An All Too Jagged Snowflake

by RedHead

Summary

When Leonard and Barry discover that they're Soulmates, they struggle with the many, many issues this causes. It might be easier without the collective difficulties of the Rogues, a metagorilla, and the military, but life has never been simple for either of them.

[COMPLETE. Diverges after the Season 1 finale]

Long fic, best read in three instalments: Chapters 2-17 (Soul Mark), Chapters 18-34 (Soul Bond), Chapters 35-50 (Soulmate).
You can skip the glossary, all words that come up make sense throughout. It's just for reference and worldbuilding, please don't be intimidated :) More terms will be added as needed and as I come up with them.

**Amygdalectomic Lesion Surgery / Lesions (noun)** – A surgical procedure that creates targeted lesions to the areas of the amygdala involved in the NeuroAffective Bond. Such lesions have been documented as severing the NAB in rare cases of study, but such a procedure is highly contentious when performed, and only done in extreme conditions. Lesions may develop naturally as a consequence of neurological damage (i.e., due to advancing dementia or calcification of the amygdala).

*See also: NeuroAffective Bond*

**Bond (noun)** – The broad term for all forms of connection between two Soulmates

*See also: Initial Communion, NeuroAffective Bond*

**Bond Baby (noun)** - Any child born to two Soulmates

**BondCom (noun)** - A romantic comedy film about Soulmates who fall in love. A highly popular genre among 13-25 year olds.

*See also: Bond Songs*
**Bond Family** *(noun)* - Analogue to one's in-laws, a Bond family is the family members of one’s Bonded Soulmate

**Bond Songs** *(noun)* - Any songs written about Soulmates or being Bonded.

*See also:* BondCom

**Bond Rights** *(noun)* - Any form of legal, constitutional, or international rights that protect the interests of Bonded Soulmates

*See also:* Copenhagen Convention, the; Pair Exemptions

**Bondiversary** *(noun)* - casual / colloquial term for the anniversary of a Pair's Initial Communion

*See also:* Initial Communion

**Born Marked (BM)** *(verb)* – When a person is born with a Mark, indicating their Soulmate is older than they are; half of all Soulmates are BM.

*See also:* Manifest Marked, Mark

**Copenhagen Convention, the** *(noun)* – Originally set in 1809 and amended in 1947 by the International Court of Justice (later governed by the United Nations), the Copenhagen Convention set International Law and precedent for protecting the rights and special interests of Soulmates worldwide. All nations must act in compliance with the laws set out by the convention; however, many countries where human rights violations occur fail to comply with these regulations.

**Exsomnis Night** *(noun)* – When a person is cannot sleep because their Soulmate cannot sleep; literally means 'sleepless night'.

*See also:* NeuroAffect Bond (NAB)

**Feed the bleed** *(verb, phrase)* – A low-brow phrase originally meaning to share in the NeuroAffective Bond with one’s Soulmate. Modern colloquial usage tends to signify any individual (with or without a Soulmate) who engages in a hedonic act simply for the joy/pleasure of it.

**Infiüales Animerum Conpares** *(noun, proper term)* - An archaic Latin term that translates to both
"rejected soulmate/partners" and "denied soulmate/partners" and "negative soulmate/partners" depending on the translators' interpretation of 'infitiales'. It is used to describe the rare cases in which one or both Soulmate(s) push one another away and end up separated. The term retains its original Latin form in part because it is used as a diagnosis of conditions in which this occurs and one or both Soulmates begins to present clinical symptoms due to the separation, and in part because there is no colloquial term for these cases.

See also: Infitialis Dimidum

Infitialis Dimidum (noun, proper term) - An archaic Latin term that translates to "rejected half" and is meant to describe an individual who's Soulmate has rejected their Bond. Such cases are incredibly rare but of interest to the psychological literature when they arise, as one or both Infitialis Dimidum typically present with psychological or physiological symptoms if the rejection lasts over a duration of years.

See also: Infitiales Animarum Conpares

Initial Communion / IC (noun) – The moment when two Soulmates first touch skin to skin, thus establishing their Bond and NeuroAffective Bond.

See also: Bond, NeuroAffective Bond

Manifest Marked (MM) (verb) – When a person who is born without a Mark develops one later in life, indicating the Soulmate has just been (re)born into the world; half of all Soulmates are MM.

See also: Born Marked, Mark

Mark / SoulMark / Marked (noun, adjective) – The unique symbol that appears in the same location on both (+) bodies of Soulmates. Marks are typically white but may appear as a light shade of most primary colors, and turn black upon the death of one’s Soulmate. Marks are unique to a Pair of Soulmates and may vary in placement on the body size, shape, geometry, intricacy, and every other dimension. It is believed that a Mark persists across the different lifetimes of a Pair during each reincarnation. Any individual with a Mark is considered Marked.

See also: Unmarked, Widow Mark

Marked and Waiting / MaW / maw (noun) – A person with a Mark who has not yet their Soulmate. Typically used to refer to people who are adults and have not yet found their Soulmate; seldom use for anyone under the age of 16-18. Carries overtones similar to a modern day ‘spinster’.

Example: “He’s never had a girlfriend because he’s a maw, just biding his time.”

See also: Born Marked, Manifest Marked, Mark
Marking Day (noun) – The day when a Manifest Marked individual's Mark appears; also their Soulmate's birthday.  

See also: Born Marked, Manifest Marked

Matemake (noun) - Similar to a "matchmaker," this term refers to any individual who introduces two people who happen to be Soulmates. The matemaking can be intentional, as when a person realizes they know two others with the same Mark, or totally unintentional, such as inviting two friends to a party only to have them meet and discover they are Soulmates.

Meutre De La Moitié / Meutre De La Moitié Syndrome (noun) - Literally meaning "Murder of the Half", this refers to one member of a Bonded Pair murdering their Soulmate. MdlM Syndrome is a psychological condition that occurs after a person has killed their own Soulmate, typically characterized by dissociation, paranoia, delusional thinking, and violent behavior. It is believed that the intent to kill and the knowledge of having murdered one's Soulmate, coupled with the sensation of their death experienced through the NAB, results in a neurological chemical imbalance, largely related to dopamine and acetylcholine levels.

See also: NeuroAffect Bond (NAB)

NeuroAffective Bond / NAB / The bleed (noun) – A neurological connection between the two (or in extremely rare cases, more than two) members of a Soulmate Pair. The neurological connection allows Soulmates to experience a range of sensations from one another remotely, typically including a range of emotions and very rarely physical sensations.

Though the scientific world is in disagreement about its exact form and function, the NAB is commonly believed to originate in the limbic system within the brain, particularly the amygdala (feeding into the nucleus accumbens and related structures). After achieving Initial Communion via skin-to-skin contact, the central nervous systems (i.e., brains) of each of the Soulmates appear to ‘recognize’ one another, activating the brain’s NeuroAffective receptor cells located in the limbic system. In doing so, they establish a neurological bond.

Through this bond, the Soulmates can transmit and receive distinct signals from one another without physical contact. It is understood that upon receiving a remote ‘signal’ via the NAB (commonly: the bleed), the NeuroAffective cells in the limbic system active the amygdala in the recipient, and this individual’s brain then replicates the original pattern of activity, due in part to mirror-neurons (i.e., specialized brain cells for mimicry).

The strength and type of signals that comes through the bleed is impacted by the intensity of the felt emotion/sensation, the physical distance between the Pair, and often by skin-to-skin contact. The NAB is strongest: directly after being established when control is not yet possible; when physically touching one’s Soulmate and especially touching their Mark; and when extreme situations/emotions call for it.

With practice, Soulmates can deliberately block incoming NAB sensations and deliberately block their own from being sent. Deliberate transmission is far more rare, but is believed to be possible by some scientists. Transmitting images and actual thoughts is not considered possible, as the ability to mimic the unique neurological activation pattern of complex ideas and images is not believed to be
possible, and because the NAB begins in the limbic system and does not (according to the current scientific consensus) feed into the brain’s memory or visual centers. Shared sensations are often fleeting, not constant, and seldom go beyond basic or semi-complex emotions.

In rare cases, physical sensations have been documented as shared, and this is believed to occur when the brains of the Pair have NeuroAffective receptor cells extending beyond the amygdala to other parts of the limbic system in the brain, including the thalamus. The Pairs will experience a more intense bleed that can extend to pain, pleasure, and a host of other phantom sensory experiences.

The archaic term for the NAB was “Communion” but this has fallen from common usage.

*See also:* Bond, Feed the Bleed, Initial Communion

**Nab (verb)** – Using the NeuroAffective Bond as an action. Usage is not particularly common, as social trends in propriety and social closeness dictate whether it is appropriate to discuss experiencing the NAB.

*Example:* “You seem distracted, is your mate nabbing at you?”

