didn’t sit well with Barry.

“Don’t let me guilt you into making a decision, okay?” Eddy asked, pulling Barry’s attention back to him. His friend considered him with a frown. “I don’t like any of this, but I’m there for you no matter what you decide to do, because that’s what family does.”

The words caught Barry off-guard, though they probably shouldn’t have, and he felt his eyes tear up in response, touched and grateful that he had been lucky enough to cross paths with the other man.

Family...

Barry swallowed thickly and reached up to rub his eyes, not surprised at all to feel the unshed tears there, as he considered Eddy’s words.

They are family.

Eddy and Mary, just like the Rogues, Bart, and Axel. It caught him off-guard as he realizes that despite everything else going on in his life, all the messed-up things that kept happening to him, he never had a family this big before in his life.

He nearly chuckled at this thought, it filled him with a pleasant warmth, and before he realized what he is doing, he said, hoarsely, “Y-You a-are m-my f-fam-mily...” He met Eddy’s eyes and gave him a watery, grateful smile. “I-I c-could-dn’t a-as-f-for a b-bet-ter o-one.”

Eddy blushed at that, looking both pleased and a little embarrassed like he always did when things got too emotional for his liking.

“Well, you’re not too bad yourself,” Eddy allowed and cracked a smile when Barry chuckled at that.

It was probably drawing his attention to how important those people in his life really are, that convinced Barry to let Mary in on his past as the Flash in the end.
Mary did take all the information in with a surprising composure, being more horrified about the things that happened to Barry than concerned about the possibility of getting in trouble over this.

Barry is glad he told her, despite how he still isn’t entirely sure whether it was the right thing to do. At least, now he doesn’t need to make up excuses to keep her from visiting him, but her absence in his apartment is still strongly felt.

It’s not like she and Eddy are gone from his life, neither of them intends to abandon him over this, but Barry still hasn’t seen much of them over the last week, and he knows that it is solely on him. He keeps avoiding them and tries to shut them out, despite knowing that they want to be there for him.

They are good friends, despite his attempts to keep them at a distance, they continue to pass by, but Barry can’t but declining their invitations to come over or for them to stick around, even if only for a little while. He isn’t sure whether it is only due to him not wanting to get them into trouble or…

Or because he is afraid of them inevitably turning their back on him.

Like all the others eventually did.

Barry hates himself a little for doing so, for pushing them away even though he knows that this isn’t helping anybody, but the fear of losing them is too intense.

He is not stupid, he knows what is going on, that he is on the way to sabotage their friendship all on his own, and it wouldn’t make the pain any more bearable. Part of him doesn’t want to be left behind again, though. He is afraid of it nearly more than the Justice League coming after him again.

Eddy told him that they are family, and Barry believes him, but… but a part of him does not. Or, rather, he doubts that this will make a difference in the end.

Jay and Joan were family too, so were Bruce and Hal, and look what happened with them.

Eventually, everybody will leave you, a voice whispers to Barry, and he finds himself at a loss to argue with it.

Maybe things will be different this time, maybe Bruce will find a way to prove his innocence.

Will this change anything, though?

It will at least when it comes to his status as an ex-convict and how his name being cleared will make things easier for him, but Barry also worries whether this won’t just cause something else to go horribly wrong.

Good things never last, and he has had the support of Mary and Eddy for so long now that he doesn’t know what he will do should he lose it.

You’re on the best way to find out, Barry thinks bitterly but hopes that he is wrong and that both his friends understand why he is doing what he is doing now. Neither Eddy nor Mary seems to be angry when he turns them away, only sad and worried, and yet they haven’t stopped checking up on him.

The same goes for the Rogues. It is hard for Barry to try and distance himself from them when some of them are sticking around the Saloon every time he is working there these days.

It’s like they want to show him that this change of events doesn’t matter, that they are still there for him, a constant presence in his life, and Barry truly loves them for it.
After Bruce’s visit and him telling Len and the others about it, he wasn’t sure what to expect. He didn’t outright mention his past as their enemy, but he just as well could have spelled it out. They all knew why the Batman was onto him and thus them, and why he was being spied on.

This conversation happened in the back of the Saloon, in the small room Barry uses to take his breaks when he doesn’t sit with his friends or needs a breath of fresh air. He had refused to come over to the hideout, just telling Len briefly that he needed to talk with him and that he can’t use Sam’s assistance to travel via the mirror verse anymore.

Bruce didn’t mention the Mirror Master or Barry’s tendency to travel via mirrors these days, but Barry knows that he doesn’t want any recording of himself being caught doing so, even if it probably won't change a thing considering he has been spied on for a while now.

Not knowing where the bugs were hidden in his apartment set his teeth on edge, he felt naked and vulnerable, like he had no privacy all over again.

It doesn’t help that he knows that there is footage of him and Len.

Len, of course, was furious, in a cool, calm kind of way that worried Barry, even though it wasn’t aimed at him.

Barry felt horrible at that moment, telling his friends about how one of the big three was now onto them as well because of him. He expected them to flip out over it, at least a little, seeing that having to deal with Batman is not exactly peanuts, but while they were visibly stunned and unsettled, the expected accusations or anger directed toward him stayed out.

“I-I c-c-come o-ov-er a-an-nym-more,” Barry told Len, feeling shaken up and so upset at that notion that familiar nausea has started to cling to him. “I-I’ve t-to k-keep a-a l-low p-prof-
file…” Which was a stupid thing to say considering that he decided to keep working at the Saloon.

That way he could see them, though. There were no bugs, and he doesn’t need to worry about his interactions with them and with Len in particularly ending up on some record.

It wouldn’t do anything for his case if Bruce decided to go after him in the end, but Barry just couldn’t cut them out entirely. He didn’t want to give up this life he created for himself, he liked working at the Saloon, too, despite the many drawbacks that came with it.

“I know,” Len quietly agreed as he stepped closer to him with a grim expression, causing Barry to tense up in response despite knowing that he didn’t need to fear his friend.

He didn’t…

Then, Len caught him off-guard.

His partner laid his arm around him and pulled him closer, urging him lightly, till Barry ended up resting against him, his head on his shoulder.

“It will be okay,” Len assured him, rubbing his back lightly, and it was then, resting against him, that Barry realized how strongly he was trembling. “You’ll be fine.”

Barry’s eyes teared up, and he squeezed them shut as he turned his head so he could bury his face in the crook of Len’s neck, breathing in the familiar, musky smell of his partner.

“I-I’m s-so s-s-sor-ry…” Barry whispered, his voice raw and coarse.
“It’s okay.” Len pressed his lips against the side of Barry’s head, his breath warm in his hair as he continued, “This isn’t your fault, and we’ll not just get up and disappear.” He moved one of his hands up and squeezed his neck lightly, reassuringly. “We’ll wait and see, and we’ll do what the Bat wants, but if it turns out that he or one of the other capes wants to cause you any troubles over this, I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

It was a promise, and while Barry knew he should protest, he couldn’t bring himself to.

He couldn’t go back to the Heights, he wouldn’t be able to live through that hell all over again.

“Th-Th-Thank y-you…”

Barry loves Len, he has known so for a while, but it really just hit him at that moment how deeply. It makes being not able to see him as much as he used to even harder to deal with.

Absentmindedly, Barry stops humming the tune of the song he picked up on the radio sometime yesterday during work and frowns unhappily, his steps slow down as he reaches his apartment building.

The thought of returning to his apartment fills him with unease.

He doesn’t want to be left alone with his thoughts again.

Not that there is much he can do about it.

Barry sighs softly and proceeds on, reminding himself that he could keep himself busy with cleaning and by doing his laundry. He got himself new bedding the other day, which still must be washed before he could use it.

It is only a small thing, but it still helps to cheer him up a little since he was looking forward to sleeping in a soft material, a luxury he wouldn’t have allowed himself in the past.

Since Charlie gave him a raise a bit over a month ago, he is able to afford a little more expensive items for himself, like better food and that new bedding. Some of his money still goes to Axel and his education. Despite Jay and Joan mostly paying for the boy these days, he still insists on bearing at least a part of his education costs.

It is nice to know that the teen has now things he couldn’t have before, like better clothes, a smartphone, and such luxuries. Axel even has his own PlayCube over at the Garrick’s, along with his own room and a lot of other things ordinary teenager his age do.

The boy still had put effort into being around every other day before Bruce turned up, but with his apprentice and Barry’s working hours it wasn’t that easy for them to spend a lot of time together anymore.

It is saddening to see the kid less even though he should be happy for him as Axel is now receiving an excellent education which also means a promising future.

The last time Barry was over at the Rogues’ current hideout, Len offered to get him a cat out of the blue. At first, Barry really didn’t understand how his partner came up with that idea until Roscoe, who had been sitting not too far away from them at the couch, reading one of his scientific journals, looked over at the other Rogue with a distinctly supercilious look.

“You do realize that a cat will hardly be able to console him over the little brat starting to spread his
Both men started to trade insults afterward, and left Barry feeling both touched as well as somewhat amused by Len’s offer.

The staircase is dimly lit as Barry enters it. A few rowdy teenagers, one of the younger tenants had over a couple of nights ago, decided it would be fun to break most of the few still working lights. It usually takes the owner of this building quite some time to fix things, which is why Barry doesn’t expect this to change anytime soon. That doesn’t help with the unease that comes with having to climb the stairs to his apartment in nearly utter darkness.

His floor has only a single functional bulb left, which Barry hates since his mind conjures up a lot of threats that could hide in the dark corners. He is good at dismissing those thoughts most of the time since he is used to his mind playing tricks on him.

This is also why he feels utterly unprepared as his gaze falls upon someone standing in front of his door as he reaches his floor. His stomach drops painfully at that view.

The silhouette doesn’t fit either Eddy or Mary, and it is out of question that it could be one of the Rogues. They only travel via mirrors these days.

Briefly, with a growing sense of fear, Barry wonders whether it could be Jay or Max, but they would have said something by now to greet him and let him know beforehand-

“Hey, Allen, you got stuck over there or something?” His visitor says in an exasperated tone, causing Barry to jump in response. “Seriously man, move it. I’ve been waiting for you in this ill-lit shithole for about an hour now, and this has probably been long enough for me to catch something.”

Guy Gardner is probably one of the last people Barry expected to meet here. The other man seems to see nothing wrong with turning up at his doorstep without notifying him beforehand about it. This doesn’t really surprise Barry, but it is still disconcerting, mainly because he never gave the man his address. Then again, it isn’t hard to guess how he got to it since probably every member of the JLA knows where he lives these days.

That isn’t a very comforting thought, and he shakes it off, bringing his mind back to the matter at hand.

“What is it? Come on, you want me to ask you nicely?” Guy huffs, looking annoyed as if Barry was keeping him waiting on purpose. “OK, then, pretty please, Allen, save me from having to spend any more time in this gloomy corridor than I have so far.”

Hal’s voice is suddenly in Barry’s head, causing well-known pain and sorrow to settle in his chest as he remembers his former friend. He recalls how the man once told him about that new Green Lantern, Guy, who was, according to him, the personification of a prick. Barry can understand where Hal was coming from now and forces himself to move.

Guy steps aside so that Barry can unlock the door and follows him in without waiting for an invitation. It hardly is as if he needs one seeing that Barry isn’t in the position to do anything about it.

“Wow and I thought I live in a dump.” Guy whistles in mock recognition and starts to look around with a wrinkled nose, causing Barry to feel ashamed even though the other man has no right to do so.

Barry brings his bag of groceries to his kitchen table and watches somewhat uncertainly how his unwanted guest walks around his living room as if he owns it. It is daunting, and he is sure that Guy
is very much aware of that.

“This has to be one of the saddest little holes I have ever seen,” Guy comments after some minutes of looking around. He scoffs and turns to Barry with a frown. “Please tell me you have at least a television in your bedroom. Otherwise, I will break down crying in horror and pity right now.”

Barry keeps quiet, and Guy seems to come to his own conclusions from it which causes him to bark a laugh and shake his head in disbelief.

“How can anybody not own a telly these days? What is this? Some kind of penance for what you did?” He scoffs at that, smirking. “Seriously, that is just overkill.”

Suddenly, Barry is angry, and before he even realizes what he is doing, his hands slam down the kitchen table while he fixates the other man with a furious glare.

“R-really!? D-do y-you r-rell-ly th-think th-that!?” He hisses, upset enough that talking becomes a chore again, but he presses on nonetheless. “T-that, a-although y-you th-think I-I d-d-did th-those h-hor-rid t-things, n-not h-h-hav-ving a-a T-T-V i-is t-t-too m-much!? W-what i-is w-wrong w-w-with y-you!? Y-you th-think w-what ha-hap-p-pened t-to W-Wa-Wally i-is a-a j-j-jok-ke-”

The last word has hardly left Barry’s mouth when the other man is suddenly at his side, way quicker than he would have thought possible, and his arm is in a harsh grip that causes him to wince in pain.

“Listen to me, you little sicko-” Guy pulls him closer so that he is all up in Barry’s face, whose eyes grow wide in fear when he notes the fury and disgust on his face. “I don’t give a fuck what someone like you has to say on this matter. You really think you have any right to preach about taking this shit seriously? I know Wally, and he may be a prick most of the time but what you did to him takes every right away from you to preach to me about what’s right or wrong.”

The grip on his arm grows painfully firm, and for a brief moment, Barry’s mind flashes back to when Wally attacked him at the art gallery.

Barry closes his eyes and turns his head away. The pain is palpable on his face.

A moment ticks by in a tense, aggressive silence, and Barry waits for the inevitable punch to follow.

He should have kept his mouth shut, he knows better than talking back.

At least he thought so.

Then, to his utter surprise, Guy just lets go of him.

Barry has to brace himself against the table to not sink to the ground with how weak his knees feel. A shiver runs through him, as he fights the dizziness that has settled over him like a massive, stifling blanket, and consequences may be damned, but right now he wishes he had decided to go over to Len and the others instead today.

Silence settles between them, and when Barry is finally able to bring himself to look to the other man again, he is confused to note that there is a slightly bewildered expression on Guy’s face.

The man looks taken aback as if he was surprised by his own reaction to him.

Wearily, Barry closes his eyes and takes a slow, deep breath to fight the tingle of nausea off that is now clinging to the back of his throat. Suddenly this is too much. He is exhausted and just doesn’t want to deal with the hero nor his righteousness.
Bruce thinks someone is manipulating all of them, maybe that has just happened to the Green Lantern? He does look surprised by his own actions…

Briefly, Barry feels the urge to pull at his own hair overcome him, and not for the first time since Bruce mentioned that something or someone else could be behind what is happening to him, Barry wonders whether this could really be true.

Shouldn’t he have noticed it before? Is he really so messed up that he can’t even pick up on something like that?

Why would anybody hate him so much…

“Wh-why a-are y-you h-he-ere?” Barry’s voice is slightly shaking, making it more difficult for him to talk than usual, but he knows that the sooner Guy gets what he wants, the sooner he will leave again.

The other man keeps watching him quietly for another few seconds before he finally begins to explain the reason for his visit.

“I want to know what you’ve learned about the picture.” Guy sounds grim, his earlier cockiness and biting humor gone. “It’s been nearly two months by now, you must have heard something.”

Barry doesn’t look at his visitor when he pulls a chair out and sits down at the table. He just needs a minute, his legs still feel like jelly, and while the feeling of utter exhaustion is unpleasant, it’s not unexpected and would pass soon enough.

By now Barry is familiar with how his mind deals with things he has trouble to cope with by urging him to take a break and sleeping at least some of the stress off. It is absurd how he is hardly able to fall asleep these days despite that.

“I-d-didn’t h-hear a-anything r-regarding a-a p-pict-ture t-that l-looks l-like t-the o-one you d-described t-to me. B-but…” Barry quickly adds when he feels the other man tense up in response, “I-I t-talked to-to a-a fr-friend w-who k-knows s-someone w-who d-deals w-with th-that st-stuff.”

The picture of a boy in a cornfield. A strange thing to look for at the black market, especially if it isn’t one of those popular ones that can get you a lot of money. Still, Guy insisted that it will turn up somewhere within the Gems and that it is essential for him to get it back. Barry didn’t ask why back then, and he doesn’t do so now. He just wants the other man gone.

“H-he t-told m-me t-that y-you c-can t-try y-your l-luck th-there. T-that d-dealer kn-knows a-a l-lot wh-when i-it c-comes t-to s-stolen a-art.” Barry forces himself to get up despite how heavy his limbs feel and makes his way over to the couch where his backpack is resting.

Two weeks after Guy visited Barry, when he still hadn’t been able to pick up anything useful in the bar, he went to Hartley for help, although he had initially wanted to avoid involving any of the Rogues.

His friend was understandably surprised by his questions regarding some picture on the Gems’ black market, and after some prodding, Barry did tell him the reason behind it. The redhead hadn’t been too happy to learn about someone blackmailing him or Barry not coming to him or one of the others earlier. Barry still got him to promise not to tell Len since he didn’t want his friends to end up clashing with someone like a Green Lantern, and while Hartley clearly didn’t like it, he still agreed to keep it between them.

Hartley didn’t use this opportunity to ask him about his connection to the hero community, despite knowing all too well why one of the heavy hitters of the Justice League was interested in him.
Barry was and still is very grateful for it, though he realized a while ago that he will have to talk to them about it eventually, something he has been planning to do for a while now but always found a reason not to.

As soon as this business with the League was over, should Barry not end up back in prison, he will have this conversation. They all know about his past as the Flash by now, of course, but he still owes them as much.

Hartley promised to ask around about the picture for him, but after coming up short, he ended up providing him with the contact address of a dealer and collector who usually knows about any loot that enters and leaves the Twin Cities as long as it has anything to do with art.

“Wh-Why d-didn’t y-you g-go a-and a-ask h-him y-yours-self?” Barry had asked somewhat hesitantly seeing that that guy seemed to be the most likely source of information regarding the painting. The question caused Hartley to pull a face and give him an unhappy, slightly pained look. “Rene and I… we had something going for a while some years back, but things didn’t turn out well and the break-up…” He grimaced, letting Barry know all he needed to understand his friend’s reluctance to seek out the man in question.

“H-here i-it i-is.” Barry turns back to Guy after he pulled the small piece of paper out of his wallet and makes his way back over to where the other man is still standing and watching him with slight suspicion in his eyes. Keeping his distance as he hands the paper over, Barry takes a few cautious steps back from Guy, still feeling very uneasy in his presence.

They don’t talk while Guy studies the name and the address written on it.

“You sure that this fellow can help me with this?” Guy gives him a doubtful look, but Barry doesn’t bother to meet his eyes. He keeps his gaze low, on the floor.

“N-no… b-but I-I c-can’t o-off-fer a-anything else,” Barry tells him honestly, and he is too tired to care that he has put his arms around himself in a way that must make him look like he is trying to comfort himself.

Another silence follows, and Barry just wishes the other man will finally leave.

“Thanks.”

Barry shrugs, his lips pressed in an unhappy, thin line.

“Look,” Guy starts anew after another couple of seconds ticks by, “Can I ask you something?”

That nearly causes Barry to scoff because since when does it matter if he agrees to something like that or not. He doesn’t, though, as he isn’t too keen to get on the other man’s wrong side again. Instead, he merely nods, already quite sure about what question the other man is about to ask.

“Why did you do it?” Guy sounds honestly puzzled as he asks that, and Barry feels the back of his throat start to hurt and his eyes itch since this is the first time anybody of the hero community ever bothered to ask. Not if he did it but why.

It doesn’t mean anything, of course, but it is still odd to think that anybody would care to look into it.

Well, other than Bruce, that is, he knows now.

“You had a good life, a beautiful wife, a job I heard you were pretty good at, and West looked up to you as far as I know from the others. Why would you throw that away? You worked for the police,
you should know all about the spiel that crime doesn’t pay off in the end.”

Out of the corners of his eye, Barry can make out a movement in his kitchen window that is currently reflecting the inside of his flat since it is already dark outside. He really hopes that Sam will be smart enough to stay away, he can’t even bring himself to feel angry about his friend so blatantly checking up on him despite how he asked him to stop doing so.

“D-d-does i-it m-matter?” Barry asks in return, meeting Guy’s eyes with a faint, sorrowful smile. He is so done with this, he doesn’t want to justify himself to someone he hardly knows and who knows next to nothing about him. “I-I d-did i-it, s-sometimes c-crimin-nals d-don’t n-need a-any r-reason.” He shrugs and licks his dry lips. “M-Maybe I-I g-got s-sick o-of i-it a-all, m-maybe m-my p-power w-w-went t-to m-my h-head, o-or I-I c-couldn-dn’t f-f-fight m-my t-twisted u-ur-urges a-anymore. T-there h-has t-to b-be s-s-som-ny s-specul-lations g-going a-around, I-I’m s-s-sure. Y-You’l-just h-have t-to p-pick o-one. N-n-neither of of t-them w-will ch-change a-anything a-about wh-what h-hap-pened.”

Barry feels drained, exhausted by being forced down by accusations and the open repulsion of the people around him.

“C-could y-you l-leave n-now, pl-please? I-I’m t-t-tired.” A stupid thing to say, really, because someone like the Green Lantern in front of him likely can’t care any less about how he is feeling. Why should he?

Guy, to his surprise, agrees after studying him once more, “Sure, I have other stuff to do as well.” For a second, he seems to want to say something else but doesn’t in the end. Instead, he makes his way over to the door. There, he hesitates again and turns back to Barry, who watches him with palpable unease.

“Look, your place, it… it isn’t so bad. Seriously.” Guy frowns, glancing around once more before he chuckles and shoots Barry a grim but oddly sympathetic look. “I’ve lived in way worse apartments, and my current one isn’t anywhere near as clean as yours.”

Barry watches the other man in confusion, not sure what to make of what he has just said, but Guy doesn’t show intent to offer him any explanation, as he shoots him another confused look before he finally takes his leave.

Watching the now closed entrance door for a long minute, Barry wonders what any of this is actually about.

In the end, it is none of his business, and he probably doesn’t want to get involved anyway.

Sighing softly, Barry makes his way to lock the door, before slowly walking back to his small kitchenette, past the table with the bag of groceries on it, straight to the sink above which he can see himself in the reflection of his window.

“D-Don’t d-do th-this,” Barry says in a soft, low tone, feeling his skin crawl with unease as he knows that he is spied on.

Briefly, he wonders what Bruce thinks of Guy paying him a visit but quickly pushes that thought away. It doesn’t matter, and he doesn’t care. He is just so tired.

He wishes Len was over, or that he could be with his friends.

Swallowing thickly, Barry goes on, “W-We h-have t-to b-be c-c-caref-ful. J-Just s-stay aw-way.”
There is no response, and he is equally relieved and disappointed by it.

He misses them.

Absentmindedly, Barry pushes his right hand into the pocket of his trousers, touching the small, round mirror that he has started to carry around with him everywhere these days. It offers a ridiculous amount of comfort in a way he doesn’t entirely understand, but regardless of the reason, he feels closer to the others and safer having it on him.

He is being silly, overdramatic really, he saw his friends just yesterday at the bar, and he will see them again the day after tomorrow.

For some reason, it still feels like he is cut off from them.

Closing his eyes, Barry takes a slow, deep breath, trying to calm the jumble of emotions in his chest.

“Th-Thank y-you…” The words are spoken so softly that he isn’t sure whether Sam will be able to pick up on them. To avoid saying anything else, he turns his back to the window and starts to put his groceries away.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. It has a lot condensed in it, and I hope all little kinda flashbacks in between did not take from the flow or your reading experience.

I know that a number of you aren’t big fans of Guy, and he probably didn’t win any brownie points in this one, but he still runs on the assumption of Barry being guilt. He is having doubts, but there is really no reason why he should doubt the JL or what they are saying. You probably also picked up on his rather violent reaction to Barry giving him some lip. Like most other heroes, Guy is manipulated when it comes to Barry and how he perceives him – or how he reacts to him, something that is not entirely lost on him either.

Barry has reached a point where he is pretty much done with his past and the people who were once close to him. He wanted them to believe in him and prove his innocence to them, but he knows that it does no longer matter. Too much happened, too much time has gone by, he has realized that nothing will make things “alright” again for him. At least, not in a sense that he can go back to being who he once was.

There is also a part of him that does not want that to happen anymore. He knows that he couldn’t have the same relationship with Len and the others if he once more was the Flash or worked for the CCPD.

Lots and lots of thanks to all of you who left me feedback for the last chapter. I always enjoy reading your comments. :) I'm in a kinda depressed mood right now, things are tricky for me in rl, and I feel like if I stumble I could fall into an outright depression again… which sucks, since I don't have the time for it (not that there ever is a time for it, but right now would be a really crappy time for it…). I hope things will start to look up again soon. Maybe it is just all the things I have to do in combination with autumn arriving. I wish I could focus more of my time on things I enjoy doing, like writing, but due to work and studies I have hardly any time for it. I wish I could climb into
Singularity and just spend some time with Barry, Eddy and Mary, eating muffins and watching old movies… something to pick me up.

Next chapter is what some of you may call a filler chapter, so if you get bored by those, you may consider skipping it. In it, we will see James and Axel again, and have some shenanigans at the Saloon.

I hope all of you have two great upcoming weeks (despite how the weather has started to suck once again…)

Cu then! <3
The Yellow Menace

Chapter Summary

Barry and James go groceries shopping. There are Sponge Bobs and confusing meetings involved.

Also, Axel turns up somewhere he is not supposed to.

Chapter Notes

Thousand thanks to my awesome friend Quintessenzza, who edited this chapter for me! <3 Seriously, he is doing an amazing job, so if you enjoy this story, also let him now you appreciate his effort and hard work. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Look, I’ve found something for Axel!”

Barry glances over his shoulder to James. An amused smile starts to tug at his lips when he spots the small, yellow plushie in the other man’s hands. His friend excitedly presents it to him as if it was some treasure he accidentally came upon among all the mundane things the small store Barry tends to go to for his groceries these days has to offer.

“H-He h-hates S-Spong-geb-bob S-Squarep-pants,” Barry reminds him, fondly, and turns back to study the two different cans of peas. He tries to decide which one to choose for the risotto he is going to make later this evening.

“He doesn’t,” James protests, though he hardly sound convincing, and his smirk doesn’t help.

For a second, Barry thinks about pointing out to James that the amount of entertainment he gets from getting Axel merchandise of that strange little cartoon creature may be a bit questionable.

Especially, considering that Axel tends to hang around Trickster a lot these days, he is certainly quite creative when it comes to getting back to James.

“This little fellow is too adorable not to like him,” James adds as he puts the plush figure into the shopping basket Barry is carrying. Barry hums in lieu of an actual response and glances at the yellow little creature. He does kind of get where Axel is coming from.

James introduced him to the show a few months ago, and he finds it strange, to say the least.

A familiar agitation starts to settle over Barry, then, as his mind unintentionally wanders where he wishes it would rather not. As he stares down at the two cans of peas he is still holding, he can’t help but remember how funny the Rogues found it when he mentioned that he was a little put off by a cartoon about a talking sea sponge and his underwater friends.
Barry hasn’t been over at the hideout for over a week. He easily could get there via the bathroom mirrors at work without Bruce noticing, but he has stayed away.

A bitter sense of self-contempt joins the nagging worry.

Barry knows that he is too much of a chicken to do something like that, not when Batman is involved.

“I already spotted a one-foot tall SpongeBob figure online that has his name written all over it,” James proceeds, oblivious to Barry’s inner discord. It helps Barry to shake the unwanted thoughts off, and he shoots his friend a funny look, which causes James to elaborate, “It’s for Christmas.”

“D-Do y-you w-want h-him t-to s-start d-disl-liking y-you?” Barry questions his friends with an incredulous chuckle. He glances back to the cans in his hand and decides to settle with the one from the brand he is already familiar with.

“He won’t,” James assures him. “We’re just pulling each other’s chain, that’s what hip young people do.”

“I s-see,” Barry says as he picks a can of cooked and peeled tomatoes. “S-So y-you’re u-using h-him t-to f-feel y-young ag-gain.”

“What?” James huffs a laugh. “I don’t! I don’t need to have some obnoxious teenager around to feel young. I am still young, grandpa.”

“S-Slowly b-but s-surely you’re c-closing in on y-your f-forties,” Barry reminds him easily and shifts his shopping basket from his left to his right hand, ignoring the faint pain that is now spreading through his fingers as he moves on to the next aisle where he can find packed rice.

The radio that is droning on above their heads turned into white noise a while ago, but Barry absentmindedly notices how the DJ starts to play a song Bart introduced him to a few weeks ago when he was over for dinner at Max’s home. It is a music style that reminds Barry of the Europe electro scene that was popular during his teenage years but is called EDM these days.

Barry hasn’t seen Bart either in nearly a month. They have both been busy with work and school, and just when Bart was about to come over for some more tutoring in drawing, Bruce picked the day before to pay him his visit.

It was out of question that Bart could pay him a visit after that, and Barry quickly cancelled the meeting. He did so per text message, too unsettled by the notion that Bruce would record his conversation if he decided to give the boy a call. That was also the reason why he didn’t dare to pick up when Bart called him not too much later, which left him feeling guilty, since he knew the boy couldn’t understand what was going on. Later, he went over to Eddy’s place and borrowed his friend’s phone to give Max a brief call and explain things.

Max didn’t seem surprised when Barry informed him that he can’t be in contact with Bart for a while. It infuriated Barry to think that Max could have been in on Bruce’s scheme, but he quickly calmed himself down, since he didn’t want to outright ask and thus couldn’t be sure. There was something akin to regret in the older man’s voice when he agreed and assured Barry that he will explain things to Bart, though.

Jay, it turned out, did know for sure. He passed by the day after Barry talked to Max. Neither of them felt comfortable during his visit, probably because Jay liked the idea of being recorded about as much as Barry did. Even so, he asked him to be careful and go along with what Bruce asked of him.
for now.

"This will be over soon," Jay assured him, "and then things will be better."

Barry nearly argued with him about it, seeing that things would not magically turn back to how they had been more than a decade ago. The sad way Jay watched him as he said so made it more than clear that he knew what an empty promise that was, though.

Barry meant what he said to Bruce that night. He doesn’t need his or the others’ help, he doesn’t even want it, not anymore. What good will it do him if they start believing him now, over a decade later? After everything that happened to him?

He isn’t even sure he wants them back in his life in the first place, and he puts off thinking about it too much.

Despite that, there is a part of him that knows that having his name cleared will allow him to be in contact with Bart and Axel without having to worry about the wrong people finding out about it. This would make things a lot less stressful, and Bart would certainly welcome such a change since he has grown very attached to him.

While Barry is sure that Max can explain everything to Bart much better than a few short text messages ever could, he still feels guilty over shutting the kid out abruptly.

It is odd how quickly one can get used to another person without noticing it. Now that Barry is keeping his distance from Bart once more, he realizes how close they have grown and how used he has gotten to talking to him every other day over the phone, even if it were just via a couple brief text messages.

With Axel, it was pretty much the same situation, though Jay tried to assure him that it was okay for him to come over and spend time with the teen.

It still angers Barry that Jay knew that Bruce was spying on him, probably did so for quite a while but didn’t warn him.

It is more than a little upsetting, but Barry is still glad that Jay isn’t just turning his back on him again. After all, this whole situation can mean serious trouble for the older man as well since he allowed him to break many of his parole restrictions.

The whole situation is just so frustrating.

Frustrating and terrifying.

“Ouch.” James huffs a chuckle, once more pulling Barry back out of his thoughts. “Thanks for making it sound like I’m already standing in my grave with one foot.”

“I-d-don’t,” Barry protests absentmindedly and reaches for the brand of rice he usually picks. “Y-You’re in y-your e-early th-thirties. I-t-will s-still b-be a-a w-wliile b-befor-y-you h-have t-to w-wor-ry ab-bout th-th-e aim-ments y-you g-get w-with p-proc-ceed-ing a-a-age.”

“You’re not eighty yet, Barry,” James reminds him with a chuckle, though when Barry glances at him and meets his eyes, he can see a familiar worry in them. It is then that he realizes that he has changed hand holding the basket with his groceries once again, unconsciously flexing the fingers of his right hand where a slight but uncomfortable throbbing heat has settled into the joints of its fingers.

“N-No, I-I’m n-not.” Barry forces to relax his hand and shoots his friend a smile he hopes looks
convincing as he agrees, “I h-haven’t e-even r-reached m-my f-fifties.”

Which should make him too young to have such a messed-up body, but his body hasn’t been acting normal for a long time now.

Barry tries to lighten the mood and points out, sounding a little bit satisfied as he does so, “M-Mary a-and L-Lisa s-say I l-look y-young f-for m-my age.”

James considers him with a thoughtful, somewhat incredulous look, his eyes slightly squinted. Barry can’t help but snort and shoot him a fake frown, “D-Don’t b-be m-mean t-to y-your e-elders.”

“I’d never,” James protests and steps closer, picking the shopping basket from Barry’s grasp and proceeding just as he is about to protest, “You do look young for your age.” He smiles amused. “You could easily pass as someone from my year.”

“D-Don’t b-be s-silly,” Barry protests, giving him a disbelieving look for both the exaggeration and taking the basket away from him. “A-And I’m a-able t-to c-carry m-my o-own g-groucer-ries.”

“I’m not, and I know,” James assures but adds, “That doesn’t mean that you have to carry them if the weight hurts your hands.”

“I-It’s n-nothing.” Barry lies, feeling his cheeks grow warm, though he isn’t really sure why he feels so embarrassed over this. There is no shame in needing help, he knows that. His body and all its ailments still make him feel helpless at times, and he hates that feeling.

“A-And I h-have t-to c-carry w-way h-heaver c-crates and o-other th-things a-at w-work.” Barry regrets pointing that out. It obviously doesn’t do anything to decrease James’ concern-

“Barry?”

They both turn to the surprised sounding male voice that suddenly spoke up next to them.

Barry feels his body tensing up in response since he can’t immediately place to whom it belongs, but the apprehension fades when his eyes fall upon a face he’s seen before. It only takes him a second to recall where and when.

“Oh… h-hallo…” Barry tries to come up with the name of the other man who is now walking up to him and James. He met him a little over a month ago, and while he knows the name sounded odd, foreign, the only thing his mind provides him with is a very unhelpful the umbrella guy.

“Eobard,” Eobard provides helpfully, and his amused smile makes it clear that he does not take it the wrong way that his name slipped Barry’s memory.

“R-Right,” Barry agrees, a little sheepish. “H-How a-are y-you?”

“Surprised to meet you here,” Eobard replies, chuckling. “The Twins must be smaller than I thought.”

That seems to be the case, indeed. Meeting Eobard here is surprising, considering how many people live in the Gems, especially the Keys.

Then again, Barry reminds himself, bigger coincidences have happened.

“I-it’s a s-small world,” Barry points out with a nod and tries to ignore the voice in his head that urges him to be suspicious of stumbling upon this man twice in such a short time. He tries to shut it
down and tells himself not to overthink the fact that there must be a reason for Eobard to be in this area of the city. The man told him he moved closer to where the Saloon is, after all.

“It really is.” Eobard nods, a grin pulling at the corner of his lips. “Do you live somewhere nearby?”

The question feeds into the unease that is already clinging to Barry, and he feels how he starts to grow frustrated over himself and his anxieties. Worrying about some ulterior motives from the other man is a stupid thing to do; he is just some guy he met two times in about a month, not some supervillain who is out to get him.

It is difficult to suppress his instincts, though, and while Barry does remember the brief meeting with the other man surprisingly fondly, the idea of him knowing where he lives is off-putting. He knows next to nothing of him, after all.

Barry tries not to let on the frustration he feels over how skittish he grows nearly every time he interacts with men he isn’t very familiar with. He is such a coward in that regard, it doesn’t matter how much he rationalizes with himself that not everybody is out to hurt him.

Thankfully, Eobard doesn’t know what is going on inside his head, otherwise his friendly expression would be replaced by an insulted or angry one. Nobody likes to be thought of in that way.

“I don’t mean to be nosy,” Eobard assures him, apparently picking up on the unease his question causes Barry. “I’m just curious.”

“N-No, i-it’s f-fine, I-I…” Barry shrugs, feeling a little helpless. “I-I d-don’t l-like… I-I d-don’t l-like… I-I’m a-r-r-rath-ther p-private p-person.”

“And you’ve every right to be,” Eobard says, giving him a sympathetic look. “I was really just trying to make small talk, to be honest.”

Of course, he was. Eobard isn’t like those men Barry has to be wary of.

Barry knows that those who hurt him were only exception, not the norm. His experiences crippled him in that regard, though.

“I-I l-live i-in th-the K-Keys,” Barry eventually settles on after another awkward moment passed by, swallowing nervously.

“Which is why your reluctance to share your home address is probably telling of your smarts,” Eobard remarks easily. “I’ve been living here for not even two months, and I’ve already been mugged once and was just pickpocketed the other day.”

“Th-That’s h-horrible.” Barry feels honestly bad for the other man, considering that he had to deal with being mugged himself already, and he knows what an awful experience that is.

To his surprise, Eobard simply waves it off. “It’s fine. I was an idiot for not paying attention where I was heading to at three in the morning and putting your wallet in your back pocket is probably also not the smartest thing to do when you decide to live in an area that’s notorious for its high crime rate.” He grins, which causes his eyes to crinkle slightly, and adds, “I’m not used to how things run in this place just yet, but I’ll adjust fine. I’ve been moving around a lot in my life, but it’s the first time that I live in a big city.” He winks at Barry. “It’s exciting.”

Barry chuckles, feeling a little blindsided by the other man’s attitude. Though, to be fair, not everybody can be such an anxious worrywart like he is.
“So, you and your friend also decided to brace the dangers of the Keys to do some shopping?” Eobard asks, and he suddenly seems a little uneasy as he briefly glances next to Barry. It is then that Barry remembers James, who hasn’t said anything so far.

He turns to his friend, just about to apologize and officially introduce both men when he notices the expression on James’s face and pauses. The other man looks pale like he has seen a ghost. The intense way he stares at Eobard suddenly causes Barry to wonder whether those two already know each other.

When he glances back to Eobard, the other man doesn’t really seem sure what to make of James’s reaction, though.

“Uh…” Barry isn’t good at dealing with tense situations, has never really been, especially when he is at a loss when it comes to what caused them. He tries to fight off the unease that starts to creep up on him, making it difficult for him to talk, and slightly coughs before introducing them.

“E-Obo-bard, th-that’s J-Jam-mes.” Barry nods to James, noticing with growing confusion and wariness how his friend is pretty much outright glaring at Eobard. “J-James th-this-”

“Eobard, I got it,” James cuts him off, rather brusquely, startling Barry into silence.

“Well,” Eobard says after a tense minute has ticked by, “Nice to meet you, James.” He holds his hand out, then, offering a handshake.

James’s gaze that has been firmly on the other man’s face drops to the offered hand, and for a moment Barry is sure he won’t accept it.

He does, though, grabbing it firmly. “Likewise.”

Barry doesn’t miss how Eobard flinches for a second when James takes hold of his hand. Like the touch startles him.

The handshake is only brief, both men seemingly glad when it is over.

Annoyance over how rude James is behaving rises in Barry, but it is quenched when he realizes that both men are now silently glaring at each other. The former amiability is now missing from Eobard’s face and replaced by an expression that is nearly void of any emotions other than what his eyes give away.

Suddenly, Barry is overcome by the realization that he does not want to be here anymore. He has no idea what is going on, but it does not sit well with him regardless.

It would be best if he and James took their leave.

“W-We sh-sh-should g-get g-g-going,” Barry informs James, touching him lightly at his lower arm. This has an immediate effect on him as it seems like the younger man is snapping out of whatever spell grabbed him. He turns to Barry, briefly looking confused.

“Of course…” James glances back to Eobard and frowns. “Let’s do that.” He gives Barry an apologetic look when he meets his eyes, but still very much looks lost, as if he couldn’t explain to himself what just happened.

Barry feels goosebumps rise up his arms and back, and returns his eyes to Eobard, trying to smile though he is pretty sure it falls flat. Something feels seriously off about this whole situation. It’s outright unsettling.
“S-Sorry, b-but w-we h-have t-to l-leave.” Barry still needs some more ingredients for the risotto he plans to prepare, but he'll probably ask Mary whether he could get them from her, or maybe they can stop at another grocery store on their way home.

“Sure.” Eobard relaxes a little, and while he is not smiling, warmth has returned to his features. “It was nice meeting you again, Barry.” He, too, seems shaken, and Barry wonders whether, whatever it was, caught the other two men just as off-guard as him.

“I-It w-was,” Barry agrees, though he isn’t so sure about it anymore.

Barry pays for his groceries, and they are back on the way to James’s car no five minutes later.

“What w-was th-that a-ab-bout?” Barry asks eventually, after they crossed the parking lot in silence.

James, who opens the trunk, pauses before glancing at him. “Nothing. I…” He knits his eyebrows together, making a move to glance over his shoulder back to the store but stops himself. Instead, he shakes his head. “I don’t know, something just felt off about that guy.”

“Off?” Barry asks worriedly, and the urge to get into the car so they can just leave is nearly overwhelming.

James stares down at the open trunk, not saying anything for a long minute before he puts the bags of groceries in it and shrugs.

“Maybe I’m just…” He huffs and shakes his head. “I really can’t put my finger on it, Barry.” He shuts the trunk and meets Barry’s eyes again as he tells him in an earnest tone, “I think you should keep away from him. There is just… something is not right with that guy.”

*Not right?* Barry fights a shiver, and while James’s words cause an onslaught of questions in his mind, he doesn’t ask them. He can see that his friend doesn’t have any answers for them anyway. James seems just as confused as him.

Intuition is a powerful tool, though, and Barry knows not to just disregard it.

Wordlessly, he nods his agreement and watches how some of the tension promptly falls off his friend in response.

“Let’s grab some coffee before we get back to your apartment,” James suggests and visibly tries to shake the last tendrils of agitation off as he shoots Barry a smile.

Barry is not really in the mood for coffee, but he agrees even so since he welcomes the opportunity to take his mind off of what has just occurred.

He hasn’t thought of Eobard since their paths crossed very early that rainy morning, anyways, maybe it will be better if it stayed that way.

***

Axel shows up at the bar on Friday night a week later. It seems that Barry isn’t the only one who misses them spending time together. It’s comforting and reassuring since he worried that Axel could have somehow misunderstood Barry’s sudden absence and he really didn’t want to hurt him by cutting him off like he had to.

Still, Barry tries to send the boy away the moment he spots him following Sam and Mick out of the
men’s restroom. Charlie would be enraged if he saw a teenager lounging around in his bar.

Of course, Axel doesn’t listen and stubbornly insists on staying.

“Oh, come on, Barry! I don’t have to work tomorrow and, believe me, the locations I usually spent my Friday nights at are way shadier than this one,” Axel points out, glancing around briefly, very clearly not in the least intimidated by the location, nor the other patrons who don’t seem particularly interested in him either.

The alarmed look Barry gives him in response lets the teen quickly realize that he probably didn’t use the right argument to make his point so that he quickly presses on, “I won’t drink any hard stuff, alright?” At Barry’s frown he rolls his eyes and adds with a huff, “And I won’t even touch the damn beer, I promise.”

Instead of arguing with Axel over the fact that he shouldn’t drink any alcoholic beverage just yet since he still is way too young to do so, Barry turns his glare to Sam. His friend has taken a seat at the bar, watching their exchange with entertained amusement.

“Wh-What w-were y-you th-h-thinking o-of b-bring-ging h-him t-to a p-place l-like th-this?” Barry demands, leveling his friend with a glare, which causes Sam to roll his eyes.

“You’ve heard the brat. He’s been at way worse sinkholes than this one before, so what does it hurt if I brought him over? Who knows in what kind of place he otherwise would have ended up in tonight?” Sam points out, shrugging. He lifts a hand placatingly when he notices that Barry continues glaring daggers at him and argues, “He told you he wouldn’t drink, and I’ll bring him back to where I picked him up afterward.” He crosses his heart. “Scouts honor.”

Barry gives him a very unimpressed look in response before another thought crosses his mind, and he asks the other man alarmed. “Y-You d-didn’t p-pick h-him u-up f-from J-Jay’s h-home, d-did y-you?”

“Do I look like a moron?” Sam scoffs and glares at Mick, who sits next to him and agrees with a convinced sounding Yeah.

“He picked me up from a public bathroom,” Axel interferes, turning Barry’s attention back to him. “And don’t worry about Jay. He and Joan think I’m staying over at a friend’s place tonight.”

“So y-you l-lied t-to th-them?” Barry mutters as he reaches up to rub his eyes.

“Only this once,” Axel assures him. “I don’t usually do that.” He sighs and crosses his arms. “And I didn’t like it, okay? You know Joan, do you have any idea how miserable it makes me feel to lie to her?”

“B-But y-you s-still d-did-”

“Because I wanted to see you,” Axel cuts him off angrily before he hesitates for a second and adds in a more subdued tone, “I nearly never see you these days as it is, and now with me having to stay away from you because of those shitty…” He cuts himself off, glaring darkly down at the top of the bar, clearly not any happier with the current situation than Barry or any of the others.

“I mean Jay and Joan are great,” Axel eventually goes on, “and the people at the labs are pretty cool, too, but…” For a moment he doesn’t seem sure how to express what he wants to say, glancing unhappily at Barry, who doesn’t interrupt him but patiently waits. He knows all too well that it can be difficult to express one’s emotions, especially if you’re a teenage boy of Axel’s age.
Fidgeting somewhat, Axel shrugs and glances up to Barry with an unhappy expression. “You used to show me all that cool stuff, y’ know, and I get that you don’t have to do that anymore because I have now my instructors and Jay, but it isn’t the same. They aren’t like you, and I miss that.” He snorts and shakes his head, smiling slightly. “It’s not the same without your stupid lectures and the way you always let me know that I’m clever and worth all the hassle even when I’m behaving like a complete brat.”

“Axel…” Barry watches his friend, briefly at a loss of what to say. The boy’s words touched him, and it is strange to think that this young man is the same kid he met roughly three years ago.

Barry would lie if he said that he likes the idea of letting him stay, but he understands where Axel comes from. The last weeks have been trying on him, not only the stress and anxiousness that comes with knowing that someone could have been manipulating his life or the fact that he is pretty much living under constant surveillance at home but being forced to limit his time spent with the people he loves. Or, in Axel’s case, cut them out entirely.

It was ignorant of him not to consider that this could have the same effect on Axel. He knew that it would affect the boy, of course, but he expected him to get over it quite quickly, especially with his new apprenticeship and the Garricks taking him in.

Barry feels like a jerk. He should really stop thinking so little of his friends when it comes to their emotional ties to him.

They are his friends, after all. He owes them that much.

Still not liking the idea of Axel sticking around at the Saloon, he must concede that it probably really isn’t the worst place the teen could spend his evening at. He doesn’t doubt that he wasn’t lying about having been at far worse locations before. The thought is hardly reassuring.

While sending him away would undoubtedly be the more sensible thing to do, Barry really doesn’t want to do so. Not right now, at least.

“I-if Ch-charlie tells you t-to l-leave, you have t-to,” Barry informs Axel, and the thought of his boss dampers his mood quite a bit, “t-this bar bel-longs t-to him a-and he makes t-the r-rules, okay?”

Axel gives him a nearly comically disbelieving look, then, and it becomes palpable that he hasn’t counted on Barry actually agreeing to his request. A big grin spreads across the teen’s lips as he nods excitedly, “Sure thing! If your boss says I’ve to scam, I’ll scam!” He shoots Barry a pleased, amused look as he continues, “I seriously didn’t think you would give in so quickly. Good to know you’re still doing my bidding.”

Barry smiles despite himself, amused by his friend’s silly antics.

“D-don’t let Jay h-hear t-that, o-or you can c-count on an-other o-one of hi-his lectures a-about re-repecting your el-elders, a-and h-how you sh-should be m-more grateful,” Barry reminds him and levels the boy with a playfully admonishing look, “N-not th-that he w-wouldn’t h-have a p-point th-there, hm?”

Axel merely scoffs at that and reminds him that Jay takes most things way too seriously. “And I’m respectful, just not in that old-people kind of way you guys are all over.”

“B-brat.” Barry chuckles fondly as his expression softens. “I’ve m-missed y-you very m-much, t-too.”

Axel blushes in response, but it is hard to miss that he clearly looks pleased with these words as well.
“And what’s about me?” Sam pipes up next to Axel, shooting Barry a very faked hurt look. “You never tell me that you miss me, Allen.”

“Because you’re like a pimple on one’s ass,” Mick provides with a smirk. “Everybody is happy once you’re gone.”

Axel guffaws in response, apparently finding that brief exchange hilarious while Barry shoots his friends an unimpressed look. He is kept from reminding them to mind their language around Axel when Charlie chooses the moment to return from his office.

“Allen, I need you to take a look at…” Charlie breaks off and stops when his gaze drops upon Axel sitting at the bar. He gives the boy a look as if an actual hobgoblin manifested in front of his very eyes before his expression turn from comical to pissed off.

Turning his glare to Barry, he flares his nostrils and points at Axel. “What the hell is this?”

“Ch-Charlie-”

“Barry, do I really have to remind you that we are a fucking bar?!” Charlie asks incredulously. “Or that we’re infamous for most of our clientele consisting of criminals and other lowlifes? We are no damn kindergarten!”

“Hey! I’m not a fucking child, I’m sixteen-” Axel protests, indignantly, but is cut off by Charlie who levels him with a very unimpressed, irked look.

“Scram, brat, this location is exclusively for people legally old enough to buy liquor.”

“Since when do you care about stuff like that?” Sam inquires, amused, but backs down when Charlie turns his scowl on to him.

“I won’t stick around that long,” Axel tells Charlie, drumming his fingers on the top of the bar, and gives him a sweet, innocent smile. “I just want to have a coke. Afterward, I’m gone again.”

“You won’t stick around at all-”

“Ch-Charlie, p-please, l-let h-him s-stay f-for j-just o-one c-coke,” Barry interjects, causing his boss to send him a surprised look that quickly turns exasperated. “S-Sam w-will t-take h-him b-back afterw-ward. I-I’ll m-make s-sure of i-it.”

Barry is confident that his boss will tell him to stop being an idiot since he is in the right here. Not to mention that Charlie has always been surprisingly strict about no teenagers in his bar.

To everybody’s surprise, Charlie studies him for a long moment before turning his attention back to Axel, narrowing his eyes.

“You can stick around for one coke, brat, after that you’re gone,” Charlie tells him. “Otherwise I’ll kick my twerp of a barman out right alongside you, understood?”

“Sure thing,” Axel agrees readily, giving the other man a broad grin and a thumbs up, which causes Charlie to scoff and turns back to Barry.

“He’s your responsibility while he is here,” Charlie informs him, tersely “Anything happens, it will be on you.”

“O-Of c-course,” Barry agrees quickly, still surprised about Charlie allowing Axel to stay in the first
place.

“Right…” Charlie nods over his shoulder. “I’ll be back in my office, I need your help with Table later after you’re done with closing.” He frowns at the two Rogues and Axel at the bar before turning around, grunting. “Try not to break something while I’m gone.”

“That’s your boss?” Axel asks the moment Charlie vanished through the door leading to the back of the place. He whistles impressed. “Dude’s an actual tank.”

“He has to be, considering his business,” Sam points out, amused.

“Yeah,” Mick agrees and orders a beer, with Sam quickly following suit.

Axel ends up staying for about an hour before his coke is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! I hope you enjoyed this little filler-chapter. :)

Though, tbh, it isn't as fillery as it my appear at first, since we've met Eobard again, and for whatever reason, James doesn't seem all that fond of him. Wonder why, since they haven't met before... or have they? ;P

Also, having Axel turn up in the Saloon is something I really wanted to happen. In the comics he is a part of the Rogues and thus follows along when they go to bars (something Charlie isn't too happy about either, in my head ;), but here he is just an ordinary teenager. It is only due to Barry and his puppy eyes (yes, Barry has some awesome and effective puppy eyes, a power he is not aware of himself ;), and the fact that Charlie knows he can trust his barman, that Axel was allowed to stay.

In case you wonder what "Table" is, which Charlie mentioned before, it's their version of Excel. I don't know why, but I prefer to mix things up when it comes to stuff like that.

Next chapter will be dark and long, it's the one I warned you about. So prepare yourself for angst and violence, but don't worry if you don't think you can read it, I'll post a short summery of what happened in the notes at the end, so you know the outline of what is going on. I will also not post it in two weeks but three, simply because I'm out of town due to work the weekend after next.

Thanks so much to all you lovelies who left me comments and wished me to get better. You're kind and amazing! <3

I'll be back you in three weeks!
The Inevitable

Chapter Summary

Barry should have taken Eddy and Mary up on their offer.

Chapter Notes

So, here is finally the next chapter, and thank you so much for your patience, my lovely readers. I'm sorry for the big delay, I just got really sick after returning from the workshop and kind of spent the last week in a drugged up state. I'm still ridiculous tired due to the antibiotics I take, but I seriously wanted to get this chapter out today. You have been waiting long enough, I think.

Anyway, thanks to my amazing editor Quintessenzza, I've had this chapter resting and collecting dust in my e-mail account for nearly a week now, so if it was up to him, you would have gotten it on time. ;) Seriously, I can't emphasize enough what a great help he is, not only with editing those chapters but helping me to strive for being a better writer in general. Thank so much for that. <3

Warning: Rape, physical violence, humiliation, PTSD, and strong language. This chapter deals with a number of heavy subjects, and I really wanna urge you to skip it if you don't feel comfortable dealing with them. I will post a brief summary of what happened in the AN at the end, so you know the gist of what happened for the upcoming chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is early September, just a couple of days before Barry’s fifth parole year starts, and the weather is abysmal.

A light drizzle has been holding on since the beginning of the week. The sky above the Twins is covered in a thick layer of clouds that vary in shades of grey, reminding people that autumn is just around the corner. Along with the bad weather, an early cold front settles over a part of the country. The warmth of summer seems a distant memory, even though the open-air pools of Central City saw a record number of visitors barely two weeks ago.

It is likely due to this abrupt change in weather that a big part of the Twins’ citizens has to deal with a late summer flu. The sudden shift in temperatures caught everybody’s immune system by surprise.

Barry is one of the unlucky ones who are currently recovering from a cold that fortunately didn’t turn into something more severe. This is why he is now resting on his couch in his living room, a blanket pulled up to his chin and a cup of chamomile tea resting next to him on the small couch table. Mary made it for him before she and Eddy left on a trip to Central City to watch an action movie Eddy had been going on about for the last couple of weeks.
They invited Barry along, of course, and despite how he still tries to keep his distance from them, he considered taking them up on the offer. As his luck would have it, it was then that he got sick, and while both his friends offered to stay and spend the evening with him, he assured them that he was fine on his own. The thought of them sticking around while Bruce is supervising his every move inside his apartment still has him ill at ease, no matter how much he would appreciate their company.

“You’ve b-been l-looking f-forward t-to th-this m-move,” Barry pointed out with a tired smile when Eddy offered to order some pizza instead.

“So what?” Eddy waved him off. “We can watch it next weekend after you’ve returned from the nearly-dead.”

“I alr-ready h-have p-plans next w-week,” Barry reminded him. While Eddy shot him a skeptical look at that, Barry wasn’t just coming up with an excuse.

Max paid him a visit the other day, approaching him about a possible meet-up since Bart is missing him a lot. The young teen doesn't understand why he suddenly has to keep his distance from his grandfather since Max and the others are understandably unwilling to share what is really going on. Barry hates it, this uncertainty that is slowly but surely eating away at him. The fear that comes with not knowing what to expect.

Bruce said he would talk to Clark and Diana about a possible new questioning. But his visit happened weeks ago. Barry is growing more and more impatient. He initially hoped that the whole situation would resolve itself quicker than this, despite his fear of the possible consequences.

It’s likely that this frustration was the reason he agreed to meet up with Max and Bart. He knows he should stay away from Bart since him being around a minor can make the already dicey situation much worse for him should the wrong people learn of it, especially if the new questioning should finally take place.

“It’s f-fine, g-go h-have an enj-joyable n-night,” Barry assured Eddy, becoming increasingly tired once more. Both his friends made no secret of how reluctant they were to leave him behind, which made him feel better despite the throbbing pain in his sinuses.

Barry wished he could speak openly with them like he used to before he learned there was someone constantly watching and listening in.

They eventually left, after Mary promised that she would check up on him when they returned. Since Barry gave both of them copies of his keys a while back, she would not run the risk of disturbing him in case he was already asleep. Barry went back to napping afterwards.

It feels to him like he hasn’t really done anything but rest and sleep for the last couple of days, with his body still fighting against whatever he caught this time.

Being his stubborn self, Barry tried to just ignore the cold for the first two days he started to feel sick. He drank a lot of herbal tea and used lozenges, but it didn’t help much. Instead, it got so bad that Charlie eventually sent him home last Friday evening with the order to stay in bed until he stops scaring their customers away by looking like he caught the plague. Barry didn’t put up a fight.

Len wanted him to stay with the rest of the Rogues at their current hideout, a new one they moved to about three weeks ago. Barry knows that his partner is worried about him and that the knowledge of the Justice League possibly picking him up any moment for another interrogation has his nerves on edge. Despite how much Barry wishes he could stay with them, he declined.
Being sick and feeling like crap doesn’t make being on your own any more fun, and Barry has started to hate every minute he has to spend within his own four walls, but he is also very much aware of the possible consequences for vanishing for a week on end. Bruce tries to keep tabs on him for a reason.

The whole business with Bruce not only causes him a ridiculous amount of unease and frustration but is also the probable reason he got sick. He feels stressed out.

It turns out that staying away from his friends is surprisingly exhausting, and Barry knows that he is being a childish about it since he still sees them at work, but he misses them. He expected it, of course, but it still caught him somehow off-guard and is even worse than what he expected. Especially with Len. It’s like he lost a part of himself, leaving him cold. The familiar fear of losing them is eating away at him.

The feelings of loss and loneliness got so bad the other night that he found himself curling up and crying, something he still feels embarrassed about thinking back to now. He should be able to deal with this better. There is no reason to let himself get this depressed.

It’s just so hard, though.

Barry wants to be among his friends, watch them play poker while listening to their bickering and occasionally join in for a game. He wants to have conversations about science with Hartley and Roscoe, about pop culture and silly tv shows with James, try out new recipes with Lisa... he just wants to be part of them again.

Most of all, he wants to prevent them from realizing that they will be better off without him around. He doesn’t doubt that they will eventually realize that having him around means running the danger of catching the attention of the superhero community.

No matter how hard he tries to reassure himself that life would go on even in that case, the mere notion leaves him cold and desperate.

The Rogues have become a part of him and his life over the years, and when he lies awake at night in his empty apartment, he feels lost in the darkness.

Len’s absence is the worst, of course. He misses being able to have dinners with him, to tell him about the book he is reading, to share coffee or tea with him, or them just spending quiet moments together. All things he can't do at the Saloon.

His depressive mood is not lost on his friends. Barry feels bad about his little break down and how it didn’t go unnoticed. Mary brought over some noodle soup the next day, telling him that it was from Lisa. That could only mean that Sam or Evan saw what happened and reported it to Len, and Barry could have kicked himself that moment. He didn’t mean to cause Len any more reason to worry about him.

Even so, it was a reassuring gesture that made him feel a little better.

Mary, Lisa, and the others aren’t the only ones who help him with keeping the looming depression at bay, though. Jay is clearly trying to be supportive, and he paid him a visit not too long after learning he was sick.

“You can stay with us until you’re doing better again, Barry. Joan and I would love to have you over, and I’m sure you will find more rest in our guest bedroom than you do here.” Jay gave the ceiling a rather dark look at that. The owners of the flat above Barry’s were currently having
another party and didn’t care much about regulations regarding peace at night. Barry didn’t feel embarrassed about his living situation anymore and instead just declined Jay’s generous offer with a tired smile.

Jay passed by again earlier today, with some medication he got from the drugstore after he learned that Barry didn’t intend to visit a doctor just yet but let the cold run its course. He didn’t think too much of that idea, but while Barry got the raise some months ago, he still doesn’t earn enough and a visit to the doctor would require a noticeable cut in his monthly budget.

Pushing that thought away, Barry rolls onto his side and pulls his blanket back up to his chin, shivering a little. He feels still bone-tired, despite the nap he has just had.

After four days rest which he mostly spent sleeping either in his bed or on the couch, Barry’s health has improved quite a bit, but he still isn’t entirely over it. He just hopes that he will be able to get back to work before the weekend. Charlie doesn’t rush him, and Barry is thankful for it, but he still worries about staying home for too long.

Things at the bar have started to pick up again, much to his relief, and while, for now, busy nights still only mean that about two thirds of their tables are occupied, it is a vast improvement over how things used to be up to the beginning of August.

He doesn’t want Charlie to think that he is lazing around now that things are picking up again.

Yawning loudly, Barry rubs his eyes before glancing over at the table where his little sketchbook rests. He has started doodling this morning, a clear sign that he is doing better. A part of him considers going back to it since it helps him to relax and gives him something to focus on so that his mind won’t wander places he wants it to avoid.

He doesn’t really feel up to it, though. Sleeping some more would probably be a better idea.

Closing his eyes, he lets his head fall back on the pillow and sighs softly.

*Stupid cold.*

Barry doesn’t notice when he starts to drift off once more.

A loud knock at the door startles him up, and he throws a slightly bleary-eyed look at the clock, which shows that it is already half past nine.

Briefly, he feels uneasiness overcome him until he remembers that Eddy forgot his phone when leaving earlier. He probably speeded over here to pick it up before the movie started. His friend can be such an airhead at times.

With another tired sigh, Barry gets up, grimacing slightly as a sharp pain flashes up his spine thanks to his rundown couch, and walks over to the door.

He feels dizzy as he slowly makes his way, his circulatory not agreeing with him moving around after resting for the majority of today.

After Eddy leaves again, he will probably go to bed for the night.