**NAB Blockers (noun)** - Drugs that can be administered that block a person from experiencing a Bleed input from their Soulmate, although this does not stop the Soulmate not taking the pills from receiving a NAB input. The pills work by selectively blocking NeuroAffective receptor cells sites in the brain. Specifically, they block receptor sites in the postsynaptic neurons that are specialized as NeuroAffective receptor cells, blocking the dopaminergic, adrenergic, and cholinergic receptor cites found there, inhibiting transmission along the mirror-neuron pathways.

*See also:* NeuroAffective Bond

**Pair Exemptions (noun)** - A term for any legal or workplace exemptions provided to Bonded Soulmates.

*See also:* Copenhagen Convention, the; Bond Rights

**Quiet bleed (noun)** – A term for when a Pair’s NAB transfers very little, mostly the basic human emotions and not intensely.

*See also:* NeuroAffective Bond (NAB / the bleed)

**Sly shaker (noun)** – A derogatory term used for people who attempt to touch (usually via handshake) as many people as they possibly can in an attempt to find their Soulmate. Typically perceived as desperate.

*See also:* Marked and Waiting, Spoiled Ballot
**Soulmate / Pair (noun)** – Two people (or in extremely rare cases, more than two) who share a spiritual connection beyond the physical realm. They share a unique Mark to identify one another, and upon touching skin to skin for the first time, establish a strong and unbreakable bond. Soulmates are often romantic partners but may be platonic and even familial pairs. It is believed that Soulmates remain over the course of reincarnation from one life to the next. At any given time, approximately one third to forty percent of the population is Marked. It is further believed that the UnMarked have reincarnated at a time where their Soulmate is not currently alive, evidenced by the development of a Mark at the time of one’s Soulmate’s birth, but not until that time.

*See also:* Bond, Initial Communion, Mark, NeuroAffective Bond, UnMarked

**Soulmate Remote Sensing (verb)** – The act of psychically locating one's Soulmate in another geographical location due to one's Bond.

*See also:* NeuroAffective Bond (NAB)

**Soul signs (noun)** – Similar to astrology, a new-age pseudo science based on the shape, form, size, and patterns within a given person/pair’s Marks. According to the Soul Sign aficionados, the angularity, geometry, shapes, and symbols within the Marks are all purported to have some higher symbolic meaning about the nature of the Bond. Some supporters even claim to be able to predict the course of one’s life based on historically-known Soulmates who have similar-shaped Marks. There is, to date, no scientific evidence that corroborates these claims.

*See also:* Mark

**Spoiled Ballot (noun)** – A person with a Mark (and thus Soulmate) in this lifetime, but never finding them and never achieving Initial Communion. A common fear among aging MaWs and among those whose Soulmate is born considerably later than them.

*See also:* Marked and Waiting, Initial Communion

**Symbolonology (noun)** - The scientific study of Soulmates and Soulmate bonds. Neural symbolonology is the study of the neural/brain pathways of Soulmates and the NeuroAffective Bond. The term arises through the Greek word "symbolon," referring to the term used by Aristophanes to explain wherefrom Soulmates arise, in Plato's *The Symposium*. Elsewhere, a symbolon referred to the dish broken in two and given to two people to symbolize the bond between them: two halves of a whole.

**Symbosexualty (noun)** - Attraction and sexual orientation specific to one's Soulmate; i.e., only experiencing sexual attraction for one's Soulmate. (Also: symboromanticism).

**UnBound (noun, adjective)** – The loss or breaking of one's NAB. Occurs as a result of
amygdalectomic lesion surgery.

See also: Amygdalectomic lesion surgery, NeuroAffective Bond (NAB)

Unmarked (noun, adjective) – Any individual who does not have a Mark / SoulMark in this lifetime; roughly 60-67% of the population at any given time.

Vitalis (noun) - A Soul Sign for individuals with a medium-to-large Soul Mark appearing over the vital organs or on the torso, particularly for Marks that have hard and broken lines. It is said to be indicative of a Bond with strife and quarrels, but also with deep passion, a strong NAB, and strong emotions. Famous couples in history with this Soul Sign include Bonnie and Clyde, Marc Antony and Cleopatra, and fictional couples such as Romeo and Juliet.

See also: Mark, Soul Signs

Widow Mark / Marked (noun, adjective) – After a person’s Soulmate has died, their Mark turns black and becomes a Widow Mark, and they become Widow Marked

See also: Mark
**Len couldn’t look away. He couldn’t hear anything—the sounds around him muted, distant. Heartbeat slow, like the space between each beat was stretched out. He felt his body take one slow, dilated step, felt the ground shake beneath his feet as something heavy crashed near him. The ceiling above them losing another slab of concrete, maybe, or maybe it was just the giant gorilla taking another thundering step. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. Nothing but that Mark.**

The Mark that said the Flash was—that Barry Allen was—

As soon as that clicked, truly clicked like a key sliding into a lock, the world resumed its normal speed. The gorilla was rounding on Barry. This heist had gone horribly wrong, the hallway and ceiling above were crumbling around them, the giant super-powered gorilla having destroyed everything around them in its rage. It didn’t matter right now, he had to get to Barry.

Barry who was his Soulmate.
They had planned their job for the early morning—two hours before the museum opened but right at the time the security changed over and, incidentally, when the museum curator would arrive each day. With some insight into the layout of the city’s subway system, the plan was simple—they would grab curator, then the jewels from their basement vault, with the curator at gunpoint. From there, they would return out to the main basement corridor and Len would freeze a hole through the floor, dropping them right overtop an old subway tunnel. They’d gone ahead an hour before, into the tunnel to freeze their escape hole most of the way from the other side—mostly undetectable but enough to make it easy to blast through later. They also stationed their getaway car as close by as they could in the tunnel—with another outside the museum as a contingency—so all they had to do was get in and get to the curator. Easy peasy.

And it was easy, until they found out that the curator had got brave and tripped a silent alarm at some point while leaving the vault. Bars descended at the end of the basement hallway toward the stairs, in front of the elevator, and also behind them into the vault. But no matter, they were almost out, fairly certain the museum had never planned for potential thieves to blow through the ground beneath them. Len was blasting the floor with his gun when—

“What was that, Captain?”

They were using aliases now—might as well, since they had them. Len looked up at Lisa and then it happened again, worse—the ground shook. An earthquake? In Central? He steadied himself, “how the hell should I know?”

Lisa had her gun on the curator, a dozen security guards making their way toward the bars that had descended between them and the stairs leading up.

“Try anything funny and your boss will be a pretty golden statue, boys!” Lisa called in their direction.

They were stationing themselves at the bars when the ground shook again, and he almost felt—that couldn’t be though. It seemed to be coming from right under his feet, right—

The ground was cracking, his ice splintering beneath him suddenly and he stepped back, away and —

With a deafening crunching and cracking like the sound of break bones, the floor erupted upwards in a storm of ice and rubble, massive chunks of concrete and rebar and marble flooring. Len and Lisa threw themselves back and out of the way, the curator dodging away from them and—

What the ever-loving hell was—

A monster, some giant roaring creature was climbing up from the ground and the security guards had already opened fire, loud in the basement corridor, ricocheting and it wasn’t a monster at all it was—

“A gorilla?!” Len and his sister yelled it in unison, as soon as the creature surfaced form the hole. It wasn’t just any gorilla—it was a massive one, enormous and—

It was angry. It reared back and roared, barreling its chest and charging toward the security guards, running at an impossible speed, side to side and jumping against walls, grabbing cross beams on the ceiling, which cracked and fell away in chunks. The monster was too fast for the guards to react properly and get a decent shot in but it had to have taken on some bullets and then it was slamming its feet forward into the bars.

But then the security guards stopped firing at all. They were just standing there, still, as the monster
growled and started to pull at the bars, bending them. Goddamn, did it have super strength too, or was that just regular massive monkey strength? And why weren’t they firing? Now that the hall wasn’t full of bullets though, Len didn’t intend to wait and find out.

He hissed toward Lisa “hole, car, now” and she nodded, cast a glance back at the back of the monster and toward the hole. Before she moved, they both heard a “please—” and snapped their heads toward another figure. The museum curator. His head was bleeding. “Don’t leave me,” he whispered, face terrified.

Shit. He was ready to tell the old man he was on his own when he heard—

“Grodd—let these people go!” It was the Flash. Of course it was. Len whipped his head up and saw the Scarlet Speedster, standing on the stairs leading into the corridor, behind the row of lifeless security guards. He knew the gorilla?

“The day just keeps getting better!” Len hissed to Lisa from behind their concrete block.

“What d’we do, Len?!” she hissed back, the curator sliding along the ground toward them now.

Whatever deal the Flash had with the gorilla didn’t seem to be holding—he could hear gunfire again, but the bullets weren’t aimed at the gorilla, saw a blur and hissed back at his sister—“We get the hell out of here. C’mon!”