Barry pushes the key in the lock and turns it, forgoing his usual check via the spyhole to see who is on the other side-

There is a sudden blinding pain nearly overwhelming all his senses as the door is smashed square
into his face. He stumbles back a few steps, too caught off-guard by the unexpected turn of events to even make a noise, and nearly loses his footing.

*Crack!*

Something hits him again with enough force to make him fall hard onto his back, causing his head to hit the ground with a painful thud. For a few seconds, he can’t see anything but bright sparks that dance in front of his eyes which accompany the searing pain in his skull.

There are voices, but the ringing in his ears is too loud for Barry to clearly make them out.

Then, after a minute passed, the room around him retakes shape as do two figures, standing in front of him.

“Hey, Barry, long time no see.”

The confusion is abruptly gone, and a smothering panic takes its place.

Before Barry even realizes what he is doing, he is back on his feet, following the desperate voice in his head that tells him to get to the bathroom, to the door with the lock, away from-

*Crack!*

Something hits his shoulder hard enough that he hears and feels something snapping inside. He howls in pain but is cut off by another blow against the back of his knees that causes him to fall to the ground again.

“Hey, what manners are these? Didn’t we teach you better?”

The sheer fear drives Barry to get up again despite the horrible pain in his right knee.

The small pocket mirror is resting on the couch table, if he could reach it and-

Time is slowing down, fear is now filling every fiber of his body, and he notes in passing how this hasn’t happened since he left Iron Heights behind, not since the last dreadful night before his release.

Everything slows down. Everything becomes silent, and his world seems to be made up of nothing more but the pulsing pain and the smothering fear.

It is such a familiar process; it is similar to how he perceived the world when he was still able to connect to the speed force. Barry feels himself choking up. He isn’t sure if it’s the speed force or all the messed up stuff he had to live through in that hellhole.

For a split second, Barry can feel the small object he so desperately wants to reach under his fingertips before he loses the contact again as another blow hits his side and knocks the air right out of his lungs. He is sure it must have cracked at least one of his ribs. He is all too familiar with how that feels.

Barry is thrown to his side. He lands with a hard thud and a painful moan.

Michael steps close and looks down at him with apparent amusement. The man beside him swings the bat in his hand in a lazy fashion, as if warming up during a baseball game. Barry recognizes him just as quickly, even without seeing his face he would recognize this massive, intimidating silhouette anywhere.

It is Puckett.
Barry nearly grows sick.

There are two of the most vicious guards the Heights have to offer, standing in his apartment. The two who enjoyed making his life in that awful place a living hell it the most. They have haunted his nightmares for years, he has never been able to forget them or the horror they instilled in him.

Judging by the looks both men give him, they haven’t forgotten about him either.

“My little bitch,” Michael starts, watching him with those green, malicious eyes that hold clear hunger, “you see, Chuck and I thought that it’s been a really long time since we’ve seen you last.” He chuckles, cocking his head slightly. “And it occurred to us that you are probably in dire need of someone giving you a good ride.” A nasty smirk crosses his lips. ”I mean, nobody else would touch something like you, would they now? And I'm sure you have to be desperate to get a big cock up your tight ass.”

Michael’s grin is all teeth, making him look even more unnerving, and he nods to his colleague. “We thought why don’t we use this beautiful night to help you out with this little predicament? I’m sure you are already itching for it.”

A frightened whimper escapes Barry when Michael steps over him so that his feet are on either side of his hips.

No, oh god, no, no, no! This can’t be happening.

This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening! This can’t BE HAPPENING! THIS CAN’T BE HAPPENING! TH-

A hand painfully grabs Barry’s hair, and he is forced on his knees that cry out in protest. A blinding, nauseating pain shoots through his left shoulder when Michel, who has stepped around him, forces both of his arms behind his back so that he is able to hold them in place with one hand.

Barry’s cry of pain is met with a numbing backhand to his face from Puckett, who is now standing right in front of him.

“Shut it! We don’t wanna wake your neighbors, do we, cunt?” Puckett grins down at him as he grabs Barry’s hair just as brutally as Michael did before, and he seems more than pleased when Barry only utters a small, scared whimper in response.

Barry knows what is about to happen. He has been there so many times already...

“N-n-no, p-p-plea-se, p-p-please d-d-don’t… I-I-I… p-p-plea-se, I-I c-c-c-can’t… pl-pl-please…”

Neither of the two men acknowledges his pleas with anything else but laughter and ridicule.

“You still know what to say to get me going, baby,” Puckett chuckles and lets go of him, a hungry glint in his eyes.

Time starts to change again, eludes Barry’s grasp as the world around him seems to slow down, and he watches with absolute horror how the guard unzips his fly.

It feels like an eternity and just an instant before Puckett returns his grip on Barry’s hair and forces his head forward.

Barry can’t let this happen, not again. He can’t allow them to use him like that.
He desperately tries to keep his mouth shut, but Michael gives his injured shoulder a sharp jerk, and he can’t stop himself from screaming out in response. Puckett uses this opportunity to push his thumb in his mouth to force his teeth farther apart.

“I’ll knock every single one of your little teeth out if you are stupid enough to scratch my cock,” Puckett warns as he presses his thumb, that tastes of cigarettes, up against his teeth, and Barry knows that he is serious.

The grip on his hair becomes more painful as Puckett tugs on it, causing Barry’s eyes to tear up.

*Why is this happening?* *Why?!*

*Why is nobody helping him?*

*He can’t do this again! He just wants to be left alone!*

*He doesn’t want to be hurt again…*

“Come, you little cock-sucker, show me how good you’re at this,” Puckett orders him, and this is all the warning Barry gets.

Suddenly, the man’s cock is forced past his lips and into his mouth. Barry’s taste buds are immediately flooded by this disgustingly salty and bitter taste he hoped he would never have to taste again, it is nauseatingly intense.

Puckett doesn’t give him any time to adjust and merely forces his prick down his throat, causing his jaw to cry out in protest.

Barry gags, or tries to while the hand in his hair pushes him forward till his nose is buried in the dark pubic hair of the other man which fills it with a nauseatingly intense musky smell.

For an excruciatingly long moment they stay like that, the dick is buried in his throat, and Barry feels like throwing up and choking at the same time.

It is like back then again. He can’t do anything, they just take what they want, and he lets them.

His head starts to hurt, and his lungs burn in desperation for some air to breathe.

*Why did he open the door? Why didn’t he use the spyhole?*

*He wants this to *stop*.*

*Why can’t they just leave him be? Why did he open that damn door?*

The cock is pulled back, though only long enough for Barry to greedily gulp for some air which gives his lungs some relief before Puckett repeats the ordeal. The man obscenely moans while forcing his dick down Barry’s throat, cursing under his breath, audibly aroused and liking what is happening.

Barry has to close his eyes.

*“Good, you do well, my little bitch.”* Michael’s praise causes the tears that he has been holding back to finally slip past Barry’s eyelids and roll down his cheeks. *“I’m proud of you, baby. I feared that you would have forgotten all your training by now, but I should have known better. You’re a natural when it comes to taking cocks.”*
Michael’s warm breath touches the side of Barry’s face, and the closeness of this man is making this whole torment even more unbearable.

It is then, that Barry picks up on the nearly overwhelming smell of alcohol that clings to those men, and with the smell comes the sudden realization why those two are here, despite how risky it is for them to do something like that outside of the prison’s walls.

“Shshshh, my little bitch, don’t cry. You’ll get my cock in just a moment, don’t worry.” Michael mocks while his free hand starts to roam over Barry’s side. It is obvious what the guard is trying to initiate with that, and the mere notion is horrifying enough that Barry starts to struggle, desperately trying to fight them off once more. Both men find that hilarious, clearly not bothered by his weak attempts, and Barry gives a muffled cry when Michael painfully pinches one of his nipples in response-

“Get your fuckin’ hands off him!”

The cock is suddenly gone from Barry’s mouth, and he greedily gulps for air.

A terrible pain shoots through the right side of his upper body a second later when Michael tries to keep his grip on him while he is forcefully pulled onto his feet.

“Let gang o’ him or ah wull mak’ sure ye wilnae hae any hauns lef tomorrows mornin’!” Evan sounds furious, and suddenly Michael’s hands are gone. Barry slumps to the ground with a thud which causes his whole body to scream in pain.

The pulse of his rushing blood fills Barry’s ears, and he hears the guard’s pained screams that follow nearly immediately. But it’s like there is a thick layer of cotton in his ears.

His head hurts worse than before, as does most of his body, especially where he has been hit by the bat.

“Hey, mate, you’re doin’ alright there?” Digger takes a knee at his side and hesitantly touches his shoulder but pulls back his hand promptly when Barry bites out a cry in response.

“Bloody bastards did right a number on you, huh?” Digger mutters softly while Puckett’s painful cries can be heard from the other side of the room which are then followed by a loud wet smacking sound and the heavy thud of a dropping body.

“You fucking bastards! I’ll kill you for that! You’ll all rot in the Heights till you fucking die! Who do you fuckers think you are messing with?” Michael sounds livid and suddenly surprisingly drunk. Barry doesn’t believe that the man would act like that in this position if he hasn’t been intoxicated. He may be an incredibly arrogant sadist, but he is not stupid.

“Och, gimme a break…” Evan is visibly pissed off by the man’s attitude, but Barry hardly picks up on it as he notices Mick, who passes him to get over to the other Rogue and the still cursing guard.

“That was a damn stupid mistake, you son of a bitch.” There is something off with Mick’s voice, it doesn’t sound right. He doesn’t yell, he hasn’t even raises his voice, but it still is frightening, and Barry suddenly doesn’t want to be here anymore.

“N-n-no! D-d-don’t, M-Mick… p-p-please-se…” Barry begs, squeezing his eyes shut as he desperately hopes that his friend won’t commit a murder tonight.

“Fuck you, jackass! The little cunt is yours? You don’t like sharing or just when it’s not one from your little group?” It is evident that Michael has no idea how dire the situation he is in is right now,
and Barry wishes he would just shut up.

“O-oh g-g-god…”

Why did he open the damn door?

If he had just stayed put on the couch, none of this would have happened!

“Don’t worry, mate, he won’ kill him.” Digger sounds grim but sure, and Barry hopes that he is right.

Barry isn’t sure whether he would be alright with Michael or Puckett dying like that, by his friend’s hand because of him. It’s something he doesn’t want to think about. If Bruce or Jay-

It is as if a bucket of cold water is emptied over him as he realizes that everything that just happened to him was undoubtedly recorded by Bruce.

Oh god…

“You really don’t know when to shut up.” Mick’s voice has a certain edge to it, there is a danger close beneath its surface. It pulls Barry back to the here and now, away from the smothering panic that was about to take hold of him, and for a moment his apartment is entirely silent. Even Michael has stopped throwing insults at them.

A brief, scared scream follows. It cuts through the tension like a knife before the sound of another gruesome sounding blow can be heard.

Barry squeezes his eyes shut and tries to not think about what just happened. He feels really sick and wishes he could just hide away in his bed, shut everything else out, and forget that any of this transpired.

“Evan, get Cold,” Mick orders the other criminal, and Barry listens to the man’s heavy steps as he comes over to where he is lying on the ground. While the calmness hasn’t left Mick’s voice, the concern is a new addition and hard to miss. Barry feels a shiver run down his spine as he realizes that his three friends must be currently studying him.

He wants a shower so badly…

“Aye,” Evan sounds a bit hesitant, worried, and Barry can feel his eyes on him like an actual, disconcerting touch.

Mick prompts Evan again, more sharply this time, the man finally starts moving. “Aye, sure, a’m oan it.”

“Come on, mate, let’s get ya off the floor. Can’t be too comfy down there,” Digger suggests, but Barry cringes away from the touch causing his friend to pause.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to move him right now. They took a fucking bat to him.” Mick steps closer and knees down at Barry’s side, opposite to Digger.

Barry instinctively tries to jerk away from him when Mick cautiously touches his shoulder. A blindingly intense pain shoots through his body. He grits his teeth in response and whimpers.

“Don’t move, Barry,” Mick tells him, his hand already pulled back. “You’re hurt.”

Even though Barry knows that his friend is right, he can hardly fight the urge to try and get away
from them. They are no threat to him, he knows that. They saved him.

There are so many hands all over his body right now, though...

He feels surrounded by tormentors who aren’t really there, and while he is aware that neither Mick nor Digger would ever do anything like that to him, he can’t help the fear or the disgust. Most of all, he can’t help the shame that is holding him in vice grip.

“D-d-did… d-d-did y-y-you k-k-k-k…” It is so damn hard to talk right now. Barry’s jaw hurts, and his tongue feels too big and like it is made of lead, making it hard to move it at all. He needs to know, though.

“D-d-did y-y-you k-k-k-k…” The possible answer scares him, which is why it becomes even harder to get the question out in the first place. He can still feel the eyes of the other men on him, and he wishes he would dare to look up, to look into Mick’s face.

But he can’t.

He is scared.

He is a damn coward.

“No, Barry, I didn’t,” Mick eventually says, taking pity on him. “They are alive.” He doesn’t sound pleased by that fact, far from it, but Barry hardly notices it due to this incredible sense of relief he feels.

“Right now, at least,” Digger adds under his breath as he gets up. Barry can’t tell where he is going and doesn’t really care.

He hurts, and the feeling of nausea is not getting any better.

“Can you tell me where these scumbags got you with the bat?” Mick doesn’t touch him again but proceeds to ask him about his injuries.

“Before you get sick enough to puke, you tell me, okay? I don’t need you to choke on your own vomit. Len will have my balls if I let that happen.” Mick tries to use a lighter tone, probably noticing how close to tears Barry is once more, but Barry doesn’t notice. He merely attempts to nod but immediately stops when it causes a stinging pain to explode at the base of his skull.

Mick goes back to asking him questions about other topics that have nothing to do with what just happened to him. There are a few about how he feels peppered in between, but that’s it.

It is probably to make sure that Barry stays awake in case the bat to his head caused more severe injuries as well as to try and take his mind off what just occurred. Digger comes back about five minutes later and joins them which ends in Barry being in even more pain because the man has a knack for making him laugh even when he feels like crap.

About ten minutes after Evan left, quite a commotion takes over his bedroom, and Barry can’t stop a relieved sob from passing his lips when he picks up on Len’s voice.

Mick gives Len space and he takes the spot next to Barry a moment later. His face is pale and shows a very tight, closed off expression. It is easy for Barry to see how hard it is for his partner to control his anger and stay calm right now.

Len doesn’t try to touch him, and Barry is grateful for it. He would feel horrible about his inevitable
reaction to any offered comfort of that kind, even coming from him.

“L-L-Lenny…” His voice timid to his own ears as if he was on the brink of breaking down again, and he really doesn’t want to repeat that awful experience.

Len makes a soft, soothing noise as he reaches for him but stops before letting his hand slowly sink back down. He doesn’t actually say anything.

Barry doesn’t hold it against him. He knows how helpless Len must be feeling right now, and if there is one thing his partner is terrible at, it is coping with knowing that there is nothing he can do.

“Oh my god!” Lisa’s upset voice causes him to lift his gaze, realizing that she has come up behind her brother without him noticing. She kneels beside Len while her eyes go over Barry with unmistakable concern. There is a tightness to her features which is near identical to that of Len, and Barry feels his stomach sink as he picks up on how her eyes are shining with restrained tears.

“Hey, honey…,” Lisa says in a soothing, soft voice that only slightly wavers. “Everything will be alright, you don’t need to worry.” She gives him a reassuring smile, causing a couple of tears to slip past her eyelids and down her cheeks. She quickly brushes them away. “We will take care of this mess.”

Barry can feel how his own tears start to fall in response to her reassuring words and presses his eyes shut, nearly feeling smothered by the awfulness of the whole situation.

“Shhh, it is alright. It will be fine.” Lisa keeps on soothing him, and he tries to concentrate on her voice.

He feels horrible. Horrible and so, so tired.

Len asks Mick about the injuries Barry received, and they talk quietly for about a minute before he turns to the others.

“Mick, Digger, back to the hideout.” Len gets up, meeting Barry’s surprised look only briefly before addressing the others. “Evan, take them there. Sam, you come with me. Lisa, you stay with Barry. It probably won’t take long.”

“What? What are you going to do?” Lisa clearly isn’t happy about that order, and Mick, who now stands behind Barry so that he can’t see him, adds, “What about these scumbags?”

For a minute, Len hesitates, apparently thinking, and Barry doesn’t like his answer at all when he finally decides, “Take them with you but don’t do anything to them while I’m gone.”

“What the hell are you up to?” Lisa demands, annoyed. “Barry needs medical attention! They went after him with a damn bat!”

The blond woman is audibly irritated, but Len cuts her off, sharply, “You think I can’t see that, Lisa? Stay with him, I’ll make sure he gets the help he needs.”

With that, Len turns away to make his way back to the bedroom, and Barry cries out before he realizes what he is doing. He hates the idea of Len leaving, it scares him.

“Shhh.” Len crouches down beside him and cautiously touches his arm. Barry manages to keep the flinch to a minimum and meets his friend’s eyes with a pleading look. He doesn’t want Len to leave him now, he needs him.
“P-p-please, d-d-don’t g-g… g-g-go.”

“It’s alright, you’re safe, Barry. Lisa won’t let anything happen to you.” Len gives him another concerned once-over which causes his expression to darken. He shoots a glance towards where the guards are.

“Nothing will happen to you again,” Len reassures him, grimly. “I’ll make sure of that.”

It is a promise. Barry, even with how groggy he starts to feel and how fogged up his mind is becoming, realizes that, and he also understands what Len is promising him.

“D-d-don’t k-k-kill t-t-them, p-pleas-se…” Barry begs, but this time, Len doesn’t answer. Instead, he gets up and turns to Lisa. “Take care of him.”

With that, Len signs the others to get going, and Barry can’t stop the sobs anymore that have tried to crawl their way out of his chest for what feels like an eternity now.

He doesn’t want Len to leave him, and he doesn’t want them to kill because of him. He just wants things to get back how they were not even an hour ago.

“Hey, baby, it will be alright. Please, Barry.” Lisa tries to calm him down, but he can’t concentrate on her or what she is saying. All there is right now is the absolute horror about the notion of what Len is going to do to the two guards and that there is nothing he can do to stop that from happening.

Bruce will learn of this, maybe he already knows, and Barry has no idea what this will mean for them or him. He can’t lose them, and he can’t be sent back to the Heights.

Why did he even open that door?

“N-n-no… D-d-don’t l-let h-h-him d-do i-it, L-L-Lisa, p-pleas-se… p-please…”

They are who they are, Len and the others, and that knowledge has never been more frustrating or frightening to him before. When Bruce inevitably finds out about it, this will turn into an even worse nightmare than it already is.

“Barry, everything is alright, just try not to worry about that now.” The fact that Lisa ignores his plea isn’t reassuring. The frustration and anger he feels in response is nearly choking before it is quickly replaced by an even worse hopelessness.

Barry shifts his head slightly so that his forehead is resting on the cold floor and doesn’t attempt to fight his tears anymore.

He is so tired of it all.

Time goes by, it’s probably been less than five minutes or so, but to Barry, it feels like an eternity.

Then, the sound of someone reentering the bedroom reaches him, and shortly afterward Len returns, closely followed by Sam.

Barry tries to say his name, but it is hardly more than a murmur. He feels exhausted and is in pain, and it becomes increasingly harder to focus.

“For fuck’s sake! Where have you been?” Lisa snaps at her brother, though the relief in her voice is audible.

“Go gear up. Sam will get you back to the others,” Len orders. “I’ll stay here and wait for Garrick to
Barry feels his mind grind to a halt, and he is sure he must have misheard him.

Lisa doesn’t say anything either for a couple of seconds, seemingly just as shocked as he is. Then, she demands, “Have you fucking lost your mind!? You went to the damn Flash! What the hell is wrong with you! That bastard will think we did it!”

“Maybe, but we can’t help Barry right now. No doctor wants to cooperate with us, and I wouldn’t want one of them to take care of him anyway.” Len kneels down beside Barry again and urges his sister from her spot while doing so.

“He needs a hospital, and we can’t provide him with that,” Len proceeds but pauses for a second before he adds, somewhat hesitant, “and I doubt that the old Flash won’t make sure he is taken care of.”

“You crazy bastard! You can’t be serious! He is going to turn you in!” Lisa points out, sounding equally livid and desperate just then.

“Probably, but that won’t be the first time.” Len snorts before shooting his sister a glare. “Stop yapping around and scam already. I’m sure that this will work out much better with you not being around.” His patience is unmistakably running thin, but Lisa hardly ever cares when that’s the case and this time is no exception.

“Fuck you and your stupid idiotic bout of altruism! I stay!” Lisa sits back down on the floor beside her brother and gives him a withering look. “I can’t believe you went to that old jackass.”

“Stop fucking around and get lost already, Lisa!”

“Oh shut up, your whining is going to make Barry’s headache even worse.”

“Guys, I really don’t wanna interrupt, but I’d rather not stick around for the Flash—” Sam is cut off when Jay fazes through the entrance of the apartment. “— to arrive… great.”

“Barry!” Jay appears next to Barry, forcing both Len and Lisa aside, and studies him with a troubled and very much dismayed expression. “Oh my god, what happened?” He tentatively lays his hand on Barry’s shoulder but pulls it immediately back when it causes Barry to shrink, whimpering in protest.

Jay stares at him for a long minute, sorrow and pain plain on his face, and Barry wishes he would stop looking at him like that. He doesn’t want Jay to know about what happened here tonight.

He doesn’t want to feel this ashamed.

“What is going on?” Jay turns to Len, who got up and is now standing slightly behind Barry’s head, glowering down at the superhero. There is audible anger to Jay’s voice. It is not yet an accusation, but it comes close, and Barry tries to think of something to say that could diffuse the situation a little but comes up blank.

How can he explain any of this?

“We didn’t do anything!” Lisa exclaims indignantly, “If you want to go after someone, then it’s Wolfe and his fucking guards. It was two of those psychos who wanted have some fun with him!”

Lisa is furious, and for a moment Barry feels worried that she would try to punch Jay.
“Shut up, Lisa! Sam, take her to the damn mirror!” Len is obviously close to grabbing his stubborn sister and carrying her out of the room himself or trying to, at least.

Sam bristles at that and lifts both of his hands when Lisa shoots a withering glare his way. “Uh, I would really rather not-”

“What do you mean!? Guards did this to him?” Jay demands, and Barry watches with a growing sense of humiliation as realization suddenly hits the older man. He starts to understand what really must have happened and his anger is replaced by a look of dismay and pain.

Barry grits his teeth and closes his eyes, trying to shut out Jay and the way he is watching him now.

“What happened, Barry?” Jay speaks in a much softer, calmer voice, and there is no trace of accusation or anger, something Barry doesn’t know how to deal with.

“Did they…” Jay must have directed these words to Len since it’s him who replies.

“No. Not all the way, at least,” Len explains, and the anger that is coming off him is nearly palpable, so much so that Barry doesn’t even need to look at him to know that he is currently glaring Jay down.

“Oh god…” Jay’s voice wavers slightly, he sounds genuinely horrified.

Barry tries to bite down on the sob, prevent it from escaping, but it is no use. He is so tired, and everything hurts…

Jay knows, probably has assumed for a while now, but now he knows for sure what happened to Barry, and it is mortifying. He doesn’t want them to know about how weak he is.

“Barry, son, it is going to be fine, I promise,” Jay says, obviously trying to calm him down, but his words really just feel like salt in an open wound.

Nothing is going to be fine. Things are never going to be fine.

He is messed up, his life is messed up, and no matter how much he fights against it, he’ll always lose.

“Like it was fine all those damn years ago when you locked him in the Heights? Or when he nearly starved during the beginning of his parole? Or how everything was fine for him forty minutes ago? You’ve got a fucked-up definition of fine, Flash,” Lisa bites out sarcastically.

“No, you shut up-” Len is cut off by his sister, who sounds like she is just done with all of this.

“No, you shut up, Len! This whole damn situation is their fault! He nearly got raped tonight because they can’t give less of a fuck about what happens to him! I don’t know what happened between them back then, what made these self-righteous bastards think that he would suddenly change like that and do those awful things to his own family-”

“Damn it, Lisa, shut your mouth!” Len tells her sharply, causing Lisa to retort something just as angry, but Barry hardly notices it. He feels like someone is pressing down on his chest and he can’t get any air in his lungs, no matter how hard he tries.

Someone touches him, causing his confused mind to focus somewhat as he keeps trying to breathe. “It’s ok, just calm down, my boy. You need to calm your breathing.” Barry recognizes Jay’s voice, but he can’t understand what he says. His head feels light, and there is a growing pressure behind his stomach.
He doesn’t want to think of it.
He can’t think of it, not now. He’ll lose it.
They aren’t here.
He didn’t do it. They won’t put him back.
But they put him there before, even though he didn’t kill Iris or hurt Wally.
Iris who is dead. His Iris… He couldn’t protect her or Wally. He can’t even defend himself.
They always get what they want.
They will take and take and take until there is nothing left of him.
He can still taste Puckett’s cock in his mouth.
They will take him back, and he will die.
Dark spots appear in front of his eyes, and the sound of his blood pulsing draws everything out.
He is going to be sick.
Someone grabs Barry, helps him roll onto his side before a hand slips below his head, helping him keep his face off the floor as he throws up the little that is left from the rice and chicken soup he ate a few hours ago. He hates the contact, he doesn’t want them to touch him, but he can’t do anything about it right now. His focus is on his stomach and how it seemingly keeps trying to wither up and die within him. His whole body convulses, the process is pure agony due to his injuries.
At least he can breathe again…
Eventually, his stomach calms down, and Barry is left feeling miserable and exhausted.
The hands are still on his shoulder and cupping his cheekbone, and the contact is still just as disconcerting, but there is nothing he can do about it with how utterly spent he feels.
“It’s okay, Barry, you’re safe,” Len assures him, close to his ear, and Barry realizes that it is his partner who is touching him. He starts to slightly rub his thumb against his cheekbone in a reassuring fashion.
It still feels wrong to be touched right now, but it helps a little that it is Len.
“L-Len…” His voice sounds weak and hoarse from crying and throwing up, but he doesn’t care. He is just grateful that Len is with him.
The throbbing pain in his head starts to get worse, and he groans softly once more, closing his eyes.
“Here, that will help him,” Lisa says, but Barry doesn’t open his eyes to see what she is talking about. A moment later, a cool, slightly wet piece of cloth is pressed against his neck, and he utters another groan, this time one of relief.
It feels nice.
“I will call an ambulance,” Jay says, and Barry listens to him getting up.
“I will have to borrow your phone for that, Barry,” he explains then, which causes Barry to crack his eyes open a little and glance up to the other man, realizing just now, that he is still wearing his nightwear, blue checked pants, and a plain, long-sleeved grey shirt.

Jay is just about to start dialing 911 when he halts and frowns. A grim expression appears on his face, and he turns back to Len. “Where are the guards?”

“None of your business,” Len retorts easily. “Concentrate on helping Barry. You don’t need to worry about anything else.” There is a hostile edge to his tone, and Barry starts to grow sick all over again when he realizes that he has totally forgotten about Michael and Puckett.

“No,” Jay declines firmly, “you’ll tell me where they are, and I’ll get them to the police. You are not going to play judge, jury and executor, Cold.”

It is obvious that Jay isn’t going to have any of it, and Barry is grateful for it.

“Fuck you…” Lens voice is low, an unspoken threat clear in those two words, and the tension in the room briefly turns intense. Barry utters a soft, upset whimpers in response.

A strained silence follows.

“Look…” Jay sighs in a mixture of exasperation and impatience, “I know that you want to help him. I really do, but what you don’t realize is that you’re doing exactly the opposite by taking care of these bastards in your way.”

“Barry has never thought of killing as a solution, even when it comes to scum like that,” Jay points out. “By killing them you are not going to do him any favors. Have you even thought about what it will mean to him? Killing someone for him? I can’t say that I totally understand the relationship you two have, but I know that you are going to damage it severely if you force that upon him.” He sighs and adds in a less sharp tone. “It’s not what people like him do, and even putting the morals aside, Cold, you must know that you’re currently being recorded. This will make things only more complicated for him in the long run.”

Seconds tick by as Jay and Len keep holding each other’s piercing gaze, as if willing the other to back down, and Barry hopes that Len will give in.

After what feels like forever, Len gives Barry’s arm a light squeeze.

“You’re an idiot for not wanting them dead,” Len speaks softly but not accusingly.

It is as if the weight of a brick wall is lifted off his shoulders, and Barry presses his face against the hand still cupping his cheek, grateful that his partner has seen reason and backed off.

“So you will let them get away?” Lisa demands.

“They won’t get away, they will go to prison.” Jay insists, and there is a gravity to his voice that makes Barry nearly believe him.

“Oh, please, because that will ever happen.” The disdain Lisa has for the older man is palpable, but Len cuts her off before she can go on.

“Enough, Lisa. We’ll play along, for now. If they really do as much of a piss-poor job handling this situation as they did in the past, we can still finish it later. But…” Len adds when he feels Barry tense up, “For now we wait and see.”
“Fucking wonderful…” Lisa mutters with an exasperated sigh.

“We’ll bring them directly to the police,” Len tells Jay. “You’ll be present to take over from there otherwise you can forget about it.”

After studying Len, probably trying to gauge how honest he is about this, Jay gives him a curt nod. “Agreed.”

Jay makes the call to 911 then, and if Barry had known what a painful and humiliating ordeal the next hour would turn into, he probably would have tried to stop him.

Len, Lisa, and Sam leave before the paramedics arrive, and while Jay stays with Barry for the trip to the hospital, he has to leave as well shortly afterwards to get to the police station in KC. This leaves Barry alone in a room with a bunch of strangers, and while he knows that they are just a doctor and nurses doing their jobs, the knowledge doesn’t do him any good with how upset his mind is.

They try to touch him as little as possible when they realize what a daunting experience it is for him, but they still have to examine him. Aside from that, there are these very uncomfortable questions the doctor, and one of the nurses keep asking him. Barry is hardly able to give them any answers at all as he is a stammering mess.

Thankfully, they don’t try to force it.

In the end, they leave him be after they realize that they are doing more harm than good and are getting nowhere.

Afterward, Barry has some X-rays made, and that experience is much, much worse than the questions earlier since he can hardly move on his own and requires help, which means being touched by strangers. When one of the male nurses tries to adjust his position on the table to get his knee to the required angle for his second X-ray, he loses it and burst out in tears. He can’t stop during the whole procedure, even though the nurse quickly got a female colleague of his to take care of him instead who is exceptionally kind and patient with him.

She is also the one who wheels him back to the treatment room, promising that she will ask the doctor for something that will help to calm his nerves.

Barry is surprised when he finds Max and Bart waiting in the room, with the former talking to his doctor.

“Barry!” Max is at his side a little too fast for an ordinary human, but for once he doesn’t seem to pay any mind to it.

“Grandpa!” Bart quickly follows suit, and as Barry meets the teen’s eyes, he notices with dread that he also seems close to tears.