They made a break toward the hole some 15 feet way but Len ran to the side and grabbed the old man’s arm and hoisted him up, moving to drag him along and then he saw—the Flash had run at the gorilla, the bars pulled wide enough to let him get a running punch and the beast grabbed him and threw him. The kid skidded and flipped along the ground, landing just a few feet from Len. Which might not have been too much of a problem except the monster was suddenly noticing him and Lisa—halted in the middle of the corridor.

“Take the old man and go!” he yelled at his sister, the curator yelling “Wait!” before being shoved unceremoniously at Lisa. “Run!” She caught the man and he had a second to see them heading toward the hole in the floor.

Before he could plan anything else through, the gorilla was charging and Len hefted his cold gun and shot the damn thing square in the chest. That oughtta’ slow him—that was not slowing him down. The thing roared in pain, bashing a wall as he reared to the side, the sound thundering in the corridor, echoing off its walls. Then it resumed its run, straight toward Len, cold gun be damned, roar deafening and the Flash was picking himself up off the ground but not fast enough to help Len. He dodged to the side, trying to get out of the creature’s path but he caught the backside of a flailing gorilla arm on his way—the impact slamming him ten feet back, back against the wall, ribs definitely broken. He groaned.

“Grodd!” That was the kid. Len held onto his ribs and grit his teeth, forcing his eyes to open. His head hurt like a mother fucker from slamming back against the wall. He probably had a concussion. At the end of the corridor, the guards had all fled back up the steps. Big chunks of the walls had busted down thanks to the gorilla’s rampage, and with so many crossbeams broken and on the ground, things were slowly starting to cave in now, mostly still the hiss of fine grains of plaster and dust sliding down around them but the occasional chunk of concrete was starting to break away too. They needed to get the fuck out.

But the monster was turning back to the Flash, who was standing, determined and edgy as ever. Len had to hand it to the kid, he could take a beating.
“It doesn’t have to be this way, Grodd. You can come back with me to STAR Labs—to see Cisco and Caitlin. You like Caitlin, remember?”

Len made a very bolded and underlined mental note to ask the Flash and his crew what the hell was going on in this city, and why the fuck a giant super-powered gorilla was wandering around unchecked. But the monster just growled and beat it’s chest, apparently unimpressed by Barry’s suggestion, and then it was looking back at Len, staring him in the eyes like an intelligent—like he was—I am Grodd— and—

Against his will, unbidden, mind oddly far and distant, like a haze, Len felt himself step forward off the wall. “Where Father?” his voice asked. He felt it, but it wasn’t him. That didn’t concern him though. Nothing did. It was all suddenly okay; better than okay, it was content, placid.

“Grodd—are you—did you just take Captain Cold to talk to me?”

“Helmet block me—where is Father?!” And Len understood—the Flash was blocking Grodd’s powers. Grodd didn’t like that. Grodd was angry. Len was angry too. Why would the Flash do that to Grodd? How cruel. And where was Father? Grodd missed Father. He wasn’t visiting.

“Wells—Eobard—he’s not around anymore, Grodd. We sent him back to his time. He went home.”

NO! Grodd was angry. He barreled toward the Flash, and—

Fuck that had been—Len fell to one knee, gasping. The mutant gorilla was a giant monster with super-strength and mind control powers!? Hell no.

Len forced his eyes to open, pushed past the tunnelling of his vision and the pain in the back of his head still from getting slammed into that wall. He saw the Flash dodge, speed, then the kid was right by Len’s side—

“Flash, you—” his voice was reedier and he could taste copper.

“You need to get out of here, now! Grodd will do that again, Snart!”

Then the gorilla was charging in their direction, having turned on a dime to follow the Flash and the kid ran away from Len, distracting the thing but Len saw it reach out and grab him as he streaked past it. It was fast for such a gargantuan thing. It hoisted Scarlet up and grabbed the front of his suit, ripping off the lightning bolt and half of the front with it, the whole right side, the cowl going too, Barry’s face and head exposed and then—

The kid screamed. Whatever the monster was doing inside his head, it did not sound pleasant.

Len looked at the hole in the ground, less than ten feet from him, and the red lighting sigil and leather that had fallen not five feet from him, but—he cursed himself—Len couldn’t just leave it at that. Swearing under his breath, he stood up and—with a silent prayer to whatever gods might be listening—blasted the monster in the back with his gun.

It made a wounded, angry yell and threw Barry like he was a rag doll. Then it rounded on Len and he tried to prepare himself for the mind control bit, walking slowly back toward the hole, gun trained on the monster, hoping the kid was smart enough to escape right now, but this time he felt—


Len shouted, dropping to his knee again and then grit his teeth. The gorilla was advancing slowly,
taking its time with a rumbling growl as he sent visions of trauma and experiments into his head and Len—fuck he had had worse than this. He could take this. He bit his tongue sharp so that he tasted blood and pulled up a memory, one of his father, angry, yelling, belt whipping down on his skin, beer bottle cracking against his forehead, bleeding, him with his arms up, trying to hide—

The gorilla stopped, still growling but then, in his head he heard—

*Puny Human. No quarrel with you.*

Wow that—that was new. A voice in his head. He hissed against the intrusion and looked up at the thing, but it was turning away from him. He stood and steadied himself, and that was when he saw—

Behind the monster, he could see Barry standing, jacket mostly torn away, exposed from his right hip to the top of his head, left side of his suit still clinging to him. And there, Len’s eyes drawn to it like the eye of a storm—the Mark. Barry had a Soulmate Mark etched onto his right side, below his ribs and above his hip, to the side of his abdominal muscles, just—there. Right where Len’s was. Right as Len’s was—identical. Matching. A Pair.

No. Yes. Fuck. He needed to get Barry out of there—*now.*

But the monster was rounding on Barry again, oblivious to Len’s shock. He stepped toward it, without thinking, even as Barry challenged it, told it to stand down, grit his teeth in pain against whatever it was doing inside his head. They ceiling was starting to cave in. If Barry got them both killed right now, Len would murder him himself in their next life.

Len blasted it, cold gun coming up in an arc even as Barry snatched a cable, or a rope—it was the ones Len and Lisa had brought for climbing into the hole, he dimly realized—and the kid was running around the screeching gorilla, wrapping up its feet, its arms to its sides. In seconds Len could lower his arm, Barry had tripped the thing, tangled it up—

“What the hell are you doing, Scarlet!?” the kid was moving toward Len, back to him, dragging the enraged creature along toward the hole.

“Getting it away from the surface! We can’t let him—”

“That’s our getaway, you idiot!”

But Barry didn’t stop pulling and it didn’t matter because a second later the rope snapped and a massive slab of concrete fell right onto the monster. The shudder it caused in the ground almost tripped Len, Barry dropped the rope and the thing kicked out, connected a foot with Barry and before Len could react the kid was sailing back, skidding and—fuck Len tried to reach out but the kid was in the hole, falling through the floor.

Len scrambled to the edge and looked down. Barry had landed ten feet down onto the floor of the service tunnel and was groaning, rolling onto his side. Len could see Lisa already rushing toward him. Thank god.

He turned back around and took another look at the monster, the gorilla, pulling the concrete slab off it’s chest, a crossbeam snapping and falling near them, the ceiling giving a spine-straightening kind of groan, hairs on his neck standing. Len shot the cold gun at the slab that was pinning the creature, icing it to the ground, freezing it to the creature. It roared and thrashed and more dust slithered down from the ceiling, cracks like spider webs about to give. Len blasted Grodd one more time for good measure then grabbed the tail of one of the ropes, the other end still anchored under the beast. He wrapping it around his arm and left hand and used it to slide down into the hole, ribs aching violently
in protest.

He dropped the last two feet to the ground and Lisa was already shouting at him.

“Let’s go, Lenny! NOW!”

He didn’t have to be told twice. The car was ten feet from him, at the door of the dark service tunnel and Lisa was getting into the driver’s seat. He hurried over, ribs smarting, and threw himself into the back seat, next to Barry. The curator was up front, wrapped in on himself, freaking out. He hadn’t even closed the door before Lisa hit the gas, door slamming as she did.

“What the hell was that!? What took you so long? And—” Behind him, where he’d been seconds before, concrete and rocks and chunks of floor and ceiling were caving in, the sound erupting into the tunnel—demolition and breakage.

Barry groaned next to him. Len snapped his attention to him. He was half-sitting and half-laying, back against the car door, legs splayed in Len’s direction and eyes closed in pain. He looked worse for wear—bloody lip and a gash on his face, bruising all over, no doubt broken ribs, a cut on his leg and who knew what else under his pants. One sleeve, his left, was still miraculously attached but the right side of his costume was gone for good, and his secret identity was definitely on display. But he was alive, if battered, and that’s what mattered.

That, and the Mark. Barry was holding his ribs, gloved hand half-masking holding the bruise and broken bones, but not masking the Mark and Len could see it—an intricate white Mark, a snowflake with jagged lines like lightning bolts.