They are considerate enough to leave some room between him and them so that he doesn’t feel smothered, but it is visibly difficult for Bart to keep his hands at his side. “A-are you alright?”

Barry wants to assure the boy that he is fine, instead he can’t stop himself from breaking out in tears once more. He feels overwhelmed by everything and seeing how worried his grandson is because of him makes it even worse.

“S-s-sor-r-ry… I-I-I…” He still can hardly speak. It is frustrating. He must look horrible to them. He hopes Jay didn’t tell Max what exactly happened, but a part of him fears he did.
He just wants to be okay, he doesn’t want to feel like this again.

Barry buries his face in his hand and gives up his fight against the tears.

“No, don’t cry! Please, I’m sure they’ll help you really soon!” Bart sounds both terrified and upset, and Barry just wants it all to stop.

“Enough, Bart,” Max cuts in. “Go to the waiting room, I’ll join you there in just a minute.”

“No! I won’t leave him—”

“Enough! Do as I tell you. You’re not helping him right now, and you want him to get better, don’t you?” Max sounds unusually sharp and on edge, which causes Bart to follow his order without any further protest despite how little he obviously likes it.

The boy still turns towards Barry one last time before leaving, and assures him, “I’m just outside, grandpa, don’t worry. I won’t let anything happen to you again.”

Barry whimpers at that and would give about anything to be able to curl up on himself just then.

Bart watches him with wide pained eyes for another second before he finally leaves with visible reluctance.

“Barry.” Max gets down on a knee beside him, and while Barry isn’t looking at the man, he still can feel his gaze, “Jay told me that happened. I cannot tell you how sorry I am. I just want you to know that we’re here for you. You don’t need to worry about anything. Nothing will happen to you, this won’t have any bad consequences for you, ok?”

Barry doesn’t respond, he can’t, and he is grateful when Max leaves soon after that so that the doctor can go on treating him.

They give him something to help him calm down, and he is relieved when it works. His crying lets up and eventually stops.

Intense drowsiness overcomes him and the sensation of hopelessness is replaced by a thick, heavy numbness.

Barry hardly notices when the doctor starts to work on his shoulder and then his knees. The pain in his ribs and limbs has become barely noticeable, and when the nice female nurse urges him to lie down and rest a little, he goes along without hesitation.

He is gone in a matter of seconds.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this chapter was a doozy to write… well not really.

First thing first, though, the brief summary:

***

Barry is home alone since he is recovering from a flue. Eddy and Mary are at the movie
theaters after they offered Barry to stay with him that evening but he declined. Someone knocks at his door, and due to it being so late, he assumes it is Eddy who forgot his mobile phone and goes to open it. It turns out that it is not Eddy but two of the guards from his time in the Heights, Michael and Puckett.

What follows is a painful ordeal for Barry, where he is severely hurt and sexually assaulted. Mick, Evan, and Digger turn up and help him after Evan spotted what is going on. The wards are subdued, and Evan goes to get Len, while Mick and Digger stay behind with Barry.

Even eventually returns with Len, Lisa, and Sam. Len is shocked and livid by what happened to Barry, and tells Lisa to stay with Barry while Mick and the others take the guards to their hideout, and he and Sam go to get Barry some help.

Len eventually returns, telling Lisa to go with Sam since he informed Jay of what happened, something Lisa isn't happy about in the slightest.

Jay turns up a few minutes later, shocked see what happened to Barry and demands to learn what happened. He readily agrees to help Barry and get him to the hospital, but then he picks up that the guards are not around anymore and learns that they are currently at the Rogues'. After a brief argument between him and Len, Len agrees to hand the guards over to the police but only if Jay makes sure that they get what they deserve.

What follows is a brief glimpse of what happened to Barry after he arrives at the hospital where he is treated for his injuries.

***

So, that's a very cut down version of the chapter for anybody who didn't want to read it due to the harsh subjects it deals with.

I'm honestly not as happy with it anymore as I was once. Mostly because my writing style and way to tell a story has changed over the years, and I'm not entirely sure I was able to polish it up to my current level due to the limited time I had at hand. I hope it is still a satisfying read to all of you who decided to read it.

I also wanna briefly touch upon something that is said in this chapter. When Jay asks whether Barry was raped, Len said no (or "not all the way" to be more precise), which, of course is nonsense. It doesn't matter whether you are vaginally, anally or orally penetrated, rape is rape. That is just again how Len was brought up, which does not mean that he is in any way okay with it or doesn't find it horrible, he just labels it differently due to what he learned. Until a few years ago was a woman being vaginally penetrated by force, today the definition is much broader (thankfully).

The next two chapters will deal with the imminent aftermath of what happened, they could be considered fiilly if you want to (though I would say it is important to see how Barry deals with what was done to him) since they don't progress the plot a lot. The last two chapters (omg, we're nearly there! :D ) will give the plot a hard kick in its behind and lead to something big that will change the status quo. After that, we are on a hiatus for a while, probably a year. I will keep you updated in any case over tumblr (I seriously need to become more of a presence there again, anyway).

I will try to respond to the comments I got for the last chapter asap, and as always, thank
you so much for leaving me feedback. Every single comment of yours is appreciated. I know that people sometimes think it is better to leave no comment instead of a brief one, but I think any writer appreciate to get them, no matter how short. It is just nice to know that people like your work. :)

I will be in London from the 30th November till the 7th of Dezember (with friends, just vacation - YAY!), so I will probably post the next chapter the weekend after (8th or 9th), which means again three weeks waiting for you, but I promise that we are back to our regular schedule afterwards.

Have a wonderful time till then <3
Recovering Hurts

Chapter Summary

Barry survived another assault, and, once again, he has to try and recover from it. At least, he doesn’t have to do so on his own, this time around, Jay makes sure of it.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is edited by my wonderful friend Quintessenzza, who seriously needs to get at least half of all the kudos this story receives. :)

Warning: traumatic memories dealing with physical and sexual child abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry’s shoulder hurts, his whole body does, really, but his shoulder is the worst, and it makes it difficult to concentrate on his doctor as he goes over his injuries with him.

It is still early, he has just had some breakfast, and he regrets eating anything at all since now he has to deal with a bout of nausea in addition to the pain. This makes it even harder to keep his focus on the doctor in front of him.

The blows he received with the bat have fractured the top of his upper arm bone, cracked three of his right ribs and injured the medial collateral ligament in his left knee. While the last two are painful, they aren’t as severe, nor do they take as long to heal as the fracture of his upper arm which will make it impossible for him to go back to work for at least six weeks and that is if he is lucky.

“A fracture of the proximal humerus can be a complicated thing, but in your case, it is a very clean break and should heal on its own without us having to do any surgery, Mr. Allen.” His attending physician informs him. He introduced himself to him as Dr. Frank Settler. He is a man in his mid-thirties, who has a kind face and is the same doctor who treated him when he arrived a little more than a day ago.

“You are going to spend at least two weeks of your recovery in bed. It is very important that you try to avoid moving your shoulder and knee as much as you can.” The man levels him with a stern look that doesn’t seem unkind. “You need as much rest as possible. It would be good for you if you had someone looking after you during that time.”

Dr. Settler has hardly finished the sentence when Jay interjects, "That's alright. He can stay with me and my wife until he has fully recovered." Turning to Barry, he adds. "Joan and Axel would love to have you over. As would I, of course."

Barry, whose head still feels like it is stuffed with cotton, which turns thinking into a chore, needs a moment to get what Jay has just said. When he does, he hesitates, not sure how to react to that kind offer, that probably should not feel as unexpected as it does.
The notion of spending his time with the older couple holds something very compelling. He really doesn’t want to get back to his own flat right now; the idea alone scares him if he is honest. At the same time, he also doesn’t want to be a burden to Jay and Joan. And there is also that little voice in the back of his mind that warns him against trusting them while he is this vulnerable. Something could go wrong, maybe he would do or say something that will cause Jay to change his mind, and he will be sent back to the Heights.

The notion alone is terrifying.

There are also Eddy and Mary, who could look after him. The idea is more comforting, but at the same time, he doesn’t want to put such a burden on his friends. Especially, after they helped him so much when he had been shot nearly two years ago. With his current state, he will be even less mobile than he was back then which means that he will need help with about anything. James will likely offer to help as well, but his friend is currently very busy with work and has probably better things to do than playing nanny for him once more.

Barry hasn’t talked to them so far. Jay spoke to them yesterday, and Barry is glad that he was mindful enough to think about informing them. They would undoubtedly have been worried to no end otherwise.

Due to him spending most of today sleeping, he missed them passing by, but Mary left a small Teddy bear that is currently resting at the bedside table of his hospital bed.

They are probably worried sick, and Barry wishes he could assure them somehow that he is okay.

There is a part of him that really doesn’t want to get in contact with them.

He is mortified about what happened to him, and he doesn’t doubt that they’ve learned about it from Jay by now. Mary will undoubtedly cry when they eventually visit him, and Eddy… he isn’t really sure what Eddy will do, and it worries him.

Barry doesn’t feel ready to deal with them on top of what happened to him. He knows that it is horrible of him, he should be grateful, but he can’t help himself. He is hurting so badly right now, not only physically, and if he could, he would put off dealing with any of it indefinitely.

It probably will be better to stay with Jay and Joan, at least for a while, he will be less of a bother to them, if that’s possible, but…

He won’t be able to see Len or any of the others there and he misses Len already so much-

“Barry,” Jay interrupts his thoughts, voice tentative but there is a nearly pleading quality to it that catches Barry off guard, “please let us help you.”

The look Jay gives him then makes it once again very clear to him how much the other man has also been affected by what happened to him the other night. It is still hard for Barry to wrap his head around that.

He knows, of course, that Jay cares about him, but it is hard to believe that it really can go this far.

If he wasn’t so tired and in so much pain, he would probably have felt a little resentment about it, about Jay thinking he has the right to do so now, after everything that happened.

He doesn’t, though. He can’t really feel anything but fatigue and pain.

“O-Ok-kay. Th-thanks, J-Jay.” Barry gives him a weak smile and feels a little better about his
decision to accept the other man’s offer when he suddenly doesn’t seem so grim and exhausted anymore.

“No need, Barry, really. We’re more than happy to be able to help you,” Jay assures him, and his relief seems nearly palpable.

It is nice to have people like Jay in his life again. People from his past, who he thought have given up on him for good.

Barry still feels the lingering desperation and hopelessness that stems from what happened to him the other night, which makes just being there a damn chore, but he tries to keep his thoughts from going too far in that direction. Knowing that there are people who care for him helps immensely. He is still hurting all over, and the mortification is so intense at times that he seems close to drowning in it at times, but the whole thing is made more bearable by the knowledge that he is not alone.

Not anymore.

He honestly doesn’t know how he was able to go through that day after day for years with nobody there for him to fall back on during his time at the Heights. It feels like a miracle to him right now.

“Are you alright, my boy?”

Barry is once again startled out of his thoughts and realizes with a sinking feeling that he has his eyes pressed shut in a vain attempt to stop the memories of his time in Iron Heights from assaulting him.

“Y-y-yeah, I-I-I’m o-o-k-kay.” Barry swallows and nods as if to reinforce his words. Jay doesn’t seem to believe him but lets it go and turns back to the doctor who then goes on to explain to them what they have to be careful about during his recovery and what his physiotherapy will look like.

Barry feels like getting sick when he learns what the cost for all that will be and he remembers that he won’t be able to work at the bar for at least six weeks, probably even longer than that. How is he going to keep his job?

Jay doesn’t want to hear any of his objections when he tells the doctor that he will pay for everything.

"You can pay me back later," Jay assures Barry when he picks up on how distressing of a topic this is to him. Barry doesn't protest any further, even though he knows that it will take forever to get rid of this new debt. He doesn't have the energy to worry about this as well on top of everything else.

After the doctor leaves, Jay helps Barry with filling out some paperwork that is involved with his stay and release from the hospital. It doesn't take long, and the only thing standing between him and leaving this place is the upcoming interview with two police officers to get his statement about what happened last night.

To say that Barry is not looking forward to it is an understatement.

Jay stays with him after a nice nurse picked up the filled-out forms and tries to get Barry’s mind off the following interview. The thought of having to talk about what was done to him, especially to the police, is disconcerting, and while Barry tries to assure Jay that he really doesn’t have to be around for that, he is secretly glad that the older man insists on staying with him.

The two officers, a pretty young woman by the name of Branch and an older, rather beefy, grim looking man in what must be his early fifties by the name of Rojas, arrive briefly after eleven. They are both from KCPD, which makes talking to them somewhat more comfortable, even though
Barry's stammer still ends up being bad enough that it takes ridiculously long for him to answer each question.

The man seems somewhat annoyed by that, and Barry is pretty sure that he must know who he is. People like Barry usually stay in the memory of their former colleagues for a long time, and with the KCPD and the CCPD closely working together most of the time, he doesn’t doubt that probably both of them have heard of him before.

Despite that, it doesn’t seem like the younger officer seems to hold the same dislike for him or is better at hiding it, at least. Officer Branch is listening patiently as he stammers through his answers and tries to help him along kindly when he once again can’t get a word out.

It is about ten minutes into the inquiry when Jay finally has enough of the older officer’s attitude, who his leaning at the wall next to the door and keeps glowering at Barry whenever he dares to glance his way, and just huffed in frustration when he stumbled over another word.

“If you are incapable of listening quietly, Officer Rojas, I have to ask you to leave and let your partner finish this on her own. My friend went through a horrible ordeal last night, and he surely doesn’t need your misplaced scorn because you mistakenly believe that you know him at all.”

Rojas has the decency to look somewhat uncomfortable and just mutters for Branch to finally go on with it after she stopped to shoot her partner a very annoyed look.

An hour later, Barry is finally able to leave the hospital and breathing suddenly seems to become a much easier affair again. Jay wheels him out with Joan and Axel at his side. Both of them arrived not too long after he was hospitalized, and Barry was touched when he learned that they stayed nearby for the majority of the last day.

“Don’t sweat it,” Axel says with a shrug when Barry thanked him for it. "Hospitals are creepy places. Nobody should have to stay there on their own." Axel says the last part with a surprisingly grim expression, but before Barry can wonder about it, Joan agrees. "Axel is right, my dear, there is no need to thank us. We are glad we can be here for you.”

Barry doesn’t trust his voice to respond to that and is thankful when they get to Jay’s car a moment later.

Max and Bart had to leave before he woke up, and Jay let him know that it was due to Wally needing their assistance with some problem that had come up the night before. He was very vague about what the trouble was, and Barry didn’t press. It is more than likely that he will be able to read about it in the newspaper if he wants to anyway.

Moving his body really hurts. He has to grit his teeth not to cry in pain when he climbs into the car with Jay’s help. Judging by the concerned look he receives from the older man, it is likely that he hasn’t missed it.

They talk during the drive home with Barry mostly just listening, and he is relieved that he has something to concentrate on. The medication he got for the pain doesn’t do a good job of helping him. Fortunately, they are lucky with the traffic, and Jay and Axel help him into the Garricks’ guest bedroom not even twenty-five minutes later.

“Th-thanks…,” Barry weakly murmurs when he is finally in bed. He desperately hopes that his body, especially his shoulder and ribs, will stop hurting this badly soon.

“No need, Barry. Do you want something to drink?” The concern in Jay’s eyes hasn’t lessened so
far, and Barry can already feel the guilt creep up on him over causing the other man so much trouble. He is able to give him a weak smile when he answers.

“S-some w-water w-wo-would be be-gr-gr-great.”

The glass is hovering within his reach not even a moment later, and Barry quietly thinks to himself that he really misses his powers. He usually tries not to think about them, but it is hard, especially now with how badly restricted his movements are due to his injuries. The water is refreshing, and he finishes half of the glass in one go.

“When do you want me to get you the television up?”

“N-no, i-it’s a-alr-alright, I-I w-would l-like t-to re-re-rest a-a l-little i-if th-that i-is o-ok?”

Barry feels so exhausted that he nearly loses the grip on the glass and is grateful when Jay takes it from him before that can happen.

The older man nods with an understanding smile.

“Of course, rest is probably the best for you anyway, my boy. Come, Axel, let us give Barry some peace and quiet.” Jay turns to Axel, who has been quietly standing close to the door all this time.

It is evident that the teen doesn’t want to leave, but he, too, seems to understand that his friend is close to nodding off anyway.

"I can stay if you want," Axel offers, even so, probably unsure whether it is a good idea for Barry to be alone right now.

"I-it’s f-f-fine," Barry declines with a weary smile as he eyes start to droop. "I-I’m t-t... t-tired... b-b-but th-thank y-you."

"OK," Axel agrees somewhat reluctantly, ”but in case you change your mind on that, the offer still stands. My room is next to yours, so if you need something, just holler.”

Barry would have chuckled if he weren’t that close to falling asleep.

He hears them leave, his eyes already closed, and he briefly wonders when that happened.

He never seems to notice something moving in the reflection of the bedside lamp just as he falls asleep.

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Everything is strangely motionless.

Barry looks at the ground in front of his feet. It is so dry that it is showing cracks in places. It is a summer day, a scorching one, and he is thirsty. His eyes go to the unhinged door of the back entrance that leads to the small rundown house he has been staying at for about six months now.

He can hear Edith’s muffled screams of pain that come from the inside. It’s clear that Susan isn’t done with punishing her. Their host mother is so quick to enrage, sometimes you don’t need to do anything more than just be in the same room as she is and she will suddenly lash out. About two months ago, she broke his cheekbone by hitting him with a pan after he had entered the kitchen too quietly for her taste and ended up surprising her. She doesn’t like them very much, neither of them, but Barry still likes it here better than he did with the last few host families he stayed with. Susan and
Jason aren’t nice people, not someone he would entrust with kids or anybody too small to stand up for themselves, but they are content with verbal and physical abuse.

Barry is getting thirstier, and it is really hot out here with nowhere to take shelter from the afternoon sun, as the big garden is nothing more than dried up grass and some dead bushes. He wants Susan to stop, not just because he isn’t stupid enough to go inside the house while she is in such a livid state, but also because he feels terrible for Edith who has joined them just a few weeks ago and doesn’t know all the unspoken rules yet. She will come to him afterward, all the younger kids do since he and Eric are the two oldest one, eleven and twelve years respecting, and therefore the ones to seek out help and comfort from. There is a test tomorrow at school he has to study for, and he is a bit angry with himself for not going upstairs instead of outside when the whole disaster started about fifteen minutes ago. He probably won’t be able to do any studying later, and he is tired, he doesn’t want to stay up all night again to prepare himself for some stupid test.

There is a slight shift in the air, it is hardly noticeable, but when Barry turns around, nervous and apprehensive of what could have caused it, he is suddenly no longer in the dead garden under the hot sun but in a bathroom. Everything seems bigger than usual, and for a second, he is confused until he remembers that he is still small and that everything looks pretty huge when you are seven. The tiled floor is cold under his feet, and he realizes that he is naked. It is then that he notices the presence beside him and that he is not alone.

Stephen always seems a bit like a giant to him, the man is nearly 6’3’’ and very broad. He has never had any problems lifting Barry up and carrying him around when he gets tired.

“Come on, shrimp, let’s get you cleaned up so that mommy doesn’t nag again.”

His voice is deep but not unpleasant, and while Barry has really started to like him, there is the, by now, familiar feeling of reluctance and dread rearing its heads inside his chest. He doesn’t want to bath with Stephen, and for a moment he thinks of telling him so, but he knows that he will have to go back to the orphanage again otherwise and he is terrified of that, too. The bigger man either doesn’t notice his hesitation or doesn’t care as he picks him up and sets him in the big bathtub in one swift swoop before joining him.

The water is warm and has bubbles in it, but Barry hardly pays any attention to it. Maybe Stephen wouldn’t want to play the secret game today? Julie is home, and they usually don’t play it when his host mother is around. But she has gone to bed already, so it’s unlikely that they are just going to bath...

“Your hair definitely needs another meeting with Captain Shampoo. You want to be a clean little boy, don’t you?”

Stephen sounds so friendly that Barry feels a bit bad that he doesn’t like to play with him anymore. He knows that he is fortunate with this family, but it is still sometimes hard for him to not feel scared and angry. His host father scoops warm water over his head before he starts to shampoo his hair. It is the one that smells like apples and has small pirates on the bottle. It is Barry’s favorite, and suddenly he is crying. He has started to cry a lot over the last two months. His host mother really doesn’t like it very much, and either gets really angry or merely ignores him.

“Hey, hey there, Barry, you are a big boy. Big boys don’t cry, that is for little girls like your sisters but not for you.”

The big hands start to caress his arms and his upper body gently, and Barry just wants to get away, far away. He wants his plush bunny and, more than that, his real mommy.
“Shhh, shrimp, it is alright, you don’t need to be scared. You are a really good little boy, I love you very much.”

Stephen’s hands start to caress his legs, and he wants to hit them, to get them away from him. It feels so horrible. He doesn’t want that at all.

“Come, Barry, be a good boy.”

Barry is lifted up and turned around so that he doesn’t sit with his back to the other man anymore and he really starts to sob quietly, because this is a secret he isn’t allowed to tell, but his little body still shakes. He feels how his head is steadily urged forward and he closes his eyes.

Suddenly, the shaking gets stronger, and he realizes that it isn’t his crying that causes it. The big hand on the back of his head vanishes, so does the water, and, for a moment, there only seems to be utter nothingness.

“-ry! Come on, my boy, wake up. It is just a dream.”

The voice doesn’t belong to his second host father and for a second Barry is completely confused which is accompanied by a nearly smothering fear until he recognizes who is talking to him.

Then, he is awake, with such promptness that he feels slightly nauseated, and stares up at Jay, who is leaning over him with a troubled expression on his face.

Barry doesn’t mean to, he really doesn’t, but before he even can think about what he is doing, he is already throwing a punch at the other man who is much too close and triggers his fight instinct. Jay avoids it without any trouble, of course, much to Barry’s disbelief. He would have felt horrible about hitting the man, even though he has next to no strength right now. He still deeply regrets the abrupt moment, a second later, when he becomes aware of the pain he caused to himself.

Jay is sitting back, studying him with concern, and the room is silent for a long minute. That is, except for Barry’s hard breathing and the rushing of his blood in his ears. He feels way too hot, and the pain is nearly maddening.

“Is he ok?”

Axel’s strangely timid voice comes from the doorway and Barry can feel his stomach drop when he realizes that this nightmare hadn't been one of those he could deal with in silence.

It is hard to make the boy out in the darkness, and it takes Barry another couple of seconds to understand that it is not really the absence of light that makes it difficult for him to see but the fact that he is crying. Suddenly, the humiliation and the anger hit him full force, and he just wants it all to go away.

“Axel, go back to your room.” Jay sounds surprisingly calm but stern and when the boy objects angrily, he merely gives him a hard look and repeats his order with a bit more sharpness.

Axel hesitates but does as he is told in the end. “Fine…”

The teen is obviously not happy about it but he is gone a moment later, leaving them alone.

Jay turns back to Barry who let his head drop back onto the pillow and is now staring up at the ceiling with a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach. His insides feel like they are tied up in knots, and even though he knows it is only psychosomatic, he still has trouble breathing.
At least, he has been able to stop the tears.

“Do you want some water?”

Barry doesn’t. He feels nauseous and just wants to be left alone. At the same time, though, the simple notion of the other man leaving is terrifying to him. Why is it so hard for him not only to understand but also to believe that it has only been a damn dream?

“Y-ye…” His teeth start to chatter as soon as he tries to speak, and he stops himself, embarrassed by his own body and how badly it is dealing with the stress.

“Okay.” The word has hardly left Jay’s mouth, and the glass of water is already in his hand. Barry looks at it for a few seconds without reaching for it. He won’t be able to hold it with his hands shaking so badly and judging by the concerned look the other man is giving him, he has come to the same conclusion.

“Do you want me to help you?” Jay asks, his voice low and tentative.

“N-n-“

Barry tightly shuts his eyes and just shakes his head after he realizes that he is still unable to get any words out of his mouth. He knows his friend means well and he is really grateful for it, but he can’t imagine anybody touching him right now. His body feels horrible, dirty, and he just wants a damn shower.

“That’s fine, Barry. I will simply leave the glass on your bedside table, and you can take it yourself when you have calmed down a bit, alright?” Jay suggests in a gentle tone, and Barry feels the itching behind his eyelids getting stronger once more. He silently nods and begins to concentrate on his breathing to calm it down a bit.

It takes a long time, probably around fifteen minutes till he has composed himself enough that he is sure he can control his emotions.

Jay quietly sits at his side and waits. He is a comforting presence, and Barry tries to convince himself that nothing will happen to him with his friend around. It is stupid and probably not right, but it still helps a little.

“Th-tha-than-nks…”

“Of course, son.”

Sometimes, before the whole tragedy with Iris and Wally had happened, during the good part of his time as the Flash, Barry imagined what it would have been like to grow up with people like the Garricks. Normal people, loving and warm people who would have treated him kindly. He didn’t do it too often seeing that wishful thinking had never gotten him anywhere and usually brought him nothing but pain when he realized what a difference it really would have made. Nonetheless, he always secretly wished that he could have had a family capable of sharing love and comfort as they do.

“Th-thank y-y-you…” Barry closes his eyes, even though he knows that he won’t be able to go back to sleep. He doesn’t want to because he knows what awaits him there. Jay gets up but doesn’t leave much to his surprise. Instead, he gets a chair so that he can give him a bit of space while still being nearby.

“Do you want me to tell you a little about my week at the laboratories?”
It is a kind offer, and Barry desperately wants to say yes, but, at the same time, he doesn’t want to cause the other man any more trouble that he already has.

“Y-you d-do-don’t h-h-have-ve t-to.”

“It is not a problem, Barry.”

Jay holds his gaze for a long moment after he turned to him with a doubtful look and something in his eyes makes Barry feel less tense. His friend starts to tell him about some of the projects they are currently working on, and how Axel is doing really well. He also mentions the teen’s shenanigans that keep his colleagues on their toes, and while he tries to sound exasperated, his amusement over the teen’s antics is hard to miss.

Exhausted, Barry listens quietly, with his eyes nearly closed.

The pain in his body is severe but it helps him stay in the present and concentrate on Jay’s voice instead of letting his mind drift off to places he doesn’t want it to go. He doesn’t know what time it was when the other man woke him up, but it was probably not long after midnight. Nonetheless, Jay stays with him until morning. His friend alternates between telling him things he believes Barry could find interesting or amusing and merely being a quite but soothing presence at his side. He doesn’t leave either when Joan stops at the door around half past six to wish them a good morning before she continues on her way downstairs. Around seven Joan and Axel join them with four bowls of freshly made porridge, so they can share the meal together while Barry is still able to stay in bed.

Barry can’t find words to express how grateful he is for their kindness.

***

Jay called Ms. Jenkins while Barry was in the hospital. Barry learns of it when he remembers his parole officer and that he missed his last appointment with her. He gets upset over it until Jay calms him down when Barry tells him what has him so worried.

“It is alright, Barry, I called her the morning after you were hospitalized. You don’t need to worry about her.”

This comes as a surprise since Barry didn’t expect Jay to think of something like that. What makes him slightly nervous though, is the grim face and tone with which his friend has told him so. It seems that Jay doesn’t like Ms. Jenkins very much, and if Barry knows the woman just half as well as he thinks he does, he guesses that the dislike is probably mutual.

It is already late, briefly after ten at night, and Jay has just come back from some business with the JSA. Joan went to bed about half an hour ago, and Axel is currently making himself a late-night snack downstairs after he has spent the majority of the evening at Barry’s side.

Jay, who has probably just passed by to check up on him, goes back to the door and closes it to give them some more privacy.

Barry isn’t looking forward to the conversation Jay undoubtedly is about to start.

The older man sits down on the chair next to his bed, which was occupied by Axel not too long ago, and for a few seconds he doesn’t say anything.

“Barry, my conversation with Ms. Jenkins has been quite insightful.”

He doesn’t doubt that. Ms. Jenkins probably isn’t what you would expect to find in such a field of
Jay is meeting his gaze firmly, with a slight frown, and it is easy to see that he isn’t happy about learning how Barry has been supervised for the last few years.

“Why didn’t you tell me what kind of person your parole officer is?”

Barry’s eyes don’t meet Jay’s but are instead focused on the pattern of his comforter. He really didn’t want Jay to learn about this. His parole will be over in less than a year, after that he won’t have to worry about Ms. Jenkins ever again. Why does the man have to learn about it now?

“Barry, I know that you are still uncertain about it, but you can come to me if you need help, especially when it comes to things like this,” Jay reminds him kindly. “That person shouldn’t have been in charge of your parole, it is obvious that she isn’t fit for that.”

Jay leans back and sighs when Barry doesn’t answer. He doesn’t seem frustrated or angered by his lack of response, though. Then he goes on, "I'm not blaming you, Barry. It isn't as if we haven’t given you enough reason not to trust us, but I hoped that you would have realized by now that Joan and I are here for you.”

There is no real disappointment in Jay’s voice, just a slight note of sadness, and Barry wishes he had never broached the subject.

A thick silence stretches between them and fills the room for the next few minutes, neither really willing nor sure how to go on.

“Barry, you do realize that you don’t deserve that kind of treatment, don’t you?”

This question takes Barry by surprise, and before he can stop himself, he looks at Jay who meets his eyes with uncomfortable intensity.

It has never really been about deserving, things like that have always just happened to him. It never mattered so far if he somehow caused them or not. Nonetheless, Barry knows that nobody deserves to be treated like that. Whether he sometimes believes otherwise is not the point. He is aware that he can’t always trust his own judgment when it comes to himself and his life.

“You are a good person, Barry. You don’t deserve what happened to you,” Jay says as if to answer the question for him.

Barry turns his head away and closes his eyes. Jay’s words touch a raw spot in him that has been aching for so long that he has forgotten about it even being there. It is nice to hear those words, to have someone tell him that it isn’t his fault. He wants to believe that so badly. He briefly thinks of Mrs. Ming and how she told him the same thing shortly before she left them.

“Th-thank y-y-you…” Barry utters quietly and startles when Jay cautiously touches his hand in response, turning to him. While he feels tensed up to the degree that his whole body is hurting, he doesn’t break the contact. Jay gives him a tight smile. He pulls his hand back after just another second, probably sensing Barry’s discomfort.

“We will find out what the cause of all this is. I promise you that.”

Barry wishes he wouldn’t. His friend means well and that he just wants to help him, but, for Barry, this is like scratching at the scab of a hardly closed wound. He just wants to be over and done with it and forget about all the nasty things that have happened to him. It doesn’t matter that he was put into prison for a crime he didn’t commit, nothing that Jay or anybody else can do about it will change
what happened. There is nothing for him to go back to, his past life is gone, and he can only look forward and hope for the best.

Unfortunately, Barry doesn’t believe that Jay shares his opinion on that matter, and he feels too weary as to discuss this dreadful subject with him. Therefore, he merely gives a small nod and tries not to think that Jay seems to pick up slowly but surely on every humiliating detail of his life. He doesn’t want the other man to believe he is weak, not any more than he already has to. The more Barry thinks about everything that happened to him and is still happening, the harder it is for him not to come to just that conclusion, though.

***

James, Eddy, and Mary visit him three days into his stay with Jay and Joan. It is a teary reunion. Mary tries to keep a brave face but ends up crying even so. Despite how miserable this makes Barry feel, they end up spending a nice afternoon together. He hurts all over towards the end of their stay mostly because Eddy and James won’t stop making him laugh, even though Mary keeps scolding them about it.

Axel joins them after he comes home from work and the four of them spend the rest of the afternoon and evening talking and playing cards. Jay joins them early on for half an hour but leaves them mostly to themselves.

Barry can’t bring himself to talk about what happened but to his surprise and relief, nobody tries to make him have this conversation. They are his friends, and they understand.

Chapter End Notes

I just came back from London, like, literally. I entered my apartment not an hour ago, and it is good to be back but also kind of sad. I love London, it is such a beautiful city with such amazing people. They seem so much warmer and more welcoming what I'm used from in my own country, and I just love the British accent. <3

Anyway, thanks to my friend and editor Quintessenza, who kept working while I was enjoying myself, this chapter is able to get out on time. I'm very grateful for that since I will spend the weekend with my family and likely not have time to get back to my laptop before Monday. I'll also not be able to respond to the comments of the last chapter until next week, but I'll definitely get to it. :)

So, this chapter is the beginning of the aftermath of what happened to Barry in last chapter. It does deal with sad and horrible things again, this time via memories Barry is forced to relief due to his latest trauma. I think we all know by now that Barry had a horrid childhood, but this gives you a little more detail about what he had to survive. Of course, probably nobody is asking for it, but I always seem to be drawn back to write stuff like that.

We also see that the KCPD (and CCPD) has not yet forgotten about who Barry is. Those cops can certainly hold a grudge, and it is a good thing Jay was there to stick up for Barry. Do you think we'll see more of the CCPD/KCPD in future? Jay is clearly not having anybody else looking after Barry right now. It is sweet, but I wonder whether being back at the Garricks' home is not also putting an additional strain on Barry's already fragile state.
I hope you enjoyed the chapter and thanks so much for your feedback, I always enjoy getting your comments.

Next chapter will have Barry miss Len, there will be more walks down the memory lane, and Barry and Jay will have a heart to heart.

Have a wonderful December till then! <3
Unwanted Help

Chapter Summary

Barry has another sleepless night, and Jay worries about how his pain medication isn't working as it should.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited by my dear friend Quintessenza. He did a marvelous job as usual, and made sure that I'm able to put this chapter up on time, even though he is currently fighting a cold. He seriously deserves some appreciation. <3 It's a pity they don't have a kudos button for beta readers as well!

Warning: Mention of past murder, description of death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry misses Len.

He stares at the dark ceiling above, lips pinched as he tries to ignore the pulsing pain in his shoulder and knee, or that every breath sends a flash of pain through his ribcage.

The rest of the house is quiet.

He can't sleep.

His body aches too much for him to find any rest, despite the medication he took for the pain not even two hours ago. It should help with it but fails to do so.

Barry can't say he is surprised, drugs had trouble working on him in the past as well, so why should it be any different now? Especially now that his body is so banged up.

Swallowing dryly, he reaches for the glass of water on his bedside table. His movements are slow, careful, but it still hurts.

Jay would likely offer to stay with him again tonight like he did Barry's first night in the guest bedroom. It would be nice to have a companion, not to be left alone in that quiet room, with nothing else but his thoughts.

A sip of water helps with the dryness of his throat but seemed hardly worth it when Barry lays back down and his body is screaming at him for being stupid enough to move at all.

He closes his eyes and tries to ignore the pain.

Like earlier, his mind goes straight to Len and the Rogues.

Barry wonders how they are doing.
There have been a few times before in which he thought he spotted either Sam or Evan in the reflection of his bedside lamp or other reflective surfaces in the guest room, but they were always gone before he could really be sure. They haven’t let him know of their presence so far which is probably good at any rate.

The little pocket mirror is still in his apartment, and he hasn’t asked Axel or one of the others to get it for him so far. He probably won’t.

This is the first Flash’s home, and Barry doesn’t think Jay will like the idea that one of the current two Mirror Masters is lurking around. Axel told him the other day how livid Jay had been at first when Len contacted him with Sam’s help last Sunday.

“I kid you not, Barry, the old guy was so furious that he probably would have climbed through the mirror to strangle them if he had been able to.”

The boy seemed more amused than anything else about that. Barry doesn’t find it particularly funny. He can imagine very well what this intrusion into Jay’s home by some of his most notorious enemies meant to him.

Axel doesn’t understand that. The Rogues may be criminals, but they are also people the teen has known for years by now and who he regards a lot like family as well. They may have their own rules that mostly prevent them from taking the same dark and nasty paths as the majority of masked criminals, but that does not mean that they can’t cause serious trouble or be dangerous.

Barry would have been worried in Jay’s place. The older man has a very different relationship with them than Axel does.

It is good that his friends are smart enough to stay away and respect the fact that this house is off limits to them.

Though, that isn't the only reason, why he hasn’t tried to contact his friends so far.

Contacting them via the mirror in the bathroom would probably be easy if Barry really wanted to speak with them. He is pretty certain that Len has either Sam or Evan keep an eye on him most of the time. Just in case.

Because of that, it wouldn't be too hard to get their attention.

What really kept Barry from doing so, despite how much he wants to see them, is that he is apprehensive about meeting them again after what happened last Sunday.

They witnessed this humiliating ordeal. They saw him at his lowest, and...

It scares him.

They know about the abuse he experienced at the hands of the prison staff, have so since before he left that awful place, but they never actually saw it before.

It will make it terribly awkward for him to be around them again at first, probably more due to him than them.

Even so, despite the shame, he is still so damn glad that Mick, Evan, and Digger have been there to prevent worse from happening.

They saved him. Barry won't ever forget that.
He closes his eyes and sighs softly.

He wishes Len were here.

***

Tonight, he is back in his old home in Danville. He knows that this is a dream, but he can only play along anyway, like a marionette attached to invisible strings.

The air is crisp, and it has stopped raining just a few minutes ago so the ground outside the charming little house is still.

The neighborhood is shrouded in darkness. It is late evening, but there should still be street lights illuminating the sidewalks and streets.

There aren’t any.

It is eerily quiet. He stands in front of the slightly agape entrance door. He tries to remember if this is like it was back then.

All those years ago, when his connection to the speed force has still been active, time sometimes slowed down on its own and stretched seconds into something that felt close to an eternity whenever he got really unnerved.

When that happened, everything else suddenly seemed to freeze, and he was in a world of stillness and silence, very similar to how it feels right now.

Did he immediately notice that something wasn’t all right back then?

He did pick up on the door being open with nobody being around, but he can't remember how he felt.

It is difficult to get a clear image of anything that happened that day, so long ago.

He likely stared at the door like he does now, with the world around him in utter silence and a feeling of dread growing in the pit of his stomach.

His palms itch, he rubs them against his jeans, but they feel odd. He glances down and sees that there is dried blood on them.

There hasn't been last time he checked.

He feels nausea join the fear.

Barry knows exactly what is awaiting him in there.

Death.

He doesn’t want to move, he doesn’t want to go inside and see once more what was done to Iris because he hadn’t been fast enough, hadn't been able to save her.

He wants to wake up.

Just wake up, he screams at himself in his mind, but it is to no avail.

Despite his unwillingness, his feet start to move.
He can't do anything about it.

This is the one part that always stays the same in his nightmares, the helplessness.

When he is awake, he is hardly able to remember anything at all from that evening. He doesn’t know what he wore that day to work or how he moved from the front door to the kitchen. It is all smudged. One fogged-up mess of pain, terror, and anger in his mind.

The closer he comes to the point where he found Iris, the harder a clear image is to grasp.

In dreams like this one, on the other hand, it is as if he steps through a door in the past. Everything is clear as if someone lifted a veil.

The coppery scent of blood is heavy in the air as he makes his way towards the kitchen. Everything is so unsettlingly quiet. As if nothing else exists in this world. Like they were inside a bubble.

For a brief moment, he thinks that this is probably the case since it is a dream, after all.

Nightmares about that night are rare, they have always been. It is as if even his mind takes pity on him in that regard. He wonders what changed that tonight while his steps finally come to a halt, and he arrives at the entrance to the kitchen.

Iris’ expression shows that she has been terrified in her last seconds. Her eyes are wide, full of fear, but no longer seeing, and Barry knows that she died screaming. In pain.

It is a horrible notion.

She has always been fair-skinned due to her being a natural redhead, but now she looks as white as freshly fallen snow.

Barry just wants to look away. He can't.

He desperately tries to close his eyes but isn’t able to.

Instead, his gaze falls upon her hair, and he remembers how soft it was to the touch. During all their marriage, he never really liked the sex, but he loved to have her close, to pet her hair and for them to cuddle together. That closeness had been wonderful, her warmth, her smell, the softness of her body.

Barry feels bile in the back of his throat when he looks at the once ginger hair that is now so thoroughly soaked in blood that it almost appears ebony.

The pool of red around her is massive, and he doesn’t want to look at her abdomen, about where most of the blood is originating from.

His hands are itching so badly.

It is then that he realizes that the blood is of the most intense red he has ever seen. It looks nearly mesmerizing on the crème colored tile floor, and for a moment, he thinks about how his own would look should it mingle with hers.

Suddenly there is a presence behind him. It feels oppressive, cold, but when he turns around, he can only spot the empty living room he just came through.

He turns back towards the kitchen floor with the uneasy feeling that he isn’t alone anymore.

Iris looks at him, her bloodshot eyes are now focused again and fixed on him, and Barry can’t
remember the last time he has been that terrified or crestfallen.

Then, the dream is gone.

It takes a few seconds for him to realize that he has woken up, apparently on his own this time. The room around him is dark and quiet. The sound of his blood rushing fills his ears, and he doesn’t move for a long moment as he stares up at the ceiling above him.

“You are alright?”

Barry startles at the unexpected voice and winces afterward when his body admonishes him for doing so.

Jay, standing at the doorway, frowns and apologizes, "I'm sorry, my boy, I didn't mean to frighten you."

The older man enters the room and pulls the door closed behind him. Usually, it stays open as it is easier for Jay or Joan to pick up on him having another nightmare, even though Barry would prefer for them not to.

The knowledge that he causes them so much trouble additionally to them taking care of him doesn’t sit well with him. He always feels guilty when Jay forfeits his sleep because of him.

“You woke up on your own.”

It is a statement, not a question, and Barry simply nods his head, exhaustion making his movement stiff and slow. The lack of sleep and the pain are starting to get to him.

Jay sits down on the chair beside the bed. He is wearing his usual sleepwear, a pair of dark cotton pants and a simple shirt.

They sit together in silence for the next couple of minutes in which Barry tries not to think back to the dream. He feels cold and slightly sick.

Right this moment, he would have given about anything to have Len around. His presence is usually enough to calm Barry after a nightmare, even an especially horrible one like the one he has just had.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jay’s voice is calm, and Barry thinks that it is nice of him to care. He has woken up from so many nightmares in the past, utterly alone.

Still, he doesn’t want to talk about it, which is why he is surprised when he hears himself speak a moment later.

“I-I s-s-saw I-Ir-Iris…”

Just mentioning her brings back the image of her dead body on the floor. It makes him shiver as a familiar itching returns to his eyes which never bodes well for him or his dignity.

Barry can’t get her face out of his mind, how she looked at him before he woke up. The expression of silent reproach and sadness that will haunt him for the days to come.

“Sh-sh-sh… I-I n-ne-ver w-w-wanted th-that t-to h-h-happen t-to h-her…” Barry swallows with difficulty and angrily wipes some tears away that have just started to run down his cheek. “I-I l-lo… I l-l-loved h-her…”

It is true, regardless of how bad their marriage was in the end, he had always hoped for them to be
able to fix it. Iris was a magnificent being, other people loved to have her around, she was funny, intelligent and strong but also kind. The fact that she grew impatient with him was his fault.

“I know, Barry.” Jay watches him with open sympathy. “And I know that she loved you just as much.”

Barry’s eyes move towards the ceiling, and for a long moment, he just stares up at it.

“Barry, don’t do that to yourself,” Jay asks him with a soft sigh, sounding weary and sad, and Barry is caught off-guard a little by how easily his old friend seems to be able to read him. He forgot about how well Jay understood him most of the time, without him needing to say much.

“You and Iris were a wonderful couple,” Jay goes on. "It was obvious how much you loved each other. Don’t try to convince yourself of anything else. What happened towards the end doesn’t diminish that.”

Barry doesn’t meet his friend’s eye, though he can feel Jay watching him. He knows that Jay is aware of Iris’ affair with her former working colleague. About anybody who knows them is. After her murder, this was treated as one of his primary motives for the act.

“S-she w-w-was u-unhappy w-with m-me…” Barry's voice is shaking slightly as he speaks. He closes his eyes and ignores the feeling of warm tears running down his face.

“Barry…”

“I-I w-wasn’t e-enough. I-I t-t-tried, b-but I-I'm n-not…” Barry stops and clenches his fits in frustration over how damn hard it is to talk about it, how damn humiliating. His right shoulder screams in protest.

“I-I’m n-not l-like n-no-normal m-m-men… I-I w-wasn’t… I c-c-couldn-dn’t…”

It is still as demeaning as ever, merely thinking about it makes Barry want to crawl into a hole and hide there forever. He remembers how Iris started to feel hurt by it, by how he was able to sleep with her less and less, just because his body didn’t obey him. He knew back then that she wouldn’t stay with him. He didn’t want to believe it, but her growing anger toward him and the increasing lack of closeness between them made it hard to ignore the signs.

“Damn it, Barry! Why can’t you trust me? Just for once, just this one time tell me what is bothering you. Why can’t you do that?”

The question was one of many of that kind. Barry asked himself the same thing every single time after she left, clearly hurt by his refusal to open up to her. He was such a jerk, he knew that even back then, but he still couldn’t confide in her. The notion of her finding out about what had been done to him as a child was too much. Too frightening, too humiliating...

At that point in time, Iris had already started to hold him in low esteem because of his lacking libido. What would she have thought of him if she had known the reason for it?

It was stupid and selfish of him, Barry knows that now, he probably even knew it back then, but he just couldn’t bring himself to tell her. Iris got to know him as a mostly ordinary young man, then she saw him become a member of the police, and later she watched him become and grow as the Flash.

What would she have thought of him if she had known about his past?
“I-I t-tried b-but I-I…I-I t-tried…” It is so damn humiliating, and Barry doesn’t even understand why he is telling Jay this of all things?

*What is wrong with me?* Barry covers his eyes with the hand of his good arm and tries to stop himself from breaking down by taking deep and slow breaths. His other hand is still clenched, and the pain this causes his shoulder is nearly excruciating but it helps him focus on something else than the emotional turmoil in his chest.

The next few minutes go by in silence and Barry tries not to think about Jay's possible reaction to what he learned from him. A part of him desperately hopes that the other man doesn’t understand, that he doesn't get what he is talking about, but he doubts it.

When Barry has himself under control again, he slowly lowers his hand back onto the mattress next to his hips, feeling utterly spent. He swallows thickly and keeps his gaze firmly on the dark ceiling.

“Barry…” There is an odd note of uncertainty and unease in Jay’s voice as he speaks, and Barry can’t help himself but close his eyes. He doesn’t want to see how Jay is looking at him right now.

“I-it’s al-alright,” Barry assures him, voice hoarse and quiet, “I-I d-didn’t m-mean t-to m-make y-y-you u-unc-comfortable. I-I'm s-sorry.”

He feels so *dirty*.

Barry would just give about anything to be able to take a long shower and scrub himself down. More than that, though, he wants Len.

Another moment goes by in uncomfortable silence before Jay finally speaks, “You don’t need to apologize for talking to me. I told you before that I'm here if you need someone to listen, and I mean that. It's just…”

Jay stops for a few seconds, and Barry can imagine how difficult it must be for him to approach that topic as well.

“I honestly didn't know about your problems. I… Barry, I really don’t think Iris would have held that against you. She was a good person, maybe she grew frustrated over it, but she loved you.” Jay means it, *wants* to mean it, but even so, Barry can make out the doubt in his voice.

He feels the sudden urge to laugh bubble up in his chest but stomps it down.

This has nothing to do with being a good or bad person; Jay likely knows that, just as he knows how much both of them wanted a family.

How much Iris wanted to be a mother.

“Did you seek the help of a doctor?” Jay asks hesitantly.

Of course, they did. Barry can still clearly remember the appointments with the handful of specialists. All of them have been extremely supportive and understanding, and he usually left those appointments not feeling as bad about himself anymore. At least not until the next time he and Iris tried to have sex.

“Y-yes b-bu-but th-they c-could-dn’t r-really h-help u-us,” Barry explains as his cheeks grow warm and he keeps his eyes fixed above him. "M-my m-metab-abolism b-burned t-through w-whate-ever me-medication t-they pr-prescribed m-me w-within s-seconds."
A typical speedster problem, and while Iris didn’t hold it against him, he knows that she still hated it. They wanted a family of their own, and he just wasn’t able to fulfill that wish.

Barry knows that he should have gone to one of their doctors, someone who knew about his powers, but he felt too ashamed, too worried word could get out and...

He had been so dumb back then, such a coward.

“Did it have a physical cause?” The words snap Barry out of his mind, and before he realizes it, he turns to look at Jay in confusion.

Then, the implication of what Jay has just asked hits him, and he doesn’t know what to say or how to deny it.

When Barry doesn’t answer, Jay hesitantly goes on, “You usually get agitated when you are having a nightmare, and you happen to say things before I'm able to wake you up. Things you don’t seem able to remember afterward.”

The air in the room is suddenly hard to breathe, thick and heavy, and his eyes grow wide in understanding and horror.

"My boy, you-"

"N-No!" Barry's voice is loud enough that he winces in response. He really hopes he hasn't woken up Axel or Joan by accident.

Jay got startled as well judging by the bewildered and concerned expression he is watching him with now.

“I-I d-d-don’t w-want… I-I… p-please, d-d-don’t..." Barry grits out, squeezing his eyes shut as he grows sick. "I-I c-can’t.”

The humiliation and pain which come with those horrible memories of so long ago are nearly smothering in their intensity.

Pressing his hand on his lips, Barry tries to stifle a sob. He doesn’t want to think about it anymore, about what was done to him, about what a failure as a man he is, or of what he could have said in his sleep.

“Barry,” Jay reaches for him, probably does so without thinking, but pulls his hand back when he whimpers in response to the touch. There is an audible sadness in his voice as he proceeds, "It's alright, you don’t have to. I'm sorry I brought it up. I'm…”

It seems that Barry is not the only one who has to fight with his emotions right now since Jay’s voice is slightly trembling as well when he says, “I'm so very sorry.”

Barry feels sick. He doesn't say anything.

Jay must have had an inkling about what happened to him for a while now, at least since Barry broke down in front of him that day a couple of months ago. By now, he probably has no doubts anymore that Barry was sexually abused in the past, and Barry hates it.

This is a part of himself he doesn't want to share with anybody. It's already difficult that the Rogues know about it, but with Jay...
Barry wishes there were a way to make Jay forget. It is not fair towards either of them. The man doesn’t deserve to be pulled down by this burden.

They don’t touch upon this topic again for the rest of the night, but Jay stays, much to Barry’s relief.

He is glad to have him around. It is so much easier to ignore the painful thoughts and memories with someone else there he can concentrate on and listen to.

***

Bart and Max come to visit. Barry is glad to have someone as energetic and infectiously upbeat as the young teen around, though Bart is unusually restrained around him at first. He warms up quickly enough after he realizes that Barry is doing okay and is honestly happy to have him around.

Axel and Bart get the former’s monitor and game console into Barry's room to show him the newest fantasy adventure games they both seem to enjoy greatly. While neither Jay nor Max is all that taken by that idea, they let them have their way after Barry told them that it really doesn’t bother him. He welcomes a little diversion.

It turns into an enjoyable, relaxed afternoon and evening, and Barry is sad to see his grandson leave again eventually.

He ends up dreaming about his time in the foster care system again that night, about Albert and them playing on Axel's console. They don't talk, but it is still nice until their foster parents return.

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“Are the painkillers still not working?” Jay asks, a frown creasing his brows as he steps into the room. He must have just returned from the JSA business that called him away earlier today.

Barry tries not to let on how much his body hurts, though judging by Jay's question, it has to be obvious nonetheless.

“I-T's ok-kay,” Barry assures him and tries to ignore how out of breath he sounds since he has trouble breathing due to his broken ribs.

The pain is terrible but nothing he couldn’t bear. Jay won't understand that, though.

“Barry, it is not okay if you're suffering,” Jay disagrees firmly, which causes brief anger to flick over Barry's face. The older man picks up on his frustration and adds calmly, “I don’t mean any harm, son.”

Barry averts his eyes, but he can still feel Jay study him quietly for a moment.

“There is clearly something wrong with your medication if it is still not working, Barry,” Jay points out. “Dr. Settler told me that these are some of the strongest drugs he can legally prescribe, and they are obviously not doing their job.”

Last night, Barry had gotten caught up in a terrifying nightmare during which he grew surprisingly violent when Jay tried to wake him up. They had to go back to the hospital the following morning since all the thrashing around lead to the pain in his shoulder getting so bad that he was hardly able to breathe. Dr. Settler changed his *Gilchrist bandage* to a *Desault bandage* and prescribed him new medications after he had learned how little the one Barry used up until then did for him. The new ones don’t do a much better job, though, and the only real difference Barry has noticed so far is that he is now feeling quite sick most of the time due to their high concentration.
“It probably would be a good idea if we contact-” Jay is cut off by Barry, who shoots him an alarmed look.

“N-no!” Barry flinches slightly at how unintentionally loud he spoke, but he still bores his eyes pleadingly into Jay’s. He is not in the least surprised when a clearly unhappy expression settles over Jay’s face and adds more quietly, “J-Jay, p-plea-se, I-I’m f-f-f-i-n-e.”

The thought of going to the Watchtower and having to meet his former colleagues is sickening. Barry doesn’t feel up to it right now, he would take the pain over that anytime. The notion of how they would treat him after they learned what had happened to him the other night makes his skin crawl. They probably think it is a just punishment for someone like him, something he probably brought on himself, and he just can’t deal with that with everything else going on.

“Barry.” Jay doesn’t sound annoyed or impatient, just tired. They had this conversation a couple of times already over the last few days.

Bruce contacted Jay shortly after what happened, something Jay didn’t bring up till the fifth day of Barry’s stay at his home. Barry is grateful for it, he really wished he hadn’t learned of it at all. Remembering Bruce and the fact that he must have seen what happened to him is painfully humiliating.

"He wants to examine you at the Watchtower," Jay explained slowly, calmly, as if he was trying to keep Barry from growing too upset. "They have technology there that can aid you with your recovery.”

Barry wanted and still wants none of it. He doesn't need their technology that would speed up his healing process, he just wants to stay away from them.

The thought of being possibly interrogated again once he is up there doesn't leave the back of his mind, a constant fear that follows him around like his shadow. Bruce told him he would talk to the others about it, and Barry guesses that what happened to him is probably going to sway the vote among the big three in his favor.

He wishes Bruce could just leave him be, he doesn't want his help. The mere idea of having Diana's lasso put around his wrist once more just to end up being forced to lie is outright terrifying. He doesn't want to go through that ordeal again.

There is this note of sadness in Jay’s voice when he speaks next, “I understand how you feel about them, and you have every right to be upset with them. With all of us. But you have to remember that we did what he thought was necessary, and we wouldn’t have let those things happen to you had we known about them. What you went through is not just punishment, this is not who we are or what we stand for.”

Barry feels frustration arise in his chest, so thick it makes it difficult to breathe. He closes his eyes for a moment.

How can he explain to Jay that being angry at them isn’t the problem? Not really, at least. He doesn't hold what they did to him against them anymore, not like he did at first. They just wanted to protect Wally, and that is something he is grateful for.

Regarding whether they would have gotten him out of Iron Heights if they had known about what happened to him in there, he isn’t sure. He wants to believe Jay, but if Bruce’s theory of someone influencing them is right, then who can say?
“I-I'm f-fine,” Barry murmurs, not looking at Jay, "R-Real-ly.”

There is a moment of uncomfortable silence in which he can feel the other man's heavy gaze on himself once more.

Then, Jay finally relents with a heavy sigh. “OK, Barry, if you are sure.”

It isn’t to miss that Jay doesn’t like this at all, but he lets the topic rest for now, much to Barry's relief.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy, am I glad I was able to put this chapter up tonight. I'm currently super tired due to a mixture of two Christmas parties in the last two days, my health being a little shit again, and the weather. I'll probably drop right into bed after posting this. I can already hear it calling me...

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter. This one is more or less a filler one again, but I'm kinda glad I can post it, because now we've only two more chapters left before the first part of Singularity is done, and I have no idea how to feel about it. I mean, I'm excited, seriously excited, and relieved as well, but I'm also a little sad and... I don't know, nostalgic? If that makes any sense? Well, I'm sure that will pass, and I'll soon start with working on part two (for which I'm still undecided about how to call it).

Mentioning part two of this story, I was thinking about posting like a small teaser of it so that you guys can subscribe to it if you want. That way you can get notified as soon as I start to post again. Would you like for me to do that?

Next chapter will be beginning of the end, so to say. Or maybe the beginning of something new? An improvement, maybe? :)

I hope you all have wonderful holidays and are able to spend it with your loved ones! Happy Holidays and Happy New Year! You all are amazing and deserve to have a magnificent 2019! *hug*
The first week of Barry's stay at the Garricks' home goes by surprisingly quickly and painfully slowly at the same time.

Barry tries not to grimace as he adjusts his position a little. He hates that, due to his injuries and the limited effect of his pain meds, he is in a great deal of pain most of the time, which turns ordinary things like resting into exhausting experiences.

"You alright?" Axel asks. He is currently sitting next to his bed, studying notes Barry is helping him with.

"I-I'm g-good," Barry assures him with a tight smile. The frown the teen gives him in return makes it evident that he doesn't buy it. Still, Axel takes pity on him. He knows from experience that Barry will not stop insisting that he is doing okay all things considered. So he turns his attention back to his studies.

Barry relaxes back into the pillow behind his back and tries to ignore how tired he currently feels. Sleeping isn't much of a relief. The moment he falls asleep, nightmares start to haunt him.

A bitter smile briefly tugs at Barry's lips, and he rubs his eyes, biting down on a yawn.

Sleep-deprivation is hardly new to him, which still doesn't help with the bone-deep exhaustion that decided to accompany him.

Glancing at Axel, Barry lets his head fall back and rest on a cool pillow. It feels nice, soothing.

At least staying here, in Jay and Joan's home, turned out to be the right decision. He hardly ever feels this safe. That is, other than when he is over at the Rogues' hideouts, surrounded by his friends.

A part of Barry stays wary, of course. It has been beaten into him, and he probably will never get rid
of it. Even so, he knows that he doesn’t have to be afraid of Michael or any other tormentor from his past coming after him while he is here. There is also nobody mocking him for what happened to him. Unlike how it was in the Heights, where the guards and inmates alike used his weakness as a form of entertainment.

In a way, how Barry is treated right now, with so much empathy and care feels nearly alien and a little unsettling. He has never had people taking care of him after he was assaulted in the past. It leaves him feeling somewhat guilty for all the trouble he causes his friends.

The selfish side of Barry is keeping him from really touching upon this point when Jay or Joan are around. He doesn't really want them to change their mind and send him home to his own apartment. Even though all the time and energy his friends put into making him feel welcome at their home makes him feel bad.

It helps that neither Jay nor Joan seem to mind having him there and clearly go out of their way to make him more comfortable. Like, for example, they make sure there is someone around at all times, just in case he needs help or company when he doesn’t feel like being left alone with his own mind.

Barry's tired gaze drifts over to Axel, he is intently studying the paper in his hand. The teen is glaring down at it as if he could force its content into his brain by sheer will. Barry slightly smiles as he watches him, feeling a familiar fondness weasel its way into his heart, past the pain that seems to constrict his chest and make breathing difficult.

It's usually Axel who is sitting with him in the evening. The teen spends a lot of time at his side, despite his apprenticeship which generally keeps him busy during the day. It has become kind of a custom that Axel joins Barry after he comes home from the laboratories and stays till he has to head to bed.

They usually spend their time talking about how Axel's day went while playing card games. Since Barry mentioned that he wouldn't mind helping Axel with his studies for work, the boy has also started bringing his books and notes along.

They are currently going through some basics regarding how to arrange redox reactions. It is evident that the whole matter, while interesting, is quite frustrating to Axel. Barry is patient and tries to make the entire concept easier to grasp by giving him some interesting examples of those reactions happening in everyday life.

"So..." Axel interrupts Barry's musing and shoots him a slightly accusing look. "Why the heck does the ligand effect influence the reaction again?"

Barry chuckles before pushing himself up in a more upright position, only slightly grimacing. He doesn't mind going over the notes with Axel once again before going a little more into detail on how the mesomeric and inductive effects influence the chemicals’ ability to react with each other.

The teen attentively listens as they work on his notes for another hour before both of them decide that it has been enough for today.

“You probably could proof-read my damn Römpp." Axel huffs as he lets himself fall back into his chair and groans. "It’s ridiculous how a person can know so much about that stuff!” He complains but shoots Barry an amused grin. "You know, you definitively have to come along when you feel better. Professor Blanchard will die of annoyance with you around. She hates it when she can’t show off how much smarter she is then the rest of us mere mortals.”

Barry just answers with a quiet smile and tries to overlook the unhappy frown he gets in return.
Axel already tried a few times to convince him to tag along to the laboratories once he feels better. He wants Barry to see where he is working, which is quite sweet, but it will probably never happen.

Barry still knows some of the people there. Meeting them again after his stay in prison, now that they believe he is a murderer and a paedophile is far up on his lists of things he will try to avoid if possible.

Aside from that, the mere idea of stepping into a laboratory still causes nearly constricting anxiety to overtake him.

Thankfully, Axel lets his lack of a response slide and instead suggests that they play another round of Rommee. Barry readily agrees.

Jay briefly pays them a visit when he comes back from a meeting with the JS but doesn't stick around since he plans to join Joan downstairs, watching TV.

"And we're done," Axel remarks with a cheeky grin as he puts his last card on the small stack between them, ending the game. "Well, who would have thunked? I won. Again."

Barry chuckles and nods. "G-Good job."

Axel rolls his eyes but keeps smirking as he collects the cards to shuffle them once more. He lifts an eyebrow. "You're up for another game?"

"N-Nah, I-I'm a-a l-lit-tle t-tired," Barry declines, closing his eyes briefly.

"You want me to leave so you can catch up on some sleep?" Axel inquires. It's hard to miss that the teen doesn't like the idea, but at the same time there is familiar guilt clinging to his words.

Barry turns his head slightly as he opens his eyes and gives the boy a warm smile. "Y-You w-wanna t-tell m-me a-ab-bout th-th e-exp-eperiemen t-ty-o-y-you d-did t-today ag-again?"