Len was running on adrenaline and not much else, too many questions, too much going on but the one thing he did know—

“Lenny I need some answers, here!” Lisa was still yelling. Fuck. They were speeding toward daylight at the end of the subway tunnel.

“Just get us out here, Lise!”

“Please!” the old curator piped up and Len had had about enough of him.

“And dump the old man.”

“No—” Barry opened his eyes and tried to sit up, “You can’t just—”

“We’ll drop him somewhere safe, kid. Lisa, pull over.”

They had come out of the tunnel toward an abandoned subway station above ground, a closed down old stop in need of repair. The neighborhood was just outside of downtown, a little less savory and Len was pretty sure that Mick had a safe house around here he could borrow. A minute later, Lisa pulled up alongside a row of businesses that were doubtlessly fronts for something, almost no traffic around on a Sunday.

“Out.”

The old man didn’t have to be asked twice. Barry moved too, as if to go, face screwing up in pain as he did.

“Not you, Scarlet. You we patch up. We’ve got questions.” And he did, Len had about a million. But he wasn’t letting himself process it quite yet—needed to be somewhere safe first, somewhere
Lisa drove off before the Flash could get out. “Where to, Lenny?” she asked, voice regaining some of its calm now that they were safely away from the subway and the giant creature, and his own heartbeat was slowing again.

“Mick’s place on thirty fourth.”

She nodded, she knew the one.

“No—STAR Labs.” Barry was trying to sit forward and Len pressed a gloved hand against his left—still clothed—shoulder to push him back against the seat. Of course. They’d never touched skin to skin, of course he hadn’t known. He would only know when they touched. He snatched his hand away from Barry, as though it was possible that through the layers of leather it would happen.

“We aren’t driving across the city when every cop in Central is gonna’ be out for the museum thieves, setting up barricades around the entire downtown core after that building collapses.”

“But—”

“We won’t hurt you, Barry,” his voice was quieter, more sincere and his hand had found its way back to Barry’s shoulder, tightening in something like reassurance. Green eyes found his own, confused, still a bit dazed and drawn in pain, tense. But he didn’t argue, just set his jaw and looked away, out at the window at buildings going by.

Len let his hand drop again and leaned back against the seat. In the rearview mirror, Lisa was looking at him with a question in her slightly narrowed eyes. He wasn’t about to explain; she would figure it out in a few minutes.

One benefit of this particular safe house was the lack of stairs. Lisa pulled up and it was an old, run down office trailer retrofitted with a kitchen and a bedroom on the outskirts of an industrial park. Lisa was grabbing the key as Len went around the car to help Barry out. The other was moving slow—way slower than usual for him—and it didn’t take long to understand why. The kid had the car door open and was standing, one arm around his ribs still and the other holding on to the door for support, left leg lifted up, apparently unusable.

“Let me—” Len immediately reached forward and Barry flinched back—

“I can—”

“Can you even walk?”

Barry glared, but the cuts on his face had closed so that was a good sign. Len had figured out by now from their various fights and the one time they worked alongside one another that Barry must heal faster than any normal person, that it was more than just the suit protecting him. But even so, Len grabbed Barry’s still-gloved arm and slung it around his shoulder, acting like a crutch for his wounded leg.

That meant his other hand had to reach across Barry’s back and hold onto his side, and since he couldn’t jostle the kid’s broken ribs—there was nothing for it, his gloved hand slid down, mostly above the Mark but still grazing it. Under any other circumstance, touching it would be like sacrilege if he didn’t know what he knew. Instead, Len was just careful to make sure their skin didn’t touch and that his own ribs didn’t burn too much as he turned toward the door of the house.

Lisa was waiting there with a calculating expression, eyes on Len, but then she saw it too, eyes
drawing to his black glove on Barry’s pale skin. He could tell the exact moment understanding hit her face. She knew—was one of the only people who did know—what Len’s Mark looked like. Her eyes widened and she sucked in a breath that Barry didn’t seem to notice, wincing and hissing in pain next to him.

“Len—”

“Not now, Lisa. Help me get him inside.”

Her shocked expression didn’t disappear but she came to Barry’s other side and helped bring him inside, toward the bedroom, tipping Barry down carefully onto the side of the single mattress there.

As soon as Barry was down she turned to him. “Len, how long have—”

“Today, fighting that thing, I just saw it.”

Her jaw dropped, “You mean you haven’t even—”

“Not now Lisa,” he ground out, and Barry was looking up at them in confusion. They both looked at him them back to each other, Lisa running a hand through her long locks. She only did that when she was really frazzled.

“Do you want me to go?”

The thought of being alone with Barry was both nerve-wracking and tantalizing. Before he could answer though, the other man spoke up, “Or I could go? Seriously? I can hobble out of here fine a few minutes, my ankle’s just twisted, or I can get a cab—”

“You’re staying,” Len’s voice brooked no argument but Barry didn’t seem to back down from any form of challenge.

“I’d like to see you try ’n stop me, Snart.”

“I didn’t bring you here to fight, Scarlet,” he glared and then caught himself, pursed his lips. He turned toward the small nightstand in the bare-bones room and in a show of good-faith, un-holstered his cold gun and dropped it down there. He dropped his parka on top of it.

“Lisa,” he said as he did, “You can go. I’ll explain things later.”

He glanced over his shoulder when he didn’t hear her move. She was hesitating near the doorway, looking between him and Barry. It grated on him a bit, to see such frank concern on her face. “I’ve got this.”

With a dubious glance she put on her false smile and nodded, “Sure thing, brother. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around, Flash.”

She closed the door behind her. As soon a she did, Len felt his heartbeat quicken. He hadn’t looked over at Barry again yet and he almost didn’t want to, unsure of how to go about the next few minutes. Should he explain it first, or just dive in? He slipped off his gloves and dropped them on top of the parka.

“What am I doing here, Snart?” Barry finally got fed up of waiting, it seemed. His voice was stronger now than it had been in the car, but when Len looked over the kid seemed strained and worn. He was peeling out of the remainder of his jacket and wiping the dried blood off his face. His left leg was stretched out in front of him. “Is it just for answers, because I’m pretty sure I could have
explained Grodd with Lisa here.”

Right. Answers. Those would be nice. But Len had more pressing matters.

“There’s something we need to talk about, Barry.”

Len hesitated for one moment under the scrutiny of Barry’s gaze, eyebrows drawn together. He was shirtless, skin pale and unblemished but for the bruises adorning him—the bruises and the Mark. It drew Len’s eye and he stared at it for too long, until Barry shifted uncomfortably.

“What do you want, Snart?” His voice was nervous now and Len snapped his eyes back up to meet Barry’s again, moss green and perfect. God he was perfect. Beautiful, even. Len could see it now—Barry had such raw power, such confidence and strength, so much that had always fascinated him, but now he could see so much more besides. He could see Barry. He was breathtaking. Len was, for a second, almost overtaken by the realization—this was his Soulmate.

He stepped forward and Barry flinched back. Len ignored it and sidestepped, dropped down to sit beside him, less than a foot away. With a steadying breath, he turned and placed his bare hand on Barry’s shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Starting off with a bang!

This fic will be long and I make zero promises about—that’s a lie, I make one promise about it. It will have a happy end. Everything along the way will be wading through mud and murky water though.
Snart’s hand dropped onto his shoulder, cold. He started at the touch, surprised by the contact and then—

Barry’s whole body lit up, everything at once—it was—he jolted, then gasped in a breath, the intensity of it flooring him. He felt all neurons firing, synapses rewiring, his Mark tingling and sensitive and alive. Everything was sharp, sudden, pupils blown, capillaries in his skin stretched, world on high contrast and brightness, too much all at once. His whole body felt a fission of electricity, not like his speed but just the experience of his entire form reacting to the same sensation all at once, tingling to his toes and the tips of his hair and his insides and everything in between. For an instant, he felt a second heartbeat synchronizing with his own. Ba-thump, ba-thump.

His whole body shuddered and he gasped in a second breath. The sensation didn’t abate. He knew what it was—everyone knew what it was. He’d had lectures on what it would feel like since childhood, watched it in movies, he just, it was—

Initial Communion.

He tried to breathe, looked up at Snart, eyes wide. Barry was shaking, dug his fingers into the mattress on either side of his legs.

“This—we—”

Snart’s hand was still on Barry’s shoulder and it was still cold but it also felt hot like a brand against his skin. His eyes traced it, fixated, every cell in body still thrumming and all of it coming from that simple hand on his shoulder, and from his Mark, still prickling. His gaze snapped back to Snart’s when he spoke.

“I saw, when that thing tore open your suit. We’ve never touched skin to skin before. I knew as soon as I saw.”

He saw. He knew. Touching Barry was intentional.

“This is real? You—you mean that you, that we—”

“We’re Soulmates, Barry.”
This couldn’t be real. Barry stared at him. It couldn’t be happening. He met Snart’s gaze, his cool blue eyes. He was so confused, but the man was looking at him with something akin to wonder, eyes searching his own. Barry’s bottom lip fell open, too much emotion surging through him.