"Sure!"

Listening to Axel recounting what he did today, Barry lets himself sink deeper into his pillow, eyes half-lidded though he makes an effort to pay attention.

Being able to have Axel around is a nice turn of events, and as Barry lies there, his body throbbing in pain, he thinks that he can be at least grateful for that. Bitterness overcomes him at that thought, and he tries to swat it away, unwilling to deal with anger or depression on top of the pain right now.

Barry tries to stay positive. At least, as positive as you can stay considering his circumstances. He is in a bad spot, he knows so, but he isn't alone. That's worth a lot, and it makes everything a lot easier. So much easier.

He feels his eyelids become heavier, but he hums in agreement to something Axel says, unwilling to nod off when his younger friend is around who apparently wants to spend some more time with him.

It probably would be a good idea to rest, though. He isn't getting a lot of it due to a combination of pain and nightmares.

"You should be angry, you know." Axel told him yesterday after Barry, without thinking, mentioned that he should be grateful for how things turned out this time.

Angry.
Heh.

He knows anger so well. Anger, frustration, hate...

Barry understands where Axel comes from. It really is his fault for not elaborating beforehand what he meant.

*I'm grateful I have you and the others,*" Barry explained, meeting Axel's scowl with a faint smile.

Axel didn't really like this explanation either. Not that Barry expected him to. Axel was someone who carried his emotions on his sleeve, which made it easy to interact with him, at least for Barry. He also was still hardly more than a child, though, and he can’t understand where Barry comes from. At least, not after what the teen saw was done to him.

Once, when Barry was still just a teenager himself, he carried a coiled-up ball of seething anger around with him wherever he went. It didn't help him to cope, in the end, and only made him more miserable.

Axel lacks the experience to understand that. He is still young, and Barry hopes that he will never be forced into a position where he has to be confronted with that kind of feelings.

“What?” Axel gives him a funny look, and Barry realizes that he has been staring at him. He smiles and shakes his head carefully. "N-Nothing.”

“You aren't getting all mushy on me again, are you?” Axel grumbles, wrinkling his nose.

This gets a laugh out of Barry that is quickly replaced by a wince when his ribs cry out in protest. At least, he is more awake now. He waves off Axel’s concern with a reassuring smile and tries to keep his face relaxed. “It's a-alt-right, 'm j-just d-drowsy.”

"You want me to leave?" Axel studies him with a familiar concerned frown.

"N-No." Barry yawns, his eyelids growing heavier. He knows he can't win this struggle. "J-Just g-go o-on. 'm l-listen-ning.”

Axel does as he is asked and continues with his tale.

Barry keeps listening until he nods off, the boy's voice following him into his sleep.

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It is late Wednesday afternoon during his second week at the Garricks’, and Barry is currently fighting to keep his eyes open once again.

The last night wasn’t restful for him. His broken ribs acted up worse than usual, making breathing a pain. This led to him staring up at the ceiling, for the most part, fighting against tears. Jay joined him in the early morning hours after checking up on him and noticing that he was awake.

Barry rubs his eyes and tries not to think back to how his friend tried to convince him once more to let someone from the Justice League examine him to find out why the pain meds he got don't work.

Exhaling a soft sigh, Barry redirects his attention to the novel he is currently reading on Joan's kindle. She gave it to him the other day after they talked about books, and she brought up Dan Brown, an author Barry has heard of but is not familiar with. Joan likes him a lot and recommends his novels with palpable enthusiasm.
“My favorite books from him are the ones about Professor Langdon,” Joan explained to him, “It's a series of five books so far, and believe me, they are a real treat.”

She showed him how to access her online library while telling him a little more about that particular series of novels.

“Though you have to keep in mind that most of the so-called historical facts he has written about are nothing but bogus,” Joan adds after she finished giving Barry a rough layout of the story, sounding slightly miffed.

Barry already guessed from what she had said about the author's writing that the man had been somewhat lenient when it came to checking the accuracy of the historical details of his story.

He could easily see why this may annoy her since Joan is quite a history buff herself. It wouldn't bother him, too much, though. He always enjoyed fictional works well enough.

“Still, it is an enjoyable read,” Joan concluded, giving him a warm smile. “You should definitely give it a try.”

During the day, when Jay is either at the laboratories or busy with his work as the Flash, and Axel isn’t around due to his apprenticeship, it is usually Joan who looks after him and keeps him company. She often brings her knitting with her so she can work on the current pullover she is making for Jay while they talk. Sometimes they listen to some of the old radio dramas Joan loved in her youth and got a collection of from Jay for last Christmas. Currently, they are in the middle of Murder in the Cathedral, and Barry is pretty amazed by how much he likes this form of entertainment, which is entirely different to what he usually sees on TV or hears on the radio these days.

Having Joan around is helpful, comforting really. She is easy to talk to, and he doesn’t feel so self-conscious about his stammer. It doesn’t seem to matter to her at all.

“You don’t need to try and hurry, Barry,” Joan told him a few days ago when they were playing cards, and he had gotten upset with himself after he wasn’t able to speak a single sentence on the first try. The look she gave him then was an earnest and sympathetic one.

“Today everybody hurries all the time, even when it comes to talking with each other. Nobody takes the time to think about what they say or even just to listen anymore.”

Barry felt his cheeks grow warm. She understood him, and the realization was a little embarrassing but also a relief.

“I'm sure it is tough for you, my dear. There must have been many people who hurt you by how they have reacted to you, but you have to keep in mind that the reason for that doesn't lie with you. It is the people who are in such a hurry to catch up with their lives that they don't even realize they are the ones running away in the first place. They have forgotten what it means to be patient or kind and not to look down on someone who doesn’t fit in this fast-paced society.”

Jay is fortunate to be married to such a kind-hearted, lovely woman.

Barry sighs and lets the Kindle rest on his lap. The letters have started to blend into each other which is a clear indication that he won’t be able to finish chapter eight right now. He glances towards the small alarm clock on his bedside table and realizes with some surprise that it is already half past six.

For a moment, he wonders where Axel is as he usually comes home around half past five. Then, he remembers that the teenager mentioned something about meeting up with some friends this evening.
and can’t but feel disappointed.

A soft knock causes Barry to startle, and he drowsily realizes that he was about to fall asleep. He groggily turns toward the door with a still sluggish mind and freezes.

“Hello, Barry,” Jay greets him warmly and quickly explains when he notices Barry's confused, slightly startled expression, "Sorry if we’ve woken you, but I've asked a friend of mine to come over. He may be able to figure out why your medication isn’t working on you as it should."

Barry doesn’t miss the concerned look Jay gives him as he speaks, and for a brief moment, he feels utterly frustrated with the older man. He has made his stance towards getting help from the hero community very clear, but Jay obviously decided to ignore that.

Though, Barry knows he probably should not be surprised. Jay made it quite clear that he disapproves of Barry’s decision to resign himself to enduring the pain. It's evident that the older man doesn’t understand why Barry seemingly prefers to suffer silently instead of turning to some of his former team colleagues. Or maybe he does and just doesn't care. It wouldn’t surprise Barry, and the thought is bitter.

Jay obviously means well, but Barry can't find much comfort in that knowledge as he studies the unfamiliar black-haired man who stays back as Jay makes his way over to him.

The stranger seems to watch him from behind a pair of dark tinted glasses that show a slightly greenish tint in the ambient light, despite it already being dark outside. While this could be just a bizarre fashion statement, Barry thinks that there is probably more to it. The stranger is most likely also a superhero, probably someone Jay knows from work, maybe a member of the Justice Society. He would prefer that anytime over someone from the Justice League, and he really hopes that Jay hasn’t gone against his wish and got someone from them he just doesn’t know of yet.

He hesitantly turns back to Jay who is now standing next to him and gives him an anxious look. The stranger, who so far hasn’t moved from his place at the doorway, has his teeth on edge.

“It is alright, he is a working colleague and a good friend of mine and probably the best physician I know,” explains Jay and adds more softly, “I trust him, Barry. He is a good man, you don’t need to worry. I promise.”

Barry holds his gaze for a minute before he gives a stiff nod. He forces himself to stay calm when Jay waves the other man over, inviting him to come in.

“This is Dr. Pieter Cross, Barry,” introduces Jay before he turns to the other man and goes on, "and that is my very dear friend Barry Allen, Pieter.”

The man, Pieter, doesn’t offer his hand but instead gives Barry a nod and a surprisingly friendly smile, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Allen.”

There is no hostility coming from the man, at least none Barry can detect right away which allows him to relax a little. He smiles a bit unsteady and answers more honestly than he would have just a moment ago, "L-l-likew-wise.”

It is probable that he knows about Barry’s past and the fact that he was a crime fighter too once, especially if he is working together with Jay. This also makes it plausible and likely for him to be a member of the JSA.

Barry tenses up again when Pieter makes another step towards the bed, his knees are nearly touching its side. He gives Jay a startled look.
“There is no need to worry, Mr. Allen. I’m just here to help, I won’t touch you,” Pieter reassures him before he asks him to lay back.

“I want to get an outline of your condition and maybe a first indication of what could cause the problems with your medication. It will be easier for me to do so if you are in a resting position.”

Barry hesitantly complies and watches with some unease how the other man merely lets his eyes wander over his body for the next couple of minutes. It is a somewhat distressing experience that causes his skin to itch.

Jay stays close-by and observes the whole procedure which allows Barry to relax a little.

Finally, after about five minutes, Pieter straightens himself again and seems to be done.

The grim expression that has settled over the man's face doesn't sit well with Barry, and he sits back up with some effort.

“So, were you able to find the reason why the medications are not working on him?” Jay inquires. He hasn’t missed that Pieter seemed to have come across something either.

Pieter takes a moment to collect his thoughts before he finally answers, speaking directly to Barry, “I will be honest with you, I don’t like what I’ve just seen. There is something seriously not right with your body, but with the limited means I have at hand here I can’t make an accurate diagnosis.”

The words are equally baffling as frightening. To hear outright stated that something is wrong with him unsettles Barry, though it hardly comes as a surprise. His body has been messed up for a long time now.

“What do you mean by that? Is he in danger? Is that the reason the medication hasn’t worked on him so far?” Jay sounds concerned, but Pieter shakes his head in response, lifting a hand as if to calm him.

“I don’t have the right equipment at hand to make a reliable diagnosis, Jay. I need more than my eyes for that,” Pieter explains but adds in a reassuring tone, "I didn’t mean to suggest that his life is in imminent danger, though.”

Despite the doctor’s words, Barry feels nausea settle over him. After he had a bat taken to him, it is no surprise that he is in pretty rough shape and a lot of pain. His body has been having trouble to heal at a reasonable pace for so long, that he didn't even consider the option that something else could be wrong with him.

“Then what are you suggesting, Pieter? Do you want to get him to the laboratory back in New York to take a better look at him?” Jay’s question makes Barry freeze in dread, but before he can protest, Pieter shakes his head in negation.

“No, I think getting him all the way to New York would put a lot of unnecessary strain on his body I would rather avoid. Even with your speed it would take nearly two hours to travel all the way to New York and to carry him is out of the question,” Pieter calmly explains. “Apart from that, I don’t believe that we have the best equipment there to treat him. I reckon that the problems with his body not accepting the medications as well as his overall condition has something to do with the nanotechnology that is currently in his bloodstream. Bruce came up with it as far as I know, and other than Michael I don’t think any of us is well enough versed on that subject to really be able to help him with figuring out what is the problem.”

Jay considers the other man's words, a grim expression on his face before he slowly nods. “Michael
is at the Watchtower right now, anyway.”

Pieter agrees, “Therefore I would suggest to bring him there. The Watchtower’s teleportation unit enables us to transport him easily enough, and since Batman is the one who constructed the nanites, I think it would be the most sensible thing to let him do the examination.”

“Right,” Jay agrees, and Barry feels like someone pulled the rug under his feet.

What the hell is Jay thinking?

"I will contact the Watchtower and-"

“N-no!” Barry meets Jay's surprised but visibly guilty expression with an angry glare. He hasn’t agreed to any of this! He doesn’t want to go to the Watchtower!

This will only end in more trouble for him, Barry is sure of it. The notion that he will have to face some of his former colleagues in his current condition is sickening. He remembers too well what his last visit to the Watchtower was like. He can't take their scorn or reproach right now, not when he feels this awful.

Why does Jay have to make such a big deal out of this in the first place? Barry has been in positions similar to this before, and the older man couldn't have been bothered.

That's not exactly fair, though. Jay likely would have tried to help him even back then if he had known. At least, Barry thinks so, by now.

He doesn't want to get examined, though. Not again. He had enough humiliating examinations over the last one and a half weeks to last him a lifetime. The notion of taking his clothes off around the people he once considered friends is just disturbing.

“Barry,” Jay starts calmly, clearly intending to reason with him. Barry cuts him off angrily, not willing to have any of it. “N-n-no!! I-I-I w-w-w…”

His ability to speak abandons him again this moment, of course, turning this whole situation into an even more frustrating mess, and he can feel how hot tears start to form in his eyes while he desperately tries to get the words out.

Barry really couldn't care less about how stupid he has to look to the other men right now. He just doesn’t want to go to the Watchtower. He simply can’t.

The mere idea of being forced through such an ordeal fills him with humiliation and horror and makes him want to vanish.

The wish for Len to be there hits him like a brick wall. He doesn't want to be here. He doesn't want to face this alone.

“Barry,” Jay tries again, voice still calm and collected, though the pain underneath is still audible. “Son, please, look at me.”

Barry doesn’t want to. It is evident that Jay intends to get him to agree with their plan, and Barry knows with growing exasperation that he will succeed because he hates to cause him any more grief than he already has. Jay has taken him in and made sure he is looked after, he has been nothing but helpful and kind so far, and he probably has no idea how much this means to Barry.

Jay cares about him.
His eyes start to sting, and Barry bites down on a curse as he lowers his head, hating everything and everybody for a moment.

“Please,” Jay repeats, his voice soft and caring, and Barry can’t but look up and meet the pleading gaze. He watches Jay as he sits down in the chair next to the bed so that they are about at the same eye level.

“Nothing is going to happen to you, I promise. You don’t need to be afraid. I will be there the whole time, and I won’t let anybody hurt you.”

Jay means every word, it’s palpable how much he wants to be there for him, and Barry has to fight to hold back the tears.

While this doesn’t make his fear and apprehension go away, knowing that he will at least have him at his side helps a little.

“I know that you have been through enough over the last week, Barry, but if there is anything wrong with you, we need to find out what it is and a way to help you.” Jay sounds so earnest, so intent on helping him that it touches something inside Barry’s chest.

They hold each other’s gaze for a long minute before Jay adds quietly, ”Barry, please, let us help you.”

Barry has to look away.

Numbing exhaustion starts to overcome him, and he becomes aware of sharp burning pain in his right shoulder and ribs that slowly but inevitably begins to spread through his whole upper body. It is then that he realizes that he is hugging himself once more in that demeaning way he hates so much because it always makes him feel like a little child. He lowers his head and closes his eyes.

They stay silent for a minute, and Barry is glad that they give him some time to collect himself somewhat. His face flushes when he realizes how loud his labored breathing sounds in the otherwise quiet room.

“Will you let us help you?” Jay finally asks again in that soft-spoken manner, and Barry can’t find the energy to object anymore.

He gives a small nod and tries to ignore the smothering feeling of hopelessness. He feels so tired.

For a long moment, Jay stays quiet, and Barry can feel his eyes on him but isn’t able to meet them.

“Thank you, Barry.”

***

It is a little less than an hour later that they arrive at the Watchtower’s teleportation platform.

Dr. Cross contacted Batman and explained the situation to him, and things went surprisingly quick afterward.

Barry feels sick to the stomach, mostly due to his nerves and exhaustion, and it comes as an enormous relief when only Batman and Martian Manhunter are present to receive them.

Batman and Pieter exchanged a few words while Jay helps him stay on his feet, which gets more and more difficult with each passing second.
J’onn’s gaze is on Barry, for the most part, he can feel it like a light touch, which is unsettling, mainly because he fears that the other man might try to read his mind. This notion alone makes him want to crawl into a hole and hide.

“You alright, my boy?” Jay asks concerned when he notices how tense he got.

Barry nods quietly and keeps his eyes glued to the floor.

The door leading to the teleportation room opens with a hissing sound, catching him off-guard. He flinches involuntarily, which in turn upsets his whole body. Barry grits his teeth to keep himself from moaning in pain. His ribs feel like someone is pressing a white-hot wire into his side.

God, he hates this. He just wants this to be over so he can go back to bed.

Barry is startled out of his thoughts when he and Jay are bathed in green light for a brief moment. It is so unexpected that he can’t hold back a small whimper of fear, squinting to see who joined them.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare him.” The Green Lantern sounds honest enough, and Barry recognizes him as one of the current four Earth Lanterns. He doesn’t know who is behind the mask, but he is aware that he is younger than the other three. Axel likes him, that’s how Barry knows that the man is good friends with Wally which doesn’t do much to calm his nerves.

“It is alright, Green Lantern,” Jay assures him, ”and thank you, this is very kind of you.”

Jay’s words confuse Barry at first until he realizes what caused the green light to appear in the first place. There, next to him, stands now the constructed wheelchair.

Barry stares at it, not sure what to make of it. He gives the Green Lantern a confused look as he doesn’t understand why he would want to help him. The younger man returns his gaze quietly, not elaborating on why he is helping him.

“Come, Barry, I'm sure you will feel better as soon as you don’t have to be on your feet anymore,” Jay points out, and Barry silently complies and let himself be helped into the wheelchair.

“You are supposed to be on watch, Green Lantern.” Batman’s voice is hard, nearly angry, which confuses and slightly worries Barry. ”You have no business here.”

The younger man merely shrugs and points out that he is on his break.

“There isn't anything going on, anyway, Batman. Vixen is more than capable of handling it on her own for half an hour.”

The Green Lantern, who Barry realizes has to be around Wally’s age, briefly glances at him before turning back to Batman. “I think I can be of more use here at the moment.”

Despite most of his face being covered by the cowl, it is self-evident that Batman is not pleased with this offer of assistance. “I don’t see any reason why you would want to help, Green Lantern.”

This remark doesn't sit well with Barry, causing him to throw a nervous look toward the other man who seems surprisingly grim all of a sudden.

“I help because I can, Batman. That's who I am and what I stand for. I know who he is, but I'm not blind. I can see that he’s hurt.”

Batman studies Green Lantern for a long moment, apparently considering whether it is a good idea
for him to stay around or not. This confuses Barry, at first, until he recalls the last conversation he had with the other man.

Glancing back to the young Green Lantern, Barry can't help but shiver, wondering whether the man could currently be under someone else's control.

“Fine,” Bruce eventually agrees, sounding just as grim as earlier, "you want to help, then help. Get him to the infirmary but keep in mind that you will answer to me if anything happens.”

That doesn't do much to settle Barry's nerves. He really doesn’t want to be left alone with a Green Lantern, that's for sure.

It helps that Jay, who accompanies them and doesn’t seem suspicious of the younger man at all.

"Everything is fine," Jay assures Barry when he notices his worried gaze, briefly resting a reassuring hand on his good shoulder.

About twenty minutes later, Barry finds himself sitting on an examination table in the Watchtower’s infirmary. He thinks it's possibly the same one as last time he was here. This place comes close to an actual maze with how confusing its layout is.

Barry has his shoulders hunched, despite the discomfort this causes, and he tries to ignore the slight panic that is gnawing away at him as he watches how Mr. Terrific measures specific points on his right hand and arm by pressing the tip of a small pen-like device into his skin. It doesn’t really hurt, but it is uncomfortable enough to make him slightly flinch every time he gets to a new spot.

The masked man, who tagged along with Batman and Pieter when they joined them about ten minutes ago, tries to touch him as little as possible. He apparently has picked up on how unsettling physical contact is to him, and Barry is grateful for this unexpected mindfulness. Like Pieter, Mr. Terrific isn’t hostile towards him. He isn’t as outright friendly as the other hero, but he still seems to try to make the whole procedure as comfortable for Barry as possible under the given circumstances.

Jay stays next to the scientist and observes the examination attentively while Batman and Pieter are murmuring in front of the main console on the other side of the room. Barry can spot the readout of the nanites slowly rolling down on one of the bigger screens both men are currently studying. It is hard to miss that they don't like the data they are getting.

Mr. Terrific, who is also monitoring the readings on a smaller screen beside the table, doesn’t say anything but his grimmer expression shows that he too is concerned about what he sees there.

Eventually, he switches from his right arm to his left hand, startling Barry who has been absorbed by nagging worries about what could be wrong with him.

“You are a bartender?” The unexpected question catches Barry off guard, causing him to flinch and pull his hand back, out of the loose grip his current physician had on him.

"S-S-Sor-ry," Barry utters, shooting Mr. Terrific an embarrassed, slightly worried look. The man just shakes his head and assures him in a calm voice that it is all right before going back to his work.

“I seem to have a real knack for scaring you,” Green Lantern comments, giving Barry a tight smile when he glances at him.

Barry frowns, still not sure what to make of the other man. When he tried to thank him for aiding him with the wheelchair after they had arrived in the infirmary, he merely told him quite tersely not to.
Still, despite his wariness of the stranger, Barry is pretty sure that he doesn't need to fear him. The man seems to be a kind person. He probably just doesn't like Barry very much since he is a friend of Wally’s.

"Y-y-yes," Barry eventually murmurs, glancing back down to where Mr. Teriffic is taking his readings. "I-I m-m-mean I-I w-w-work a-at-at a-a b-b-bar."

At least he did until two weeks ago. He isn’t sure if this will still be the case after all of this is over. Charlie was surprisingly understanding when Barry called him on the third day after his assault. He didn’t outright state whether Barry would still have his job after recovering, though, and Barry was too big of a coward to ask.

Green Lantern nods quietly and doesn’t say anything else which is just fine with Barry. In all honesty, he would prefer for the other man to leave. His presence makes this whole ordeal even more unnerving.

Another five minutes go by, and Barry feels immensely relieved when Mr. Terrific finally lets go of his right arm and takes a step back.

The relief is only short-lived, though, as soon as Mr. Terrific addresses Barry once more, “I have to proceed to your spine next, Mr. Allen. For that, I need you to strip to your waist.”

Barry just keeps sitting there, staring at the other man with wide eyes.

Then, he starts to shake his head quite vehemently causing his shoulder and ribs to flare up in pain. He hardly notices it.

There is no way he is going to take off the short-sleeved shirt as well. He already feels horribly exposed by wearing nothing more than it, especially around these people. It was different with the doctors and nurses at the hospital, they didn’t know him, and he didn’t know them, but it is something else entirely with Jay, Bruce, and the other heroes around. He doesn’t want them to see the scars. It will undoubtedly just lead to questions and trouble. Not to mention that Barry doesn’t want to live through the humiliation of these men seeing what was done to him.

While Jay hasn’t said anything about the scars so far, Barry is quite sure that he already knows about them from Joan. She has been the one to help him with changing his clothes and with cleaning himself up since he stayed with them.

The mere notion that his friend could actually see them himself, though, makes him want to sink into the ground.

“Barry, are you alright?” It is due to Jay’s concerned question that Barry realizes that he has started shaking. His teeth are slightly chattering. He tries to calm himself down but once again feels like he is smothered in his own body. He wants to tell Jay that everything is fine and that he doesn’t need to worry, but he can’t bring himself to utter a single word.

“Mr. Allen, I need you to calm down.” Mr. Terrific's voice is calm, soothing even, and Barry is relieved that he doesn't sound angry. A part of him feared the consequences for disobeying, and when Barry realizes that, he also realizes with dread that he is already far too close to losing it.

"I'll touch your shoulders now to help you to lay back, is that ok for you?"

Barry hardly hears Mr. Terrific’s voice due to the loud rushing of blood in his ears, but he is still clear-minded enough to shake his head in negation. Touching him right now is not going to help him at all, and he really wants to avoid another panic attack.
“Just give him a moment, Michael,” Jay tells the other hero, audibly concerned, and Barry feels himself choking up in gratitude over Jay understanding his predicament.

“What is going on?” Batman appears beside Mr. Terrific, closely followed by Dr. Cross. He gives Barry one brief look. It seems he doesn’t get what is going on as well. His face darkens, and Barry starts to fear that he has upset him by accident. There isn’t much he can do, though. His body is currently not listening to him.

“Barry,” Batman speaks in a surprisingly calm manner, considering how angry he appeared just a second ago. "I need you to calm down. Do you think you can do that on your own or do you want a light sedative?"

This question surprises him, as does the fact that the other man is speaking to him directly. So far, Batman hasn’t exchanged a single word with him since his arrival. While Barry has been glad about it since he still isn't sure how he feels towards his former friend after the surprise visit he paid him.

Shivering, Barry tries to tell him that he doesn’t want a sedative. It probably wouldn’t work anyway. He can’t get a single word out, so he merely shakes his head again and hopes that Bruce understands.

Bruce does since he gives him a brief nod in return. It is hard to miss that he isn’t all that satisfied with his decision, though.

Mr. Terrific follows Batman and Dr. Cross back towards the display they have been studying so far to go through the collected data, and Barry is grateful that they have given him some time and additional space. Their closeness has really started to get to him.

Jay stayed at his side. He is talking to him in the familiar soothing voice he always uses when he tries to calm him down. His older friend tries to get his mind off the whole situation by remarking how Axel would love to see all the technology that is in this room.

“The boy actually seems to have an even bigger knack for engineering than for chemistry,” Jay points out with a chuckle, and Barry isn’t in the least surprised to hear that. Axel assisted Len and the other Rogues at times in the past when they fixed things at their hideouts. He knows that the teen is quite a natural when it comes to this sort of things. Even Len said so.

Len...

Barry feels his stomach drop, and he closes his eyes. He forces himself to focus on Jay’s words while he tries to get his troubled breathing to slow down and deepen. The presence of the Green Lantern behind him makes it more difficult, but the younger man has been kind enough to step back so that Barry doesn’t feel as if the man is shadowing him anymore.

It takes a while before the trembling finally stops, and he doesn’t feel like a brick wall is resting on his chest.

The thought of taking off his shirt still scares him, and the first thing he does when he is somewhat able to use his voice again is turning to Jay, giving him a desperate, pleading look.

“P-p-plea-se, J-J-Jay, I-I-I c-c-can’t t-t-take i-i-it o-off.” It is humiliating how thin his voice sounds, but he doesn’t care as long as he doesn’t have to take off his shirt.

Jay gives him a sympathetic look, but before he can answer, Batman does so for him. Barry jumps, hissing in pain. He shoots an alarmed look at the other man who seems to have materialized next to him out of thin air. It never stops to amaze and annoy him how silently and unnoticed Bruce can
move if he wants to.

“We need the contact between the sensor tip and your skin for the electrochemical impulse reader to work,” Batman tells him, “You know that the nanites in your body have been designed to be unaffected by any outside source of energy that doesn't have the right frequency and isn't in direct contact to your skin.”

Barry feels his stomach drops at those words.

Of course, he knows that. He helped Bruce create those damn things in the first place in case they would have to stop someone with his kind of powers.

What a damn idiot he has been back then.

For a moment he isn't sure whether he feels anger or just plain sadness envelop him at that thought.

“Barry.” Batman’s voice sounds unexpectedly sympathetic when he goes on after a minute, and Barry can’t help himself but hate him a little bit for it. “We will try to keep the examination as brief as possible, but we can’t skip it. We need those measurements if we want to understand why the nanites are interfering with your body the way they are.”

Batman turns to the Green Lantern next who is still standing not too far behind Barry. “Your break ended more than fifteen minutes ago. Go back to your duty.”

The younger man doesn’t object this time. Him being here doesn’t aid them, and he gets that his presence would make the whole ordeal only worse for Barry.

After the Green Lantern is gone, Batman asks Barry if they can proceed, and while he would like nothing more than not to, he gives a silent nod of agreement.

Trying to delay the inevitable won't make things any easier.

Jay helped him to take the Desault bandage off shortly after they entered the infirmary to allow Mr. Terrific easier access to his arms. This leaves just the dull dark grey shirt he is now wearing. It is a button-down which makes it possible to put it on and take it off with the least movement for his broken arm.

Barry tries to undo the buttons on his own with his left hand, but it becomes quickly apparent that this won’t get them anywhere. He has started to shake again now that his nerves are flaring up.

“Come, son, let me help you with that,” Jay offers, and Barry doesn’t protest when the older man steps closer and starts to unbutton it for him. Breathing starts to get harder. It feels like someone has their arms around his chest and is slowly but surely constricting it. It is a daunting sensation, and Barry lowers his head while closing his eyes.

His mind goes to Len, something it tends to do these days when he feels nervous or scared. It helps, and he tries to tune everything else around him out as he thinks of his partner's voice, the comforting touch when he cups his neck.

Barry misses him so damn much, it hasn't even been two weeks, but it feels like so much longer. He wants to be with Len, with his friends, far away from here. He just wants to feel safe.

“Barry, can you lift your arm a bit, please?” Jay asks while he puts light pressure on his left elbow. Barry does as he is told but keeps his eyes closed.
Jay has gone around the examination table so that it is easier for him to get his good arm out of the shirt.

Barry starts to feel sick, really, really sick.

His right shoulder hurts even at the slightest movement, and a few seconds later his arm is free of the soft garment. He can feel Jay freeze, and while he still has his eyes closed, he knows that everybody's eyes are on him now.

It is a horrible, demeaning experience, and he wishes he could just vanish into thin air and get away from this. He forces himself to concentrate on his breathing, on taking deep and slow breaths. It hardly helps and doesn’t stop the trembling that takes over his body once again.

It is a relief when Jay finally lets go of his left shoulder which he has been tentatively cupping so far.

Nobody says anything for another long moment, and Barry wishes they would just get on with it. He wants this to be over. They will have questions, they will demand why his back is in the state it is, and he will be forced to tell them.

Nearly choking nausea takes hold of him suddenly, and he tries to even out his breathing.

Calm down.

He needs to calm-

“What the hell happened to him?!” Mr. Terrific’s clearly outraged voice cuts through the otherwise silent room like thunder, causing Barry to startle. The intense pain coursing through his right shoulder momentarily takes his breath away.

Nausea he thought was terrible before suddenly slams into him like a fist, and before he even really catches up with what is happening, he starts to retch up the sandwich Joan made for him as an afternoon snack a couple of hours ago.

He doesn’t throw up on himself or on the infirmary floor. Like last time, Jay notices what is about to happen and grabs a kidney dish he positions below Barry's face just in time.

Barry would be grateful for it if his stomach weren't cramping up painfully as if trying to find its way out of his body along with its contents.

It hurts. His whole body is like one single bundle of pain. He tries to fight against nausea that has him in an iron grip, he tries and fails to get himself to calm down.

He wants to go home...

As usually when Barry gets sick, the urge to heave up goes on long after his stomach is already empty. It is an awful experience. With every second the pain gets more and more intense and makes him wish he would just pass out.

Jay is helping Barry to stay seated still holding the pan in place. The older man is speaking soothing words to him. Barry’s left hand is holding onto Jay’s wrist tightly, and while the supporting hand on his chest makes him want to crawl out of his own skin, he is still glad to have this connection to the here and now.