“God, you’re beautiful.” Snart whispered it, voice softer than Barry had ever heard it, alien to his ears. The hand stayed put on his shoulder and the other came up to caress down the side of Barry’s face. Snart leaned forward and bridged the space between them, his lips pressing softly on top of Barry’s own.

Barry’s heartbeat ratcheted up in his chest. Snart was kissing him. Leonard Snart was kissing him and it was—his mind went blank. He couldn’t process anything right now. Nothing made sense. There was no way this was really happening. The tingles like electricity inside him at each point of contact between him and Snart—the hands on him, their lips—that was the only thing he could focus on and his brain was grinding to a halt.

And his body wouldn’t move—heavy limbs that wouldn’t obey his commands, just sat buzzing but still, except for his hands which dug so hard into the mattress he might shred it. The rest of his body could barely twitch. The inside of his mind turned slowly from the static of white noise to a louder sound, increasingly shrill until it sounded as if he was screaming inside his head. He was. Because this couldn’t be happening.

Barry didn’t respond to the kiss, didn’t move a muscle, and after a few moments Snart leaned back, touched his face again and he flinched, involuntary. Snart didn’t seem to mind, just smoothed his palm to cup Barry’s cheek and he realized that he had tears on his cheeks, wet under Snart's hand.

“What’s happening?” Barry whispered, voice low and hoarse, shaky.

“It’s okay, I know you’re scared but it will be okay. I promise, you’re safe, I won’t hurt you, or let anything else hurt you, ever. You’re safe, Barry.”

The man kissed his forehead, fingers carding through his hair and—hurt? Safe? It didn’t even make sense. He wasn’t scared of—this room, this feeling, that’s what he was—what was going on. His breathing was speeding up, coming in shorter gasps now, “What’s going on?”

“Barry—it’s okay, I’ve got you.”

No. No no no no no NO!

He scrambled back on the small bed. No. His chest was on fire, fighting to pull in air and his heartbeat was too fast but his perception wasn’t speeding up with it, slowing down instead, nothing made sense and he was gasping, throat tightening, tears down his cheeks and Snart was leaning forward with his knees on the mattress and holding his hands up like Barry was some frightening animal and—NO.

“This isn’t ha-happening, this c-can’t—” his hands were shaking and he felt nauseated, stomach tight, hard to breath, face too hot, every sound dim and far away except the blood pounding in his ears. His vision was dark at the edges and starting to tunnel and he was scared. Nothing registered and he closed his eyes and tried to muffle out the sounds, tried to breath but it wasn’t coming at all and then it was coming too fast and sharp and hot in his chest, heaving—

“Barry?” it sounded so far away, muffled, repeating itself, “Barry? Barry! Barry!”

Eventually his name broke through and he shuddered, looked up. He didn’t know how many minutes had passed. He was curled in a corner of the bed, corner of the room really, hands over his
ears, pulling on his own hair, wet cheeks, gasping wet breaths in. And Snart was there, looking worried, completely open expression that made no sense on his typically closed face, eyes wide. His hands were still in front of him, suspended like they were uncertain about shaking sense into Barry, grabbing him to hug him, or just dropping back by his sides.

Barry shuddered. “Snart?” His own voice was raspy and raw, throat burning.

The man’s arms relaxed, as did his face, softening toward something more neutral. “You’re having a panic attack, kid. Just take a second to breathe.”

“I—” he was. Barry hadn’t had one in almost a decade, not since his first week of college and fuck. It hadn’t been that bad since he was a kid, hadn’t totally lost control to that extent. He should never have dropped his guard around Cold like that, not even if—he swallowed the thought. He was still shaking, spent as though he’d run a marathon but somehow still on edge and ready to bolt.

“You’re safe here, Barry.”

Snart kept saying that—that word, safe. Like that’s what Barry was worried about. He shook his head. “This can’t be happening.” More tears leaked out as he said it, but he had some control again, tenuous maybe but within his grasp and he wiped them away, face bunching in anger.

Something changed in Snart’s voice when he responded, it became more familiar, less of this soft and smooth and comforting and more of the steel he recognized. “It’s already happened, kid. We’re Soulmates.”

Barry’s reaction was immediate and instinctual. He lunged forward at high speed, onto his knees and he grabbed Snart by his shirt, hauling him close to hiss—“Do not call us that. You have tried to kill me and betrayed me; you have tortured my friends and you have done more than enough damage that the only thing I want for you is to see you rotting in a prison cell, Snart. Do not call me your—”

Snart’s hands shot out and circled his wrists, grip tight—“Soulmate? But I am, Barry.”

He shuddered, throat constricting all over again. The contact was too much, the sensations—he couldn’t cry again, not now, but fuck he couldn’t do this, not like this, not with him. “I—”

And Snart’s expression got soft again and that was almost worse. He dropped Barry’s wrists and gathered him into his arms, hugged him and Barry didn’t fight it, too on edge, too unable. His hands stayed clutched in the fabric of the other’s sweater as one of Snart’s hands reached up to card through his hair again and he trembled. It felt so comforting and he already craved it, Bond forming and stretching to pull them close. He hated it.

“It’s okay, Barry. I promise—I’ll never hurt you again. I’ll never hurt the people you care about. You’re my Soulmate and I’ll protect you, you have my word.” It made no sense. Snart was a criminal, a thief and a murderer. He hurt people and he bragged about it. How could he and Barry be connected like this? Why? And how could he make these promises? Were they empty? They had to be—Snart hated him. He had no remorse before. It didn’t turn on a dime like that. People didn’t just change like that. “I’ll love you, Barry.”

He threw himself out of Snart’s arms, across the room, body like whiplash with speed. His ankle shot pain up his leg. “No! No—no, you can’t! You don’t even know who I am, Snart! Do you even know what love is?”

Barry felt some awful jolt inside his chest and gut but he ignored it, increasingly nauseated. “Barry of course I—” the man went from surprised to annoyed in the space of a second, stood up and ground
out, "I've been waiting years to meet you. Of course I know who you are—even if we weren’t Soulmates I already know all about you. Now that I know you’re my Soulmate, loving you isn’t even a question.”

Snart looked him in the eye as he said each word and Barry Could. Not. Deal. With. This. He ran out of there like lightning on fire.

**********

Barry was home in record time, whipping upstairs and he headed straight into the bathroom, the shower; he set it to scorching. He was still in his pants, his ankle was throbbing, he had dried blood on his body and his stomach hurt so much that he might vomit any second.

Leonard Snart.

Barry shuddered under the onslaught of hot water.

Leonard Snart.

A sob erupted from his throat and he clutched the shower wall. Why?

His Soulmate was a killer. Someone who hurt others with relish, who had hurt people he loved. He’d even tried to give Snart a chance once and the man betrayed him. He’d tried to kill Barry twice and almost succeeded both times, and then he’d betrayed Barry and almost got him killed a third time. They couldn’t be Soulmates. They couldn’t.

“But I am, Barry.”

Snart’s words from a few minutes ago floated up in his mind, unbidden and he could almost taste bile at the unwelcome thought.

He wanted to rage. He wanted to punch the tiles and scream and bruise something. He wanted to fight. But there was nothing to fight against. Just fate. It was done, it couldn’t be undone. So he broke down instead, let it overtake him.

His throat was aching from the ragged crying, both there and here, sobs pouring from him, barely holding himself up. This wasn’t supposed to be happening like this. This wasn’t like any of the stories he heard, not like Caitlin meeting Ronnie, shaking his hand on her first day at STAR Labs, both of them shocked, ecstatic. This wasn’t like Eddie meeting Iris by saving her laptop from the mugger, him seeing her Mark on her collarbone, flustered and excited. This wasn’t like any of the countless stories he heard.

This was anguish.

And fuck, he could feel it—the bleed. The NeuroAffective Bond, the NAB, the psychological connection that bound all Soulmates together after Initial Communion. It was linking him and Snart, strongest just after forming. He could feel that some of these emotions weren’t his own, could feel waves of sensation, of anger and pain and other things he couldn’t place, too complex for the NAB to decipher, things that set him on edge at the edges of his perception, bleeding through. His gut was churning in a way that was new to him, wasn’t his own, and that closeness was disturbing, violating. His own emotions weren’t his own, and whatever he was feeling Snart was too, becoming
reciprocal, cyclical.

He fell to his knees and the water poured over him.

The bleed, *it hurt*. It was strongest when fresh because it was supposed to help establish the Bond between newly-communed Soulmates, supposed to cement their connection. They were supposed to touch for the first time and experience elation, relief, joy. They were supposed to smile and want to touch, to feel skin on skin, to experience comfort and awe. It was supposed to help them fall in love.

He gagged, throat raw.