There is no way for Barry to say how long it takes for his stomach to calm down, but it feels like an eternity to him. He is absolutely drained, and he can’t stop the wet sob that escapes him as his body
finally calms down.

“Shhh, it is alright, my boy.” It helps to hear Jay, to know that he is close by. Barry can’t bring himself to let go of his wrist.

“Has your stomach calmed down?” Jay asks, and Barry nods tiredly after a long minute in which he tried to gauge if he is going to be sick again anytime soon. He can’t feel anything but this profound exhaustion that makes it hard to stay conscious at all.

“Come, I think it is a good idea for you to lie down for a little while.”

Barry softly whimpers when Jay helps him to lie back on the cold, smooth surface of the examination table. Every little movement of his body seems to cause intense pain right now, but he is still glad when he is finally resting. His eyelids are getting heavy, and he isn’t sure if he even acknowledges it when Jay tells him to rest before everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

So, Barry is back at the Watchtower... poor guy. :/

Jay means well, as usual, but going behind Barry's back was not the best way to handle it. Still, we can at least hope that something is going to happen now when it comes to how Barry's body doesn't seem to want to heal right. Pieter was clearly caught off-guard in what state Barry's body was in. Do you think it's because of the nanites or something else? Or both? Dx

I wonder who of you is familiar with Dr. Midnight (or Mid-Nite) aka Pieter Cross? I got to know him via the JSA issues written by Goeff Johns, which is a run I can recommend. Same goes for Mister Terrific aka Michael Holt. Michael is nothing like the version in the Arrowverse, btw, he is entirely based on his comic equivalent. ;) Both of them are characters I like and am happy to bring them into this story. They also have quite a sweet friendship in the comics.

We also got introduced to another Green Lantern! Yay! :D Quintessenza pointed out that he likes it that Kyle is one Lantern who seems kind and sympathetic towards Barry for once, so I'm happy I can give you that. Kyle is a really sweet guy; he is someone who can't just watch other suffer but has to help them. I'm looking forward to seeing him again later on. Also, who wouldn't want to have such a kickass and handy GL ring? Constructs for the win!

I wonder whether anybody of you listens to radio dramas? I've done so a few times when I was younger due to my late great aunt. I can't remember much, but I do know that I did like them. Maybe I should start doing so again. Then again, I have a list of things I'm supposed to listen to/watch that is as long as my arm, so maybe not.

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter and many thanks and hugs for anybody who was sweet enough to leave me a comment last time! (^^)/

Btw, I'll creat a series for Singularity, so you can subscribe to it if you want. The teaser will still be posted, though. ;)
Have a wonderful New Year, and I wish you all a great start in 2019!

Next chapter will be the last one, and we may finally see a significant change happen! I'm already so excited! :D

See you all in two weeks! <3
Chapter Summary

The status quo changes.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been edited by my badass of an editor, Quintessenzza! :D It improved a ton thanks to him, and I'm a seriously lucky person to have found such a fantastic beta. Thank you so much for joining me on this journey. You've been there for most of it, a crazy long time, and I'm thrilled about that. I hope that it will stay like that for much, much longer. *hug* You certainly deserve much more appreciation than you've got, and I sincerely wish they would introduce a second kudos button so that I could press it for every new chapter. <3

So, we're finally here. The last chapter of "Singularity: Divergence". As you know by now, this is not going to be the end, though. The Story will continue in "Singularity: Convergence", for which I'll upload a teaser chapter soon after posting this chapter (probably still tonight). Feel free to subscribe to it, so you get a notification when I start posting again. I've turned Singularity into a series now as well, though, so you can subscribe there instead if you prefer that (both is also fine, of course ;). Thanks to IanPeriwinkle for pointing this out to me.

Warning: mention of abuse, trauma, PTSD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Well, so much for keeping a distance from him," John grumbles as he keeps staring at the display showing Barry’s unconscious body in one of the Watchtower’s many infirmaries. He glances over to Bruce, frowning. Then he scoffs. "Great job, Batman, if the forces manipulating Mr. Allen were still active, you could just as well have brought him back to his former prison cell."

Bruce meets the occult detective's derisive demeanor with a silent glare, but before he can respond, Zatanna cuts him off.

"Could we not do this right now?" Zatanna asks her colleagues as she leans back into her chair while reaching up to rub her brow. She is getting a headache.

"I agree," Pieter says and turns his eyes from the tablet he has been studying so far to his colleagues. "I think we should focus on Barry and how we can help him instead of making unnecessary accusations that will only cost us our valuable time." His gaze meets John's. "If what you've just told us is true, we are lucky this spell or whatever has been put on him has not been activated yet."

"It's not that it hasn't been activated yet," John points out with some unnecessary bite. Zatanna is pretty sure that her friend's mood would be a little better if Wonder Woman hadn't forbidden him to
smoke in the conference room they are currently in.

"The spell is still very much active, it has probably just been weakened to a point by now where it isn't affecting us in the way it initially did," John explains, tapping his pointer on the table in front of him and adjusting his seat with too much nervous energy.

"Probably?" Diana asks from her position next to Bruce, looking still as grim as the moment she entered the room.

Zatanna shoots her an uneasy glance. It’s not the first time she notices that the Amazon still seems to refuse to believe what she learned not even twenty minutes ago after Batman called in this meeting. A part of her wonders whether it is a good thing that Superman is currently not available. While Bruce is clearly no longer affected as strongly by the magic put on Barry, Diana clearly is, and if that was also the case with Clark, his presence would only complicate matters further.

"Yeah, probably," John agrees with a huff and shoots Diana a glare. "We've already explained that we are still trying to completely understand how this curse works. The magic that was put on Allen is very old and very powerful. It's a little more complex than solving a crossword puzzle in the morning newspaper."

Diana is clearly not happy about the snappish tone John is using, but J'onn intervenes before she can rebut the occultist once more and undoubtedly start another argument. The mood among them has been tense and uncomfortable from the very beginning.

"You're certain that this magic is still at work, though?" J'onn asks. Zatanna doesn't miss the troubled undertone in the Martian's voice despite how his features hardly give any emotions away. She understands why, way better than she would like to. J'onn had failed their former friend just as much as she had.

"Yes," John agrees with an agitated groan, letting himself fall back into his seat with a little too much force. "As we've told you already, magic was put upon Allen, probably decades ago, which is the reason for the miserable farce of a life he’s had so far and you putting him into prison-"

"We put him into prison because the evidence showed that he had killed his wife and sexually abused his nephew," Diana cut John off harshly.

"Without giving him a fair trial," Michael throws in, returning Diana's frown unmoved. It is very obvious that he is more than bothered by what he has learned so far, not only about the ominous magic that has been manipulating Barry's life for a long time but also how the man was treated by his former colleagues after his apparent confession. Zatanna can't say she is surprised. Mr. Terrific is known for his strong moral compass and dedication to rules.

Diana doesn't budge but inclines her head slightly. "We did make mistakes when dealing with the former Flash after what happened, but that does not change the fact that he got the punishment which was according to his crime."

"Since when does a prison sentence involve being abused by the guards and other inmates?" Michael sharply asks, not bothering to hide his anger at all over how blasé Diana seems about what they told her regarding Barry not too long ago. Seeing the otherwise so compassionate woman acting so cold was unnerving and would probably set anybody's teeth on edge.

It's the magic, the curse, of course. Zatanna knows that, but she doubts that Michael has really grasped that so far.
"Let's please focus once more on the problem at hand," Jay throws in. He also sounds slightly on edge, but mostly just tired. The magnitude of abuse Barry had to live through was hard to stomach, Zatanna felt sick just having been told about it. She doesn't even want to imagine how it must be for Jay, who sees Barry pretty much as his son.

"I agree," Pieter adds, "arguing among us is not going to help anybody, and I think time is probably of utter importance in this matter."

"Please, let's listen to the blind doctor," John agrees, adjusting his position once more so he is leaning forward, and points at Bruce. "Bat's over there knows how fickle this whole situation is. I'm sure he is more than willing to give you a detailed portrayal of what will and will not happen if we don't take care of Allen's little ailment before who- or whatever is responsible for this whole clusterfuck notices that their little scheme has been found out."

"How are you planning to do this?" Jay asks, prompting Zatanna to answer. "We need the magic to work so we can interact with it," she explains.

"I thought we don't want it to accidentally activate," Pieter wonders, confused.

"If we can't interact with it, we can't get rid of it," John explains, shooting the other man an exasperated look. "For that to happen the curse needs to be activated."

"We will be monitoring it, of course," Zatanna explains. "And we will be careful not to let its effect go out of hand and impact us."

"That sounds risky," Michael points out.

"A risk we will have to take," Bruce joins in. "Zatanna and Constantine have been studying the magic that was put on Barry for months now, they think they will be able to handle it."

"And if they won't?" Diana asks, looking less than convinced by the suggested plan.

"Allen will be on his way back to prison before dawn, I'm sure." John shrugs.

An uncomfortable moment of silence passes between them.

"After what you've told me," Diana says, slowly and deliberately, "maybe that's exactly what should happen. He did break his parole-"

"Seriously?" Michael cuts in, shooting her a harsh glare. "Even after you've learned about what happened to him there, you still think it is somehow excusable to send him to that place?"

Diana frowns, it is visible that she wants to argue that point, but a part of her seems to hold her back. She may still be under the influence of the spell, but deep down she knows what happened to Barry is an atrocity.

"How will you get the magic to activate?" J'onn asks, ending the uncomfortable tension as everybody turns their attention back to him.

Zatanna exchanges brief looks with Bruce and John before Bruce replies, "We need to question him again about that night."

Out of the corner of her eye, Zatanna can see Diana's face darken and expects her to protest. She knows from Bruce how adamant both Diana and Clark are about another questioning of that kind.
"Diana," Jay addresses the other hero and meets her frown with a pleading look, "please, let us do this. I understand that you don't think that's the right way to deal with this, but if what Bruce and the others say is true, can you really allow such injustice to take place?"

Diana doesn't respond immediately but holds the older hero's eyes, contemplating.

"We owe Barry that much," Bruce adds from her left, his voice low and grave.

*That and so much more*, Zatanna thinks, a familiar bitterness rising inside her. In a way, she can understand Diana, she really can. Being confronted with the possibility of having done something so horrible to someone you once considered a friend is just frightening. How do you deal with that kind of guilt?

"Fine." Diana eventually inclines her head, a grim expression on her face. The reluctance with which she says that simple word is nearly palpable.

The air inside the room immediately relaxes, and Zatanna hears John exhale a relieved sigh next to her.

"Great," Pieter pipes up, directing his unseen gaze towards the others. "So how are we going to do this?"

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Barry studies his own reflection in the tinted window of the Batmobile.

It is cold, he notices absentmindedly. Dark and moist. The Batcave has never been one of his favorite places to spend his time at, but Bruce pretty much sees it as his second home.

He feels beads of condensed water drop around him, briefly wondering whether there is a problem with the ventilation. Maybe that's also why the air smells so off. Sickeningly sweet.

The thought and the consequent sensation that something feels odd are only fleeting, though. His attention is on the masked person that looks back at him from the dark window. It seems alien. Unreal.

Wrong.

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, feeling the ground move slightly below him.

Barry can't help but frown. The otherwise bright color of his costume appears unusually muted and dark. A strange sense of unease overtakes him, and for a split-second, an image of himself appears in his head. He is still wearing his Flash costume, but it is all wrong, all black and angry looking.

Momentarily, the anxiety that has settled into his guts increases, but it vanishes just as quickly as it came. It leaves him shivering.

Shaking his head, Barry exhales a sigh and notices that his breath comes out as a puff of mist.

That's odd, it's still summer, and Bruce is heating this area of the cave.

Barry tries to shake the odd feeling off and notices how something shifts next to him, out of the corner of his eye. He doesn't look to see what it is.

Instead, he turns back to his friend, who is currently going through some files on one of the cases he is currently working on.
Batman usually doesn’t allow other heroes in his city and much less into the Batcave, but Barry is among the very few people for which he makes an exception.

*It's nice,* Barry thinks and doesn't understand the sadness that suddenly clings to him.

“If you're done admiring yourself, you can give me a hand with these files.”

Bruce sounds annoyed, grim even, and Barry is at his side not even a second later. Picking up one of the folders on the table, he lets his eyes fly over the pages.

Sadly, the reason he is here is due to business. A new series of murders is haunting Gotham and its residents, and the way the murderer kills his victims doesn’t fit the usual suspects. That is terrible news since it likely means that Batman’s rogues’ gallery got another addition.

Despite the graveness of the situation, Barry can't help but be relieved to be here. Bruce has been strangely distant the last couple of weeks, just like the rest of the heroes, and Barry is starting to really worry about it.

Bruce reaching out to him for this is probably a good sign.

The thing is there again, he can make it out out of the corner of his eye. Barry tenses up in response, but its presence is just as quickly gone.

*You shouldn't be here.*

Barry shakes his head, frowning at that odd thought. He glances at Bruce, who is studying him in return, and turns back to the folder in his hand.

He is a scientific investigator, it is his job to work on murder scenes that still reek of blood. Investigating murder victims and the surroundings of their death for traces that could lead them to the one who did it has become second nature to him over the years.

That doesn’t change the fact that he hates to see what some people can do to others.

Barry never understood it. He grew up with violence, with pain-

A frown crosses his face, and he shakes his head again.

Why is he thinking of that?

"Everything alright?" Bruce's voice is low, gruff, and Barry nods, shooting him a small, reassuring smile. The other man doesn't return it. Of course, he doesn't. Bruce never smiles when he wears the cowl.

Why does he wear the cowl, though? It is just them. Bruce usually takes it off when they are alone.

*Leave!*

Barry nearly flinches at the intensity of that thought.

He can feel Bruce's eyes on himself and forces himself to focus back on the file in his hands.

His eyes fly over the offered information within a second, taking everything in. Then, he starts anew, letting his gaze move in a much more moderate pace over the pictures of various crime scenes as well as the collected data regarding the victims and the circumstances of the killings. Barry always takes his time when it comes to his job. Slowly going over every detail, stashing away every information,
looking at the scenes from a purely scientific point of view, far removed from the awfulness each victim brings with them.

As he studies the information, it quickly becomes apparent that the various murders had to be committed by the same person. This realization and what it means comes with a sinking feeling.

Serial killers are always a pain to deal with, but it is even worse if they turn into an actual rogue.

Without thinking, Barry starts to speak, quietly, more to himself than Bruce. "The crimes always happen at locations the victims are familiar with, like their homes or close to remote places they are known to regularly frequent." He considers the data for a moment and goes on, "In the case of the latter, there are no traces of the victims being brought there by force. They either followed the killer on their own or the killer waylaid them there. The killer wanted them to feel secure." He studies the case of a woman who was killed in her home not even two weeks ago. "There are also no signs of fights having taken place before the victim was killed at home. The locks of the doors don't show any sign of forceful intrusion or manipulation either."

They weren't afraid of their killer. They knew them beforehand and trusted them enough to believe that he or she wouldn't hurt them.

Barry studies the time at which the crimes took place.

Late evening or very early morning.

"The killer makes sure to meet their victims before the kill. They want their trust." Barry frowns, studying the photo of a young woman lying on her living room floor. Her head is resting on a pillow that was put there after her death. Her hands are resting on her chest, giving her a rather staged appearance. Her neck had been broken according to the medical report, it was a quick death, something Barry can't determine from the picture alone. What is obvious are the traces of blood running down her temples, originating from her now empty eye sockets.

The girl, Samantha, was a student who started her first semester in psychology less than two months ago, working as a cleaning help on the side with family back in New England. She was rather new in Gotham with hardly any acquaintances and no friends who could miss her.

A coil of anger settles in Barry's stomach, and he can't help but think that he hates those people. They kill to satisfy something inside them. Something twisted and dark.

An unwanted memory forces its way into Barry's mind. He sees himself, cowering in the small space between an old, dirty bathtub and an old and dirty toilet. His inner thighs are covered in blood-

Barry forces that thought away, silently cursing himself for not being able to keep his mind clear and ordered these days.

He coughs lightly, ignoring how his cheeks heat up as he forces himself to proceed, "They don’t try to force themselves onto their victims. They don’t stalk them or try to intimidate them. It is possible that they spend some time to get to know them beforehand..."

He doubts that, though. According to the information Bruce gave him, he would guess that the person, most likely a man, sees it as a kind of game. No, not a game. Not really.

The killer wants to get people to trust him quickly to such a degree that they would willingly let them in, despite this being Gotham or the absurd hour they turn up to commit their crime. There is still an unusual thoughtfulness to how they treat their victims.
They feel connected to them, maybe?
Barry feels a shiver run down his spine.

*Please, leave...*

"There is no discernable connection between their past victims," Barry points out as he reaches up to rub his eyes. A slight throbbing pain starts to make itself known right behind his brows. "So, my first guess would be that it is usually an impulsive decision on their part who they go after."

They don't care about the person, but the act itself.

A dull pain suddenly starts in his right shoulder, and he tries to ease it a bit by stretching his arm. It doesn’t help much.

Strange, he can’t remember getting hit there during his recent fight with the Weather Wizard earlier today.

Or was it yesterday?

Forcing himself to focus back on the matter at hand, he turns the page of the file to the next case. It is another woman, older one this time, but once again with missing eyes. She worked as an accountant, no family, apparently no real friends to speak of. A loner.

"Their victims seem to mainly consist of individuals who don’t like to socialize too much and are probably very uncomfortable in crowded locations." Barry studies the photo of the corpse of an old man, whose head is bashed in. Again, according to the data, no family and no friends or even close acquaintances. "They are able to sniff them out," Barry muses, grimacing slightly as the pain in his shoulder spikes briefly. He tries to ignore it. "They know this kind of exclusion from society. They probably were like these people once. Shy and unsure of themselves, but something changed that. They feel more secure about themselves now and possess the kind of charisma that attracts their victims, but it is the knowledge that they found a kindred spirit that makes them trust them and agree to let them come along somewhere more private."

"They don’t want to hurt them, they believe that they help them. Their victims had always been already dead before they went to get their souvenirs. They feel connected to them and want to have those people close by. They see them as kindred souls, in a way. Someone who can keep them company. That's why they collect their eyes," Barry quietly explains. "The age or gender of their victims doesn't matter to them. It can be a teenager or someone over sixty, they just want to help them get rid of their loneliness. The strength they have to possess to break their victim's neck quick and clean makes it more sensible to assume they are male. They don’t want to make them suffer, they are under the delusion that they are making things better for them."

Barry stops and closes the file before putting it back on the table that is littered with additional photos of crime scenes. He hates this.

"They're probably of average height, heavily built, the size and depth of their shoeprints suggest that they weight around 185 to 200 lbs. The handkerchief that was found with their last victim doesn't seem to belong to her, it is outdated, and this print is unlikely to appeal to younger women like her. Its examination still shows that it is relatively new which means it belongs most likely to the murderer. This makes it likely for them to be a bit older, not in their twenties or thirties anymore, probably more mid-forties to early fifties. They probably have a very fatherly appearance, maybe like a nice older uncle, neat and tidy but still a bit old-fashioned. They used their handkerchief to bandage their last victim's hand after she had cut it, this injury didn’t happen at the time of the murder, it
happened beforehand, maybe it was when they met each other.”

Barry points at the photo of the bloodstained piece of cloth as he goes on, "She hurt herself and was upset, he came by and offered his help. She started to trust him and offered him some coffee as a thank you. Seeing that this is Gotham City it is surprising that she did so, but it makes it obvious that the murderer didn’t appear threatening to them at all."

"From the neighbor, we know that she came back around half past ten at night but the murder didn’t take place until two o’clock the next morning. There were traces of tears found on her face and the investigator assumes that it's due to her crying because of fear, but I think it happened earlier. Her murderer listened to her and what wore her down, which proved to be very emotional for her. She was likely very grateful to have finally found someone who was willing to listen and just be kind to her."

Barry falls quiet and silently studies the photo of another young woman. It is a close-up which shows her eerily pale and young face. Her eyeballs are clearly gone, causing the lids to be sunken in which gives her an unsettling appearance but doesn't diminish the air of melancholy and world-weariness that seems to have stuck to her even after her death.

“Bruce.” Barry licks his lips and lifts his eyes to face his friend, squinting briefly when another sharp pain flashes through his shoulder. "Why did you really ask me to come here? This isn’t something you need my help with. You've probably already profiled this guy, haven’t you?”

Their eyes meet, and while Barry can’t see through the white lenses of Batman’s cowl, he is pretty sure that the other man wouldn’t have given anything away even if he could.

*Don’t stay, just leave...*

Barry notices with some concern how the pain in his shoulder starts to spread down his side, across his ribcage, making it suddenly more difficult to breathe. If he wasn’t so concerned about why Bruce had asked him here, he probably wouldn't so easily dismiss this, but right now, his nerves are on edge because he senses that something else isn't right.

*He sees you!*

“You've been under a lot of stress lately,” Bruce remarks out of the blue, and Barry is hit with the sudden realization that he really doesn’t want to have this conversation.

They've known each other for nearly a decade by now, and while he and Hal are really close friends, his friendship with Bruce has always been different. This man knows him better than any other person. Sometimes even better than Barry knows himself, and that goes the other way as well. While most superheroes believe that Superman is the only one who can get past Batman’s cold demeanor, the Justice League knows that it is the Flash who can get him to back off or reconsider something after the rest of them have already thrown in the towel.

It was like that until recently, at least.

“Bruce,” Barry sighs softly and pushes his mask back. He prefers to have more serious conversations face-to-face, at least when they are on their own. Therefore, he is quite glad when Bruce follows along after a moment of hesitation.

“You're talking about the transfer from the forensic team.” It isn’t a question, and Barry can feel himself grow tired once more. His life has been nothing but a downward spiral for the last few months, and it seems there is nothing he can do about it. It is frustrating and frightening at the same
“You don’t do mistakes, Barry. Not like these. They are rookie-mistakes, they point to someone who doesn’t take his work seriously enough or is simply not fit for the job,” Bruce points out, and Barry feels himself grow angry at his friend for spying on him behind his back again.

“How is it possible that you, one of the most meticulously working people I know, make such stupid errors in their works that it enables rapists and murders to get away free?” Bruce demands, his tone cold and harsh. He has always been good at goading Barry on. At making him lose his calm and thus get him to spill his problems and thoughts he doesn’t want to share with anybody. Barry never liked that about him, but he knows that his friends mean well in the end. He closes his eyes briefly and takes a deep breath before he answers with a strained voice. “I don’t know. I didn’t do those damn mistakes, I'm sure of it, Bruce. I put so much damn effort into making everything as by the book as possible, and I still somehow ended up being responsible for that damn bastard getting free again.” He rubs his eyes and heaves a tired sigh. "It's as if someone is sabotaging everything I do these days.”

He knows it sounds like a stupid excuse, but he can’t think of anything else anymore. Though, even if that was really the case, he should have been able to pick up at least some sort of trace.

He's watching you!

A shiver runs through Barry, causing him to flinch since it upsets his already hurting shoulder and ribs even more.

"What..." Barry blinks, feeling disorientated for a moment, picking up on the presence next to him once again, but he is kept from glancing towards it when Bruce touches upon a topic that causes Barry to bristle.

“Your problems with Iris seem to have taken a turn for the worse as well.” It is a statement, cold, clinical. No sympathy.

It is infuriating.

“That has nothing to do with that-” Barry protests, but Bruce cuts him off harshly. “She is unfaithful, and you think that's because of your inability to give her what she wants.”

It's like a punch, it's like the air is forced out of his lungs, leaving him speechless. Barry can just stare at the other man. He isn’t even really surprised that Bruce knows about that. Batman knows things that are not his place to know about. That is his job, after all, and it is part of why he is such an effective crime fighter despite possessing no powers. What really catches Barry off guard is how the other man throws this into his face even though he has to know what that means to him.

It hurts, and leaves Barry confused. The behavior of the people around him is getting stranger and stranger these days, and it's starting to get to him.

“Yes…” He has to clear his throat and presses on, "Yes, we're currently not on speaking terms.”

It is hard to stay calm, to stay still. He wants to move, start running. The need is so intense it is nearly painful, but he forces himself to stay calm.

Briefly, the memories of Iris and the other man force their way into his mind. He still can hear them, how she sounded under him. He still can see how her fingers clutched against his back while he was moving rhythmically against her, the passion that was so obvious between those two who had no right to be together. Iris was his wife...
He loved her, and it hurts so damn much.

Then, he thinks of Cold. He thinks of the way the taller man moved against him, how they grappled before Barry ended up under him, the rough hands, the lips and the teeth that nearly got him to fall apart, that made him feel like breaking and getting whole at the same time.

Barry stomps down forcefully on those memories. They make him want to hide away from the world because of how ashamed he is of himself. He forces himself to focus back on Bruce instead.

The pain in his shoulder and ribs starts to get worse. Breathing starts to get difficult.

“You think my problems at work originate from my problems at home,” Barry clarified, and he hates how angry he sounds, how petulant nearly.

Bruce doesn’t answer immediately, and Barry hates the way the other man looks at him then even more. Those cold eyes that are the Batman’s and not his friend’s.

The worst thing is that Barry can’t even say when things have started to change between them. These days, nearly all the other superheroes seem ridiculously hostile towards him most of the time. While he is still a member of the JLA, he isn’t sure how long this will still be the case.

Even Clark has started to behave strangely distant towards him, a totally atypical behavior for the man, and he was openly upset with him when Barry asked him about taking a short two-week break from the League due to personal reasons.

It is unsettling, how he slowly but surely seems to lose all the people he holds dear in his life. The mere idea scares him, but he knows that he will end up all alone again if this proceeds.

There is no explanation he can find for why everybody is behaving like this. He thought he found a place to fit in.

A home, a family, but he starts to realize that this probably won’t last for much longer.

“Are you sure it isn’t you who is responsible for what is happening to you right now, Barry.”

Batman meets his startled look, and for a brief moment Barry wonders when Bruce put the mask back on. Then, he realizes that his costume is wrong, that it has changed. It isn’t the one he used to wear back when Barry was still the Flash anymore but the darker more sinister looking one he uses nowadays.

“This is a dream…”

Run!

The pain in his shoulder intensifies again, enough that he can hardly breathe.

“You've always been unreliable, Barry. A stupid useless boy who became a stupid useless man. If it weren’t for you, your former wife wouldn’t be dead, and your nephew wouldn’t have to bear those scars. You're a rotten person, everybody realized that in the end.” Batman’s voice sounds strange, not like his former friend’s, but still unsettlingly familiar.

Barry can't say where he knows that voice from, though.

Run, Barry!

“No…” Barry tries to protest, but he sounds faint and weak even to his own ears.
“You've had to realize by now that you're simply unfit to not end up alone. Nobody ever wanted you in their life, not your former colleagues or friends, not your own wife or your nephew, not a single one of your host families and not even your own parents.”

The voice sounds so horribly calm, nearly lulling in its quality, and Barry wants to make it stop. He tries to tell this person, this thing that is clearly not Bruce to shut up, to stop saying these cruel things.

This is just a dream, a nightmare caused by his own self-doubts and fears, nothing real.

Not a single word leaves his lips, though.

He feels like he is frozen, helpless, and he can only listen as those words slowly poison him from the inside.

“How badly you didn't want to be alone anymore. You still failed in the end like you always do. It will be the same with the Rogues. They will realize what you are. It won’t take much longer for them to recognize the hideousness you are made of.” The air has gotten thick, hard to breathe, just as the cave around him grew darker, making it nearly impossible to see his tormentor.

Barry squeezes his eyes shut, causing warm tears to run down his cheeks as he tries to will himself awake. His whole body is one huge spot of pain, but it still isn't enough to shut out those hateful words.

“You're alone, Barry, and you are going to die alone. Deep down you are aware of that, and if the people around you mean anything to you, you will see to it that this happens sooner rather than later.”

The voice falls silent and the last traces of light are snuffed out, leaving him in pitch-black darkness.

Barry feels utterly alone.

***

Barry wakes up to a dimly lit infirmary. It takes him a moment to recall where he is and what happened. When he does, he feels himself grow sick, but it only lasts for a moment.

A soft, miserable groan passes his lips, and it is when he lifts his arm to rub his eyes that he notices that he doesn’t lie on the examination table anymore but like a smudged shadow that emits a chilling coldness. “Everybody knows that you've tried. How badly you didn't want to be alone anymore. You still failed in the end like you always do. It will be the same with the Rogues. They will realize what you are. It won’t take much longer for them to recognize the hideousness you are made of.” The air has gotten thick, hard to breathe, just as the cave around him grew darker, making it nearly impossible to see his tormentor.

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Groggily, Barry looks around and realizes that he is alone.

Jay isn’t here, neither is anybody else which is a relief in a way but it also worries him. It doesn’t help that his whole body seems to be a single tight ball of pain. It is worse than it was before he lost consciousness.

A shiver runs through him as he briefly closes his eyes and vaguely recalls the dream he had.

He can't really recall it in detail, but the feeling of desperation and isolation still clings to him.

What a miserable day.
Barry winces at the unexpected noise of the infirmary door hissing open and glances over at it with a sinking feeling. The sensation of dread intensifies as he watches Batman but lightens a little when he spots Jay just a second later.

“Barry!” The older man is suddenly at Barry's side, and it is probably due to how exhausted he feels that he isn't startled by his sudden closeness. “How are you, my boy?”

Barry tries to smile but fails. He feels like shit, and that is probably more than obvious. The worry he can make out on Jay’s face causes a familiar guilt to join the other upsetting emotions in his chest, but a small part of him is still relieved to see that he once again means that much to the older man.

Jay won't allow them to put him back in the Heights. He has to believe that, or he will go crazy with fear.

“I-I'm f-f-fine…” Barry's voice sounds faint and raspy due to how dry his throat is, and he coughs lightly. When Jay offers him some water, he accepts it gratefully.

“You look very tired,” Jay observes with noticeable concern after he put the glass aside. Barry gives him a faint smile since he can only agree. He feels like he has no energy left.

“H-how l-l-long w-w-was I-I a-a-s-sleep?”

According to how he feels, it can’t have been more than a few minutes, but he knows that can't be the case.

“About five hours.”

That is a surprise. Barry didn't expect that he was out that long. He also is a little disappointed since he actually hoped that he would feel a little more recovered after sleeping for more than one hour at a time. His body is probably so exhausted by now that he will need more than a handful of hours to recover from his exhausted state.

What worries him though, is that his body is hurting worse than before. It is not just his shoulder and the other injuries but really every part of him. He grits his teeth in pain when he tries to lift his hand again.

“Don’t! You are going to hurt yourself if you try to move right now,” Jay informs him and goes quickly on when he notices his troubled and confused expression. "You don’t need to worry, it's just temporary."

Before he can ask Jay to explain what is going on, he notices that Batman is joining them after he has briefly surveyed something on a monitor close-by. Barry can’t bring himself to look at the other man. The knowledge that he and the others have seen his back makes him want to crawl into a hole and just hide away forever.

It is so damn humiliating.