You weren’t supposed to be Soulmates with someone who’d tried to kill you. You weren’t supposed to experience their pain, their anger, their—fuck, their love. Technically, that part you were supposed to experience but he didn’t want it. He didn’t want Snart to love him. He couldn’t love Snart.

Leonard. Fuck.

Barry sat back against the side the bath and finally dragged his legs out of his suit, then turned the hot water to ice cold. He shivered under it and curled in on himself, trying not to think. Sensations came through the bleed, intense enough to make him gasp but he tried to ignore them. It was almost impossible to.

Was it supposed to be this strong, this clear? It must be a first-week effect, the NAB so strong in the first few days. Snart had shifted to something that reminded Barry of… anxiety, maybe, grief. Was the bleed supposed to transfer things like grief? The more complex the sensation the less likely it was to transfer. He almost wondered if he felt guilt but that seemed impossible coming from Snart.

The shower dragged on until his ankle had stopped hurting and his skin was starting to prune, whole body shivering and teeth starting to chatter under the cold spray. He finally turned it off.

Mustering his strength, Barry dried off and went to find clothes, steadfastly trying to push away any sensations he couldn’t pinpoint as his own. As his mind cleared, he remembered—SHIT.

His friends. STAR Labs. Joe. They probably thought he was crushed under several tons of concrete.

Barry sped downstairs to the house phone (his cell was at the lab) and dialed Cisco’s number. He picked up halfway through the first ring—

“Please tell me it’s you, Barr—”

“Cisco! It’s me!”

“Is it him?” he heard Caitlin in the background.

“Barry! You’re alive!”

He immediately heard Caitlin again, close to Cisco and the phone—“Let me talk to him, where is he? Is he okay?”

He was put on speaker a second later—“Barr, what happened? You’re on your house phone?”

Fuck, what could he say? “It’s a long story. Long. I’m alive. My suit got mostly destroyed. Grodd showed up and—”

“Grodd?!” Cisco and Caitlin shouted in unison, and Barry winced, pulling his ear back for a second before continuing.
“Like I said, it’s a long story. But he busted up my suit and ruined the comms and GPS. And Cisco, did you put an anti-telepathy device in my suit?”

“I knew that would come in handy, man!”

Barry blew out a sigh and ran a hand through his hair. It was still wet.

“Barry we’re just glad you’re alive,” Caitlin said softly. “Why didn’t you come straight back to the lab? And have you talked to Joe or Iris yet? They’re both worried sick about you! They’re on their way here.”

His whole body tensed. What could he tell them, all of them? He couldn’t tell them about Snart. He couldn’t. “I was injured and I… I had to hitch a ride. I’ll explain when I get there.”

“Barr… you don’t sound too hot. Is everything okay?” Cisco’s voice was concerned and Barry put his hand over the receiver to sniff and wipe his eyes.

“Yeah, I’m—I just got whammied by Grodd. I’ll be there in a few minutes, okay?”

He hung up and dragged in a heavy breath.

His friends, his family. They would be horrified. They would be so disappointed.

Whatever Barry was feeling, he wished he could close it off from the NAB, the bleed, keep his emotions away from Snart, but he had no idea how. He knew it was possible but it took practice and he… God this was all a mess. He tried to sort out his face and look normal before sprinting to STAR Labs. His ankle wasn’t perfect yet but it was good enough, and the pain up his leg was grounding.

Joe and Iris were there by the time he arrived. He was greeted with hugs and relief that he readily accepted, needing some comfort. Then they started in with questions.

“What the hell happened at the museum, Barr?” Was the one Joe chose to lead with. “I thought you were there to stop a robbery? None of statements from the security made any sense whatsoever and the curator showed up thirty blocks away yammering about some monster from the abyss.”

“It was Grodd.”

“Gorilla Grodd?” Joe paled, something that always made his dark complexion look sickly.

“As in the giant gorilla that almost killed you and my dad last time you fought him?! I thought he was dead!” Iris looked terrified and Barry couldn’t blame her. He tried to smile reassuringly.

“Same gorilla, and I’m still kicking, so… I don’t think there were any casualties at the museum, were there?” He addressed that to Joe.

“No, just a few bumps and scrapes and a lot of confused security personnel. Oh, and over a million dollars worth of damage to the lower levels.”

“The whole thing didn’t come down?”

“Did it seem like it would?”

Barry sighed, then took a seat and started explaining it from the top—he described showing up just as Grodd was coming out a hole in the floor, seeing the Snart siblings (at which point Joe slammed his fist on the nearest surface with an emphatic ‘I knew it!’), then fighting Grodd and losing his cowl, Snart fighting and Grodd taking over Snart’s body, then them both taking Grodd down together.
before he was thrown into the hole, then how Lisa Snart helped drag him into their getaway car. He felt some need to cast the Snarts in a good light in this little story, something that made him frustrated with himself because he knew exactly where that urge was coming from. He told them about dumping the curator and—

“And they dropped me a few blocks later, after I could stand on my ankle. They wanted to know about Grodd.”

“What did you tell them?” Iris asked. Joe looked like he was digesting everything.

“That it was none of their business and to stay out of it.”

“Lisa Snart—she saw your face?” Joe always managed to pick up on the details like that. Barry nodded solemnly. “Okay—I guess it was only a matter of time, her knowing if her brother did. You’ll have to be more careful from—”

“You think I wasn’t careful, Joe?” Barry snapped, “It’s hard to keep track of some things with Grodd sending torture and trauma straight into your brain!”

Everybody winced. Caitlin stepped forward, “Barry are you…”

Barry blew out a breath and leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees and steepling his fingers in front of him. He closed his eyes for a second. He was a mess. “I’m fine. I’m just tired.”

“Grodd really whammied you again?”

“Yeah. Seems that way.”

It was halfway true at least—Grodd’s pain inside his head had been white hot and disorienting, probably part of the reason for his panic attack earlier. But he knew his anger right now had a lot more to do with Snart than it did with anything residual from Grodd. And he knew he should come clean, that there was almost no point to lying about this. Unless he could avoid Snart for the rest of his life, his friends and family would find out eventually. But he needed to gather his thoughts first, figure out where things stood, see if there were any other adversary or arch-nemeses Soulmates in history, if that was even a thing. And before he did anything else, he needed to get the feel of Snart’s lips against his own out of his head, needed to get the sound of him declaring he’d love Barry out of his ears.

The thought was still nauseating. His stomach clenched, tight.

“Okay, Barr, you look like hell. You sure you’re alright?” Joe came closer and dropped a hand to Barry’s shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay, just need some rest.” He started to stand but an onslaught of sudden sensations—teeth-clenching frustration, hot anger, tight-throated grief—almost knocked him over. He steadied himself by sitting back down, grateful that Cisco took that second to start speaking and distracted everyone.

“We’ve gotta’ make a plan for the next time Grodd shows up, guys.”

“You think he’s still alive?” Iris turned to Cisco, along with almost everyone else, though Caitlin was still looking at Barry in concern.

“He survived a subway train before, why not this? Joe, has the clean-up crew found any giant gorillas yet?”
“Not that I’ve heard, though it’s early still.”

“So we can’t rule it out as a possibility,” Caitlin had finally stopped looking at Barry to rejoin the conversation and he was a bit relieved. “And Cisco’s right, we need to make sure this doesn’t happen to Barry again next time.”

Barry tried to smile, if weakly, now that everyone’s eyes were on him. “I’ll be fine, you guys. I’m just—”

“Tired, yeah we know. But we worry, Barr—super speed or not. And next time you get whammied, can y’try givin’ one of us a call before we all think you’re six feet under?” That was Joe, voice steeped on concern with an undertone of steel to it, which meant he really had been worried. Barry wanted to scowl up at him but it was a reasonable request.

“We didn’t actually think you were dead dead, man, more like—mini dead. Like mopping-you-up-from-underneath-some-priceless-artifact-but-ultimately-still-alive dead.”

“Thanks, Cisco, that’s very… reassuring.” Barry finally did stand and stretch, after saying that. He had a headache, probably from clenching his teeth and being so on edge, and his stomach was still unsettled. “Before I head to my actual job—for which I am now more than an hour late—are there any more questions?”

“Just one last thing before you jet… is there anything left of the suit?” Cisco cringed with hope and fear at his answer and Barry found himself smiling for the first time since seeing Grodd. At least some things would never change.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: So… the boys aren’t dealing all that well right now. Hopefully that changes? (spoiler alert: not for a while. You guys shouldn’t let me write. I’m not nice enough to write; I’m clearly a miserly grouch who wants to ruin everyone’s day.)

(ps - next chapter is pretty much just Len's background...)


Len was nauseated—he felt physical ill. He didn’t throw up because it wouldn’t have helped. Nothing was going to help with this.

Barry ran out of there like the devil was at his heels and it fucking hurt. In a visceral, physical way, like wrenching out some important internal organ and leaving it there on the ground to bleed. He was halfway confident that the pain was more than just his other injuries and imagination—that separating from a Soulmate so soon after Initial Communion was probably meant to hurt, meant to pull people back together. But if Barry noticed he must not care because he sure as hell didn’t come back.