He can feel the other men’s eyes on him. They likely can guess what has him upset right now, and he hates how this makes him feel.

“Barry, we deactivated the nanites in your body,” Bruce informs him, and before Barry even realizes it, he is staring at the other man, his mouth slightly agape.
“W-What?”

Batman doesn’t answer right away but watches him with a stony expression that is neither comforting nor really unsettling but it still causes Barry to grow increasingly nervous.

When Bruce finally answers, he sounds surprisingly drained, and Barry can't help but ask himself when the other man has rested the last time. Bruce tends to ignore the basic needs of his body more often than not.

“The examination has yielded that the nanites were malfunctioning,” Bruce eventually starts to explain. "They gathered at areas of your body which we assume used to act as connectivity ports for the speed force. Most of these locations are joints, but these clusters were also found around most of the muscle trimmings in your legs.”

Barry isn’t sure he understands. He gets what Bruce tells him, he knows that the nanites weren’t supposed to work like that. They were supposed to stay in his bloodstream and emit a steady electromagnetic signal which frequency disrupted the electrochemical balance of his body enough for the speed force to no longer be able to connect with him. Why would they malfunction in such a way, though? He created them together with Bruce, they tried them on him before...

Maybe it was due to the length of time they had now been active? Or the additional changes Bruce made to them?

“This caused severe damage to the cartilages in your body," Bruce goes on. "The emitted electrical impulse in those areas exceeded the tolerable limits and led to the onset of corrosion of the affected area.”

It is a frightening notion that his body has started to decay without him even realizing it, and Barry has to close his eyes for a moment.

Suddenly, the throbbing pain seems so much more intense.

He doesn’t want to think about what that means for him, but at the same time, he finally understands where the constant pain has been coming from.

So far, Barry has thought that he was supposed to be hurting, that the pain was just another kind of punishment. A reminder so he would never forget the crimes he supposedly committed. That doesn’t seem to be the case, after all, and the realization doesn’t make him feel any better.

He would rather not, but he still forces himself to meet Bruce's eyes when he speaks. He is already quite certain what the answer will be, but he still needs to know for sure.

“Y-y-y... y-you d-d-d…. Speaking has suddenly become so damn difficult again, making it nearly impossible to get the words past his lips. Barry has stopped for a minute so he can calm himself a little before he tries once more.

“Y-you d-didn’t kn-know th-th-that i-it… th-that i-i-it…”

It is next to impossible to get the last word out as if his subconscious is fighting him there. He needs the confirmation, but he is also afraid of what he is going to learn. Of what it means.

Bruce, of course, understands what he is asking.

“No, I didn’t, Barry.” The man studies him with sad, regretful eyes, and for a brief moment, Barry feels like crying.
“It was never supposed to hurt you. The nanites were only meant to suppress your powers, nothing more.” Bruce sounds calm but the gaze with which he is holding his is nearly pleading.

Barry closes his eyes and lets his head rest back onto his pillow.

For a long moment, neither of them speaks. He can feel their eyes on him, and he wishes he was alone again. It is so damn hard not to break down here and now.

“Barry,” Jay says, and he can hear him step closer, "with the nanites no longer working, your connection to the speed force should kick back in over the next few days. That should take care of the damage.”

Jay is right. Without the nanites, Barry will get his powers back, and they should heal him. Still, he can't say he is looking forward to it, and the realization is both unsettling and numbing.

He got so used to not being able to feel his connection to the speed force. Usually he just doesn't think about it, and while he was able to convince himself that he is fine with how he is now, he isn’t sure how he will deal with getting his powers back just to have them taken away from him again shortly afterward.

Barry doubts that Jay or anybody else can understand what it is like to be cut off from it. The immense feeling of emptiness that follows. It took nearly two years till the painful notion that something was missing to stop haunting him every waking moment. It was a horrible experience, nearly similar to how he felt when he lost Iris, and he still is ashamed for perceiving it that way.

In all honesty, he would prefer the pain over that happening to him again.

The unexpected hissing of the opening infirmary door cuts through the otherwise silent room and causes Barry to startle again.

“Good, you are awake.” Dr. Cross greets him with a friendly smile, but Barry’s attention isn’t on him or Mr. Terrific who entered next to the doctor but the four figures who follow closely behind.

The sense of fear he feels is nearly smothering as he watches Wonder Woman, J’onn, Zatanna, and Constantine enter the infirmary. His body tenses up all on its own, causing his injuries to flare up in pain.

Visibly frightened, Barry turns to Jay who gives him a sympathetic look and lightly puts a reassuring hand on his upper arm.

"Everything is alright, you don't need to worry, I promise," Jay tells him, but Barry has a hard time believing him.

“How are you feeling?” Dr. Cross studies Barry with a slight frown, probably using his ability on him once more.

It takes Barry a moment before he can bring himself to answer, “F-F-Fine.”

The expression on the doctor's face makes it clear that he doesn’t believe him, but he lets it slide nonetheless. Instead, he asks Barry directly about the pain he is experiencing. “On a scale from zero to ten where zero is no pain at all and ten is unbearable, how would you rate your pain right now?”

Barry needs a moment to think. The presence of his former colleagues makes it difficult for him to concentrate.
“F-F-Four.”

“When you are not moving or when you try to?”

“N-Not m-m-moving.”

Dr. Cross nods and goes on, "And how does the number change if you try to?"

The memory of him trying to lift his hand from a few minutes ago comes to Barry’s mind and how hot and intense the pain was that shot through his body in response.

“S-Seven.”

The doctor nods again and steps closer so that he is standing directly to his left. Barry's body involuntarily tenses in response.

“It's fine, Barry,” Dr. Cross calmly assures him, "I'm just going to take you off the drip for now. You will get another one a little later, and I'm sure that the next set of painkillers is going to work better than this one.”

After the IV is disconnected from the injection cannula that is currently attached to the back of his left hand, Dr. Cross asks him if he is still feeling sick. Barry answers truthfully with a small nod as his nerves are causing the earlier brief attack of nausea to return.

“Oh, I will give you something to settle your stomach. It won’t taste good, but medicine hardly ever does, right?” Dr. Cross gives him a reassuring smile before going to fetch the medicine.

It hardly takes two minutes before Jay helps Barry to drink from the small paper cup that holds a white sweet-smelling liquid. It tastes indeed horrible.

Afterward, Barry is given a few minutes for his stomach to settle again during which Batman, Dr. Cross, and Mr. Terrific retreat to the main console of the room to have a quiet conversation about the current measurements that are still being recorded from him.

Zatanna and Constantine are also talking among themselves. They stay next to Diana and J’onn, still close to the entrance. While Barry avoids looking in their direction, he is sure that his former team comrades are watching him. It is disconcerting, and he is glad when Jay interrupts his worries by asking if his sickness has started to subside by now. It gives him the opportunity to concentrate on him instead.

After about five minutes, his little grace period is over. Batman steps back to the end of his bed and starts to explain what they are intending to do and what the presence of the other superheroes means.

"We want to use Diana’s lasso on you once more, Barry,” Bruce informs him, his eyes unseen behind the white lenses of his cowl. "This time, we want J’onn to read your mind during the process."

The words cause Barry's already upset stomach to make a distraught leap. If it weren't for the medicine Dr. Cross gave him, he is certain he would have thrown up. He feels himself grow pale, and utters a quiet protest, which Bruce ignores, as he presses on.

"We need to confirm that we made no error when we used the lasso on you the last time.” Bruce continues. He then nods his head towards where Zatanna and Constantine are standing next to Jay. "As you know by now, we have reason to believe that our way of dealing with you could have been influenced by an outside force, likely one of magical origin. To avoid this from happening again, we
decided to call Zatanna and John to help us to learn what really happened.”

What really happened...

So, it seems that Bruce really believes him after all.

Barry can't bring himself to feel any relief or hope over this, though.

He can't do anything but stare at the other man while the feeling that this has to be another nightmare grows stronger.

They want him to go through that miserable ordeal again?

Why? Why can't Bruce and the others just leave him be?

*What if they are right?*

A shiver runs down Barry’s spine.

The idea of someone manipulating his life in the past or even still manipulating it is disturbing. He hasn't thought too much about it so far. He pushed the possibility of something like that truly being the case away. He will go mad if he starts to consider it, the notion of being nothing but a puppet with someone else pulling the strings.

There is no motive for anybody doing this to him. Bruce and the others must be wrong. He doesn’t have enemies like that. There is no reason for anybody hating him to such a degree.

Barry's eyes flicker towards the other two members of the Justice League, standing not too far behind Bruce.

Diana looks grim, nearly angry, but meets his glance steadily. J'onn, on the other hand, appears worried and a familiar sadness clings to the Martian he has already noticed on him earlier.

Another shiver runs through Barry as he considers the possibility of J'onn on picking up on his emotions even without actively trying to. He knows from their time working together, that this can happen at times when a person is too distressed and emotionally compromised.

It is a sickening thought.

Suddenly, the need to leave hits him like a brick wall.

He can't do this.

Not *again*.

“N-N-No…” Barry's voice is thin, and under any other circumstance, he would feel embarrassed about how scared he sounds. It hardly matters now, though. He doesn't pay any mind to it. Instead, he looks toward Jay with a pleading look.

“P-Please, d-d-don’t… I-I c-c-can’t… g-g-god, p-please d-don’t…” Barry squeezes his eyes shut in a vain attempt to shut the others out. He doesn’t want to go through that damn ordeal again. He *can't*.

The mere notion that J’onn could look through his mind and discover what happened to him over the last decade is so horrifying that it makes it difficult to breathe.

“Barry, please, try to calm down. Nothing is going to happen to you. We just want to help you.” Jay
tries to calm him down. He is obviously worried, but Barry hardly listens.

"There is no reason for him to behave like this," Diana states, voice cold. "This is an attempt to help him." The next words are directed to Barry. "If you are really innocent, you will comply with this."

Barry bites down on a whimper as he feels himself start to shake.

They will put him back to the Heights. They won't believe him. Just like last time.

“I doubt his reaction has anything to do with his innocence," Mr. Terrific throws in. "He is clearly scared out of his mind because of what happened to him the last time you interrogated him."

The anger in the other man's voice is unexpected, but Diana’s is not.

“There is no reason for us to go over this again, Michael. You made your point quite clear,” Diana warns. "We've discussed this long enough. The proof of his guilt is solid."

“It isn't," Mr. Terrific argues. "We established that it isn't. Did you listen to anything Bruce or John had said earlier?"

Barry has his eyes still closed, but he can imagine the glare Diana shoots at the other hero at that.

“The lasso of truth was created by the gods," Diana reminds the others. "It won’t allow its wearer to speak anything but the truth."

The exasperation is thick in Mr. Terrific's voice as he demands, "Why are you even here, then? You are obviously convinced that your lasso wasn't mistaken."

"I’m not here due to any doubts," Diana replies tersely, "I have agreed to come because of the plea of an old friend."

She means Jay. Barry is sure of it, and gratitude towards the older speedster sweeps over him once more. It seems that Jay really meant it when he said that he will try to help him, even if it is a vain attempt.

The thought that they could have been talking about him while he was unconscious doesn't sit well with him, though.

By now, Barry is certain that they know what happened to him during his time in prison or have a hunch, at least.

Jay probably told them about what he knows, and even if he didn’t, it is unlikely that Bruce didn’t.

This is so damn humiliating.

“Infallibility does not exist, Diana," Jay points out quietly.

“Maybe,” Diana concedes after a moment of tense silence, "but his guilt wasn't only proven by my lasso."

"And we established earlier that this could be due to the influence of an outside force," Constantine cuts in, sounding exasperated. Barry can't help but look at the occultist, then, who looks like he really wants to get this over with.

"Can we please get on with this?" Constantine asks. "I get that this is a dicey situation for anybody involved but quarreling among ourselves like a bunch of brats won't get us anywhere."
Diana turns her dark gaze towards the other hero, just as Zatanna cuts in, "John is right, Diana. This is something we have to do. If Barry is innocent, we need to make things right, anything else would be a crime."

Both women hold each other gazes for a long moment, the tension in the room thick enough that it could be cut with a knife.

Finally, Diana gives a short nod. "We talked about this more than enough. Let's begin. My patience starts to grow thin."

Mr. Terrific’s expression makes it clear that he has more to say to this, but the opportunity is taken from him by J'onn.

“As Diana has stated, we've long enough discussed this matter.” The Martian meets the other’s eyes, his gaze grave and tense. "I think it will be best for all of us if we proceed and make sure that we really made the right decision back then."

Barry feels slightly sickened by the thought that not a single one of them acknowledged his objection. They can see that he doesn't want to do this, and they don't care.

It shouldn't be a surprise, he should have known better by now. This is exactly like the last time he was interrogated about Iris's death. Nothing has changed, and he isn’t sure if he is furious, frightened, or merely disappointed by it.

The realization of how little he really matters to these people is numbing.

That depressing thought is cut short when he is directly addressed a moment later.

“Barry, we are not going to force you to do this.” Bruce sounds calm and earnest, catching Barry off guard. His former friend seems to have caught on what was going through his mind. "But if you are really innocent, you have to stand up for yourself."

I don't, Barry thinks, petulant and hurt, but he knows that Bruce is right, no matter how much he just wants to be done with this. A lump starts to form in his throat, making it difficult to swallow.

“A lot of terrible things happened to you,” Bruce proceeds, “and I can understand that you're exhausted and don’t want to fight anymore.” He reaches up to pull his cowl back so that Barry is able to see his eyes and adds, sounding sure but also pleading, "But we both know that you aren't broken. Don’t try to make yourself believe otherwise."

For the next minute, nobody says or does anything as Bruce holds Barry’s gaze, and Barry starts to realize that the other man actually really doubts his guilt.

Bruce believes him.

This realization leaves him stunned.

“Barry, you have been through a lot.” Jay reaches out to lightly touch the back of his hand in an attempt to offer some comfort. "Bruce is right. We won't force you to do this but, son, please consider it. You are innocent, and it is wrong for you to have to bear the consequences of a crime you did not commit. Even if you think that it makes no difference anymore. It does."

This is important to Jay, really important. Barry realizes that, despite how the relationship between him and Jay has changed once again, he hasn’t expected that. He knows that Jay wants to help him, he has even started to consider him a friend again, despite how difficult it is to trust him. Even so, he
didn’t understand how much he meant to the older man once more.

It’s become obvious that, while he has resigned himself to this fate, Jay hasn’t, and neither has Bruce. Why, though? Where is this unexpected support coming from? Why does it matter to them? It didn't for so long...

If Bruce and Jay were right about somebody manipulating them and Barry’s life, the current turn of events would make more sense.

If there was really somebody or something that used the people in his life to make him suffer, this change of heart can be explained by Jay and the others no longer being influenced by this outside force.

But...

Does he really want this to be the case, though?

Is learning about his own utter powerlessness when it comes to his own existence really better than thinking his whole life was nothing but a string of unfortunate coincidences?

Barry stops that train of thoughts. He is being stupid. There is nothing he can do about this, whether Bruce and the others are right or not. If they are right, it will change everything that happened so far, though. It doesn't matter whether he wants this or not. He needs to know the truth. What happened to him does not only affect him. If they are right, if someone has it really out for him, then Wally was pulled into that whole miserable affair, and he deserves to learn why.

A very small part in Barry hopes that he can get his nephew’s forgiveness that way, but he quickly shuts it down.

Barry glances to J'onn before his gaze drifts on to Zatanna and Constantine.

What makes them so sure that this time will play out any differently than it did the last time?

Why shouldn't J'onn's powers be manipulated like Diana’s lasso? Can the magicians really help?

Before his former colleagues came to the decision to put him into the Heights, J'onn only read Wally's mind. Wally really believed that Barry hurt him...

What if J'onn would see the same in his?

Barry's stomach tightens up painfully at that notion, but what also scares him is the mere thought of the telepath seeing what happened to him. He doesn't want anybody to know about it.

Unfortunately, that wish hardly makes any sense anymore. Jay, Bruce, and now the others as well already suspect about what happened to him during his stay in prison.

It is so damn humiliating.

Barry lowers his gaze and swallows around the lump in his throat.

Will they think he deserved it should the lasso force him to lie again, and J'onn isn't able to detect it?

Nervously, his eyes shift towards Jay once more, who is currently studying him with a concerned and troubled expression which quickly turns comforting when he notices his gaze.
Briefly, the dream from earlier forces its way into his mind. It causes Barry to shudder, leaving him cold and distraught.

He can't say he is surprised about his subconscious coming up with something so sickening and horrible. He had similar nightmares before, but there was still something different about it.

Does he really think that way about himself?

Does he really believe it?

Barry pushes the memory of that dream away, too exhausted to deal with it on top of everything else. He wishes they would give him a few minutes to himself. All of this comes so suddenly, and he feels utterly unprepared. Not that another five minutes or even five hours would really help with that.

This will change everything, no matter how it goes.

The possibility of his friends' attempt being in vain appears very likely to him, but what if it isn't? What if it works? What if his innocence is proven?

What then?

What would it mean for him and his life?

Barry is not stupid enough to believe that this would make things to go back to how they were before the whole ordeal started. There is no way. Aside from how his environment has been changed forever, he isn't that person anymore either. He changed too, drastically so, and he isn't sure he can deal with how his innocence being proven would turn his whole world onto its head once more.

All of this is already overwhelming.

He doesn't believe that he has the energy left to pick up the crumbled leftovers of his life and try to build himself a new existence again.

He is just so *tired*...

His mother suddenly comes to his mind.

It is out of nowhere, catching him utterly off guard, and Barry feels his body tense up in response.

His mother...

He hasn't thought of her in a long time.

There isn't really anything to think of, anyway. There is no actual face left he can put to that word, he has no photos of her, can't be sure whether she really had long hair he shares the color with, nor does he remember the sound of her voice or the feeling of her touch.

She could just as well have never existed...

But that isn't true either.

Barry still very much remembers the feeling of love and security he felt when he was with her. He knows she made him grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup when he didn't feel well to cheer him up. She loved to brush through his hair and to hug him, tell him stories about Mr. Bunny, the
plush bunny he had as a child who was with him as long as he could remember. She loved for them to watch cartoons together on Saturday morning for an hour before she made them breakfast, pancakes with blueberries because they were his favorites. She loved to take him to the park, to pick him up when he grew tired and carry him even though he was getting too big and heavy for that.

She loved him.

She loved him.

Barry's eyes start to itch, he can feel himself tearing up and has to blink.

He hasn't thought of her in so long.

Of the woman who was there for him the first five, nearly six years of his life.

It was her, the slowly vanishing memory of her that helped him to go on as a child, even later as an adult when everything just seemed too much to bear.

The only true and pure source of love in his life he never doubted despite not being aware of it for the majority of it.

It shouldn't be possible to miss someone so much you can hardly even remember.

Barry tiredly closes his eyes and murmurs a soft, "O-Ok-kay."

She wouldn't want him to give up. He is certain of it.

Dr. Cross gives him a light sedative to calm his nerves before they start with the questioning.

While they wait for the drug to start working, Barry is surprised to notice that Zatanna and Constantine make their own preparation. He feels too groggy and nervous to ask about it and instead just watches them as Constantine starts to position a handful of stout, mostly burned down candles on the ground around the bed he is resting on. It is easy to spot that those are no ordinary candles due to the symbols etched into the wax, or how their flames burn in a very dark violet once they are lit.

Barry wrinkles his nose when a heavy smell of rotten eggs starts to fill the air around him, and he immediately thinks of hydrogen sulfide. It reminds him of the last case he worked on as a criminal investigator, and he nearly asks for them to put the candles out. Constantine is hardly lighting them to make the room homier, so he keeps quiet.

His attention is still on the occultist, who has just grabbed a bag of rock salt out of the backpack he picked the candles from earlier when he notices someone moving in the space behind his head. He glances back, spotting Zatanna, who gives him a reassuring smile.

"I'll need to monitor you during the questioning to be able to spot the curse and lift it," Zatanna explains, lowering her hands next to Barry's head. "It won't hurt."

Barry swallows nervously and is grateful when she doesn't touch him right away.

"Th-The c-c-cand-dles a-and s-sal-lt?" Barry asks in a hoarse voice, glancing to Constantine who is currently busy writing symbols in between the candles with the said salt.

Zatanna glances to the other occultist before focusing back on Barry with a thin smile. The worry visible in her eyes doesn't sit well with him.

"They're to make sure nobody else is listening in," Zatanna says cryptically, and Barry shivers in
Eventually, Constantine is done, and Dr. Cross deems it alright for the whole procedure to start.

Barry watches apprehensively as Diana and J'onn step closer.

J'onn picks up on his worried expression and assures him, "Don't worry. I will limit my intrusion only to the necessary. You will only have to answer very specific questions so it will be improbable for me to come across any thoughts or memories you don't want to share."

The words are comforting, especially because Barry doesn't doubt that J'onn is honest about this. That doesn't stop his nerves from going right back to being on edge the moment Diana steps closer, stopping right next to him, her expression dark and hard to read.

Thus, it is a surprise when she lifts his hand with unexpected care as she slings the golden rope of her lasso around his wrist. A tingling sensation spreads up his arm and down to his fingertips in response, it is awfully familiar, and Barry averts his eyes, feeling slightly sick.

"Are we ready?" Bruce asks, who has stepped next to Jay on Barry's other side.

Constantine, who has just put the salt away, returns to the spot at Barry's feet, huffing a sigh as he runs his figures through his hair. "As ready as we'll get, I guess." He shoots Bruce an annoyed look. "This came up on a rather short notice, after all."

"We're ready to start," Zatanna says firmly while giving Constantine a look that makes it clear that they have matters to attend to that need their full focus. The occultist doesn't roll his eyes, but Barry is sure that it's a close call.

The feeling of Zatanna's soft fingertips touching his temples causes Barry to flinch, and he is grateful when nobody mentions it.

A strange sensation, like faint pressure, starts to overcome his mind, and Barry glances to J'onn, who returns his nervous gaze with a calm look.

"I'm going to ask you a number of questions now," Bruce informs him and waits for him to agree. Barry gives a small nod, the dread that sits in the pit of his stomach intensifying.

"State your name," Bruce says.

"B-B-Bar-ry A-Allen," Barry murmurs, closing his eyes and ignoring that he has started to tremble.

"Your age?"

"F-F-Forty-th-three."

The experience of listening to himself talk without his own volition is odd and disconcerting. Just like it was the last time he was under the influence of the lasso.

"Where do you live?"

"K-Keyst-stone C-City."

"Your occupation?"
"B-B-Bart-tender." At least, he hoped so.

There is a brief pause, and Barry opens his eyes to look at Bruce, who in turn has turned his attention to Zatanna.

"Everything seems normal," Zatanna answers the unstated question.

Bruce gives a curt nod and continues.

"Are you a former convict?"

Barry swallows, his mouth suddenly dry as a desert. "Y-Yes."

All eyes are on him, he has lowered his gaze back to the blanket covering him, but he can still feel it.

"Where did you serve your sentences?"

"I-I... I-Iron H-Heights." His teeth start to chatter. He starts to feel cold.

"How long did you stay there?"

"S-S-Six y-years."

A pause again. Zatanna gives another okay.

"Were you the second Flash?"

"Y-Yes."

"For how long?"

"N-Nearl-ly e-eight y-y-years."

The lasso feels heavy around his wrist, and Barry would give a lot to be rid of that sensation. He feels caged, there are too many people around him, all of them too close.

"It's okay, Barry. You're safe," Jay assures him and gives him an encouraging smile when Barry shoots him a pleading look.

He wants this to be over.

He knows where this is going, and everything inside him balks at the mere thought.

"Did you have a sidekick?"

Barry squeezes his eyes back shut and murmurs, "Y-Yes."

"What was he called?"

"K-Kid F-F-Flash."

"What was his real name?"

"W... W-Wal-ly W-W-West."

His eyes start to itch again, the lump in his throat has returned, and he starts to feel sick.
Everybody's attention is fixed on him which makes it difficult to breathe.

"What was your former spouse's name?"

"I-I... I-R-ris A-A-Allen..."

There is another pause.

"There is something," Zatanna remarks behind Barry, her fingertips pressing a little firmer against his temples, which is a surprisingly reassuring feeling.

"Yeah," Constantine agrees with a grunt. "I sense it, too."

"J'onn?" Diana asks, sounding skeptical but also concerned.

"Something is not right," J'onn replies quietly, and when Barry glances at him, he can see that he has his eyes closed with an intensely focused expression on his face.

"Should we proceed?" Jay asks with audible worry.

"We better if we want to get at the bottom of what is going on," Constantine points out.

Bruce seems to agree since he continues. "You are aware of the charges that were pressed against you?"

Barry swallows with some difficulty but his voice still stays hoarse and small as he answers, "Y- Yes..."

A moment of pause follows, and Barry tries to brace himself for the question he is certain that is about to follow.

"Did you kill your late wife, Iris Allen?"

No! No, he didn't!

He would have never hurt Iris. He loved her! He truly loved her, despite all their problems.

She was the first person he ever felt like that about, his first love. She was his wife, his companion...

He just wanted to be happy. With her. He wanted to make her happy, her and Wally.

Why did he have to fail them so badly?

Barry feels tears start to run past his closed eyelids. He hardly picks up on Zatanna starting to murmur something above him, but he senses that her face is suddenly much closer to his than just a second ago.

J'onn grunts next to him as his telepathic touch turns uncomfortable, nearly painful.

Barry can feel how his mouth opens, how his tongue starts to move on its own, and with a horrible clarity, he understands what he is going to say.

No...

He desperately tries to fight it.

He didn't kill Iris! He never hurt her! He loved her!
He loved her...

His head starts to hurt. The increasing pressure right behind his brow starts to make it difficult to concentrate, to keep himself from saying the one word that would ruin everything for him all over again.

No, I didn't! Please!

"Y-Y-Yn-ynnn-

He grits his teeth, groaning due to the monumental effort it takes him to stop speaking. It becomes difficult to breathe. He feels so cold.

Another voice picks up next to Zatanna's. It is Constantine cursing. There is a sound of things breaking, Bruce says something, so does Jay, but Barry can't understand them.

His whole body feels heavy and so very cold.

There is a low buzzing sound suddenly filling his ears. Something hisses and the pressure behind his forehead becomes painfully intense. It feels like someone is trying to crack his head from the inside.

God, he just wants to be over with this. He wants to go home.

He wants Len.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the memory of that night forces itself into his mind. It is like the blow of a sledgehammer, it cuts through everything else. With horrible clarity, Barry suddenly sees Iris in front of his eyes. Lying on the tiled floor of their former kitchen, blood surrounding her. Her blood.

So much blood...

Her eyes are wide open, and she looks so damn scared.

"Y-Y-Yes..." Barry answers, voice faint, and he gives up.

Things around him start to calm down, and it is just then that he picks up on all the noise that has been going on before. He can't bring himself to care, though, and keeps his eyes closed.

A tense, uneasy silence follows.

Barry knows that they are all staring, all judging. Just like the last time.

They will put him back there again.

His trembling grows worse, and he fights for composure, unwilling to break down in front of them.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, Bruce speaks, "J'onn?"

Reluctantly, Barry opens his eyes, causing even more tears to escape, and looks at the Martian, feeling bone-tired.

J'onn seems to expect it since he meets his gaze, holding it for a few seconds, and Barry is caught off guard by the sadness he recognizes in it. It seems so profound that he isn't sure what to do and ends up looking away, slightly unsettled.
What J'onn says next causes Barry's mind to come to a grating halt, and it takes his breath away.

"His memories show that his wife was already dead when he found her that night. He did not kill her."

Something loosens inside Barry's chest, and he starts to cry in earnest now.

The others have started to talk to each other, sounding agitated and concerned, but he doesn't pay them any mind. He probably should, but he can't bring himself to care.

Instead, he thinks of Iris, of how he has never been able to say his goodbye to her. The last picture he will forever have of her is her lying on their kitchen floor, her body growing cold, and her expression one full of horror.

Barry closes his eyes and tries to think of nothing.

Chapter End Notes

And this was chapter 125! :D

I mean, damn! We're done! The first part of Singularity is over, and it's truly bizarre. xD I don't know how to describe how I'm feeling about this. I don't even really know how I'm feeling about it, tbh.

Well, that's not entirely true. I'm definitely happy and slightly awed how far we've come. I always planned on bringing this story to an end, and while we're just halfway there, it is still rewarding and encouraging.

I hope you all are satisfied with this chapter, at least to some degree. I know that most of you were waiting for something that would provide more answers, but I wasn't able to offer much in that regard. There is still too much that is going to happen, enough that I can't start to unveil what is going on just yet. Part two of this story will be much more rewarding when it comes to answers and explanations.

I plan to streamline the plot of Convergence a lot, as well, which will take quite some time. I've already started working on it, and chapter one was finished a couple of days ago because I apparently can't let it be.

Still, even so, I think it will be beneficial for me and the story if I go on a little break. The upcoming year will be crazy for me, and I'm sincerely grateful I was able to finish this part now before I would have been forced into another involuntary hiatus.

Singularity Convergence will start in January of 2020. I will try and post updates on my Tumblr (http://snatch7777.tumblr.com/), especially if there should be a more significant change of plan. I'll try to be more often on Tumblr, I have hardly been there at all for the last year, and I very much welcome you to message me there if you want. I can't promise I'll answer right away, but I'll get back to you. :)

Also, another big and excellent piece of news is that I've got a second wonderful person who offered to edit Singularity for me. It's MeteoraWrites, who has started to work through the story from the beginning, re-editing the whole story. That's just amazing; it
means that Singularity will be a much smoother read should you go back to it. It's incredible that there are people like Quintessenzza and MeteoraWriters who put so much of their free time to help me out with this story. Thank you both so, so very much! :) 

Btw, MeteoraWrites has also an ao3 account under the same name with a ton of stuff from many different fandoms posted there. Seriously check it out!

Coming briefly back to the actual chapter. What did you think of the (temporary) conclusion? Are you disappointed it ended on a cliffhanger like that? Do you like how things seem to have finally changed for Barry? What do you think will happen now? Will Barry's name be cleared? Would you want him to go back to be a CSI or stick with being a bartender? And will the Rogues be okay with the hero community waltzing in and claiming a big part of Barry's life again? And how did you like the brief cameo of Constantine (our favorite smoke-addict). Seriously, I'm curious to know. :) 

I've been fortunate, not only due to how I found many kind people, helping me on my way, but also with what kind of readers this story drew in. :) I'm very blessed I got you to join me on the ride so far, even if you just followed along in silence. It is incredible to imagine that so many people find this story interesting and touching. It's also just crazy how many of you have left comments over the years. That's probably the part of posting Singularity here which I enjoyed the most — just being able to read your thoughts or learn that the story moves you.

Thank you all so much for coming along, for accompanying Barry and the others on their long journey that got us here and is not even over yet. You turned this into so much more than what it initially started as.

I'm happy and sad, and it's just magnificent. <3

End Notes

I hope you like it!

I really appreciate feedback, so feel free to let me know what you think of it, it would mean a lot to me. :)

Works inspired by this one: ART for: Singularity by cassandrasfisher

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!