Len had fucked up so royally it was almost certainly some act of fate. Or maybe he was really just that much of a fuck up after all. After forty-two years, he really should have seen this coming, but somehow, this one had got away from him.

He sat back down on the small bed, swallowing back bile and in pain, ribs burning still on top of the rest. His left leg felt like it was on fire. He realized with a jolt that that wasn’t his own pain. His breath was coming in tight and hot and he grit his teeth then focused on breathing. Slow, deliberate exhales. The pain was nothing new, nothing he couldn’t handle, and he forced himself to focus for a second, laid down on his back so he wasn’t putting pressure on his ribs.

Barry’s panic attack had winded him as it happened, intense in their newly-formed bleed, enough that his chest and muscles were tense and he’d almost tumbled into a panic attack alongside the kid. But now Barry was gone and Len could still feel him—his terror, his pain, his bone-deep despair.

Forty-two fucking years for this. Twenty-five of those years as Manifest Marked, as Marked and Waiting—waiting for this kind of ugliness. He let himself remember those twenty-five years, wondering how the hell it got to this.

**********

Len’s Mark appeared when he was seventeen. Like most Unmarked kids, he’d secretly wanted a Mark when he was really young, daydreamed about what his ‘perfect person’ might look like, sound like, be like. Almost every Unmarked kid had a phase where they romanticized the concept, and some of them never really outgrew that phase. Len had. By the time he was in his early teens, being Unmarked was a relief. He had Lisa to look out for and that’s what mattered. Even if he didn’t though, having a Soulmate would just mean subjecting them to the mess his father was making of
him. By the time he was a teenager, Len knew he would make a crappy Soulmate—too broken, too cruel, too hard already. There were whispers at school about counseling, about therapy. He really shouldn’t want to subject himself on someone, at least anyone who wasn’t just like him. And he wouldn’t want a Soulmate just like him anyway, so why bother.

Like most things in Len’s life up to that point, he didn’t get what he wanted. A few short years after quitting the whole notion of ever being Marked, it happened—at the worst possible time in the worst possible place. He felt it burn onto his skin right after a beating, right underneath a blossoming bruise. He’d been pissing off his father on purpose, getting up into his space in a way that made the old man go off. He had to—Lisa was crying, and there was nothing the bastard hated more than that sound. She was too young yet to learn to dry her tears all the time—most of the time, but not all of it. Normally she’d come to Len when she was upset but she’d fallen while skating and hurt her wrist pretty bad. It might be broken and she needed a ride to the hospital. Drunk and disorderly, the old man got angry, and Len had just come home in time to pull him away from doing more damage to Lise than a broken wrist. He seemed to think that the hospital would ask too many questions if she came in injured, blamed her for making him look bad.

So Len had pulled back the drunk bastard and got a fist to the face for his trouble. And then another. And more after that. He goaded his father, stood up against the onslaught, blood on his teeth and told him exactly what he thought about the old man beating on a young girl—on his daughter. The next thing he knew he was on the ground, a hailstorm of angry kicks, the belt came out too. He knew better than to fight back. Lisa wasn’t crying anymore, she was begging their dad to stop. He did, eventually, when Len was black and blue. It was a bad one.

Then the bastard went to sleep it off while Len sorted himself out. He was just standing—with Lisa’ help and goddamn, his sister shouldn’t have to see this—when he felt a warm, almost burning and almost tingling sensation on his right side. He clutched it, figuring it was just a bruise. Then he called their neighbor to pick Lisa up and take her for an x-ray on her wrist—he’d pay them back. They knew by now he was good for it. After she was gone, he sat down on the side of side of his bed with the first kit. After peeling off his shirt to assess the damage, he looked down and—

And there it was. A jagged, white array, circular, almost like a—

“A snowflake?” Len’s voice was whispered, surprised and his first instinct, though he was alone, was to hide it, cover it, keep it for himself. It was his. It was—

He a had a Soulmate? In this life?

He swore and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes against the sudden burning, the tightness in his chest. It had to be a mistake. No one should be saddled with this mess. No other person—

Not person. A baby. An infant. His Soulmate had just been born. The Manifest Mark would appear at the time a person’s Soulmate was born, and the other person would be Born Marked. His Soulmate was a newborn baby and he was seventeen. Just his fucking luck. And the Mark was already being enveloped in a green and purple bruise. His first gifts to his Soulmate—pain and bruises.

Len couldn’t stay there, not after that. He had to leave. Less than a month later he was gone, taking a shot with a group of crooks he knew, some small-time shit but it was an out and he needed out. He hadn’t told anyone about the Mark, covered it and protected it. He didn’t know quite what to do about it. He had a Soulmate, but his Soulmate was some innocent baby out there, no good to him now. But what about the future? He had to plan ahead, to make something more of himself for whoever it was, for whenever they met.
Len knew he couldn’t let his father see the Mark and ruin this part of his life too, insult it and him like he did with everything else about Len, from his absent mother and slurs to his own bad attitude and abilities. And he couldn’t let the old man bruise that spot on his body more, not now that some part of him was precious. He also couldn’t let him get drunk and go too far one day, slip up and accidentally hit Len till he had brain damage, or worse. It had almost gone in that direction one too many times already but now he had someone else that might be depending on him, some other life he was beholden to, someone who wasn’t even as old and strong as Lisa.

When he left, Lisa cried. It was the last time he ever saw her cry. She was angry and upset, scared and young still and she asked him why he had to go, how he could leave her alone. It was rotten, the whole situation, just like he was. He couldn’t tell her about the Mark. He couldn’t let her think he was putting anyone else—even someone he might never even meet—ahead of her. So he told her to be strong, to be harder, to dry her tears and let her hate him for being selfish. Then he tried to convince himself their father would be better without him there. It was Len he hated anyway—Len who’s mother hadn’t come around in fifteen years, unlike Lisa’s mother who still dropped in sometimes; Len who talked back, who was a fuck-up, who constantly made him look bad. He hated Len for being—a lot of ugly things Len didn’t want to think about really.

Then he was gone, and years started to slide by. The night before his Soulmate turned two, Len slept with a gun under his pillow, an unfamiliar ceiling overhead. He had a job to pull the first thing in the morning. He spent his Soulmate’s next birthday inside of a prison cell. The year after, he was at an art exhibit, upping his game, trying to reach a new level because this small-time break and enter shit was getting old. There was a school field trip there that day, a bunch of kids and he caught himself wondering—of course his Soulmate would be too young for school yet, but one day he’d be on field trips like this and—

Len left the art exhibit and ended up picking up a different job instead, cracking a millionaire’s safe for a diamond. His Soulmate was a toddler and for the first time, he’d let himself start thinking about whoever it was in earnest, hoping it would be a boy, hoping he would grow up happy and loved, would grow up and love Len, would he be his lover and—he felt gross. Like a pedophile. His Soulmate was a fucking child. No matter than Len was imagining this future with an adult, a man closer to his age, he couldn’t change the age difference by wishing.

After that, he started avoiding being around children, even looking at them. It bothered him. He was an adult, almost twenty one and his Soulmate was some toddler. What if he actually saw the kid and recognized his Mark? Initial Communion between a grown man and a kid, that kind of bleed? There was no way in hell. He avoided physical contact with young kids at all costs. Not that people were lining up for him to pick up their kids or hug them, but he steered clear like he was allergic, a toddler-phobia.

When he was twenty-three, Len made his first kill, a matter of survival and necessity. His hand was shaking on the gun, he threw up afterward. It was a week after his Soulmate’s birthday. He didn’t think about that. Killing got easier each time after the first, and eventually he would have a reputation for being cold and ruthless. It came in handy as the years went by.

The next year, when he was twenty-four Lisa came to find him. Their father was arrested, but it hadn’t hit the news, they were keeping quiet about it because he was a cop. She’d been planning it for a while, she told him. She gathered evidence on their old man—all the bribes he took, the back door deals. Compiled it and then found a way to trickle it to the cops and keep her name out of it, her prints off it. Len was impressed, and wished he’d thought of something like that years sooner. Lisa was smarter than him. She was still in her teens, about to enter into the system because of this. When he asked how she found him she’d actually laughed, already too smart for her age, too good at this. “You’re not that hard to find, Lenny.” She’d told him. He learned to cover his tracks better, but
never from her.

And since she knew him so well, and he had nothing he’d ever really wanted to hide from her, and because he felt like a creep and alone, Len told her about the Mark. He showed it to her, hidden amidst an intricate tattoo he was still expanding on his torso. He thought she would be pissed but she was happy for him. It was wrong and backwards because the Mark was halfway a curse in his mind. He explained that his Soulmate had just turned seven and she seemed to think it was funny and teased him about being a cradle-robber. Somehow, she made it seem less awful than it was.

After that, they were a team again. None of her foster parents dared even look at her the wrong way after he’d had a conversation with them, and mostly she was free to do what she wanted until she was eighteen. He made her finish school and she whined about it, but someone in the family had to get an education since she’d decided that the Olympics for ice-skating weren’t her speed after all. Their father was in prison by that point, good riddance.

And for a little while, the world was his oyster. The years started to tick by faster, different cities, different police to run from, different countries, different circles of friends, different everything—the only constants in his life during his mid and late twenties were his sister and the Mark on his skin. When he was twenty-six and his Soulmate was nine, Len was in Mexico, laying low after a job. When he was twenty-eight he was back in Central City, sent away for a dime in Iron Heights that didn’t last him more than a few months thanks to his connections with the Darbinyan family. His face was busted up after running into his father in the yard and giving him hell. The old man was in the hospital ward though, and Len had no regrets about his own bruises and busted up knuckles. His Soulmate was turning nine now, and Len laid up in his bunk that night and wondered what he was thinking at the moment, if his own father was any better than Len’s. During that stint in prison, his cellmate was an arsonist named Mick Rory. Len hated him. They became good friends.

When he was thirty, Len let himself wonder about his thirteen-year-old Soulmate. Leonard Snart was a name that people knew now, not just with the mob or around Central or even America; it was growing internationally. He was on every watchdog’s list—the FBI, ARGUS, Interpol, whatever. So on his Soulmate’s thirteenth birthday, he let himself wonder. Would the kid grow up to be a criminal, like Len? Would they end up as partners in crime? Would they meet in prison? Would it be someone he could help look after, show him the ropes? Would he be someone who looked up to Len for his accomplishments, such as they were?

But over that year Len realized, with a sharp and twisted feeling slowly churning in his gut, that fate was supposed to sort it out, that Soulmates were supposed to be compatible, but fuck he’d had a twisted life until now. His Soulmate was some kid out there, and if he was gonna’ look up to a guy like Len then the kid was on a dark path, one Len wouldn’t actually want for him at all. He found himself almost hoping that his Soulmate would be some normal person, with a happy family that loved him and none of what Len had been through, even if it meant his Soulmate had no idea what to do with a man whose trade was theft and his network of friends were all connected to organized crime. It was a catch-22: either he had a Soulmate with a dark life like his own, who understood him, or a Soulmate with a happier life, who would probably never want some older, scarred up criminal who couldn’t get on a commercial flight without using a fake name and disguise, someone who had nothing to offer in the way of normalcy.

Len pushed away those thoughts more and more as the time went on, but they bubbled up the next year and he let himself get an ugly kind of drunk. It put him off booze for months afterward.

Then he started upping his game in a new way—hadn’t seen the inside of a cell in four years and he didn’t intend to ever again. He also didn’t intend to have only a rap sheet or arrests to offer his Soulmate if he ever met him. The Darbinyan family was falling and the Santini one rising, and he
didn’t have near as many friends in that circle. Len started to make contingency plans for if he ever got picked up by the cops again, took better jobs and started getting paid more, kept cash on hand and set up better safe houses, made some investments.

When his Soulmate was fifteen, Len found out Mick had his own Soulmate and a weird arrangement, one that made Len feel both more and less nervous about his own situation. When his Soulmate turned sixteen, Len was in France doing an art heist with Lisa. That was when he let himself notice the faces of teenagers walking past. His allergy to babies and toddlers had extended to kids and middle-schoolers and then to teenagers, aging as he did, as his Soulmate did. But he figured sixteen wouldn’t be totally disturbing for Initial Communion, if he accidentally shook hands with this kid somewhere.

That night, after celebrating their score, he laid back and found himself wondering—had his Soulmate kissed anyone else yet? Len lost his virginity at sixteen, would his Soulmate be doing the same? He didn’t expect for that thought to make him feel as possessive and jealous and angry as it did. Len had had more than his share of hook-ups over the years, far too many to count at this point. Relationships didn’t stick for him, almost never did for someone Marked and Waiting but even less so for someone with his lifestyle. His tattoos hid his Mark from most people but partners figured it out anyway, if they’d have enough chances to examine his ink—nothing would quite replicate the unique tones and almost luminescent quality to the Soulmark. But between his few relationships, his many one-night stands, and his more-occasional-than-it-should-have-been nights with sex workers, Len had no right to be jealous. It didn’t change that he was, of some hypothetical person who might get to touch his Soulmate before he did.

When Len was thirty-five and his Soulmate turned eighteen, he got drunk again, but this time it was to celebrate. He’d made it—his Soulmate was an adult. Lisa celebrated with him. And every year up to that had been a win—another year toward eighteen, toward a potential future with some person he was connected with in a bond that was supposed to span lifetimes, if only they could find one another.

But every year after that was a curse. Thirty-six, thirty-seven, eight, nine—forty. He didn’t let himself think about it—hadn’t ever really in the first place, except that one day a year—but it was the type of thing that was always there in the back of his mind. And as the clock ticked along, he felt more and more certain he’d be a Spoiled Ballot, a hand that would go unshaken, a missed connection. He became harder, crueler, made new enemies out of old friends, busted his remaining ties with the Santini family, then a job went sour and Mick got burned bad. Maybe it would be better for his Soulmate to never meet him in this life after all. Len tried to convince himself it was for the best, what he’d always wanted anyway, no one else to worry about.

And then, just before he turned forty-two, Len met the Flash. And that—that was a pleasant distraction, a new game to play. Captain Cold was something he could do, could become, a direction he’d never explored. The cold gun, the Rogues, the craziness of people with powers, upping his game, reconnecting with Lisa and Mick, even erasing his records to make things easier just in case. All of it was enough to keep him having more fun than he’d had in years.

Which is why he should have fucking figured this would happen. Only his actual fucking Soulmate could distract him so well from thinking about his hypothetical Soulmate. He should have known. He should have known the first time he hit Barry with the cold gun: right overtop of his Mark, under that red suit. And after all of it, he’d been right, the only gifts he had to offer to his Soulmate since he was born—pain and bruises. After all of it, he’d given those gifts to Barry time and again, relished in it. After all of it, he really wasn’t any better than his father.
Len’s stomach twisted and burned, pulling him out of memories, out of that thought. He tasted bile thinking about it, sharp and hot, angry. It was no use thinking about anyway, what was done was done. The only option now, ever, was to move forward.

He needed a plan. The important part was tracking down Barry. Leaving it this way wasn’t helping either of them. Len had been laying there for too long, lost in thought and memories. He took stock. He needed to bandage his ribs, check for a concussion and other injuries, eat something—he was starving—and then he needed to figure out where his Soulmate was.

The first few steps were easy; the final one was less so. First things first, he called Shawna Baez about his ribs. After saving her from Barry’s little prison, she’d volunteered to look after injuries he and his friends sustained, but didn’t want anything to do with heists or jobs for fear of what the Flash might do. Barry had no idea the impact he’d had on her and those others, but she’d been the first to come around, followed quickly by Roy Bivolo.

She could meet him, which was good. He got her to pick him up and take him back to her little back-room practice he’d helped her set up in what he was hoping might one day be a Rogues home base of sorts, if his plans ever came to fruition. Apparently he had three cracked ribs and another with a hairline fracture, but no internal bleeding. The concussion she lectured him on since it was far from the first he’d ever had, but he just scowled through it.

Then he dodged calls from Lisa, making his plan instead. Showing up at Barry’s house might freak him out at this point, not to mention that he lived with Joe West and that wasn’t likely to be a fun interaction. He didn’t have Barry’s number—something Len planned to rectify as soon as possible—so his first bet was STAR Labs. If nothing else, he had an excuse to go there.

Decision made, he waited until almost evening to head to the lab, when he knew Barry would be off work. He’d known the kid’s schedule for a while—set about learning everything he could about Barry Allen as soon as he’d learned the Flash’s name. Apparently, not tracking down his cellphone number was an oversight.

Then, tension and anticipation warring away inside his stomach, Len pulled up to the lab—in a car because a motorcycle and broken ribs were not friends. The lab seriously needed better security. He walked in through the main doors and toward the cortex, the location of which he’d found when they worked together before by snooping around but now could easily walk straight to. He didn’t make it all the way there though—he was halfway down the long and curved corridor when—

“What the hell are you doing here?!”

Chapter End Notes

You'll notice as this fic progresses that each chapter is a single character's point of view, and never the same character two chapters in a row.

Come visit me on my tumblr for more about this fic and these ridiculous characters!
After that horrendous morning, Barry’s day was long, second after second dragging along as he stared at the clock. He couldn’t focus on work at all, and both Joe and Eddie were out dealing with the museum mess still so he didn’t even have them dropping into his lab as a distraction.

The only thing that did distract him were the little emotions kept cropping up and didn’t belong to him, disorienting and phantom-like. There were slight shivers of anger, fear, disgust, and then more complicated things to disentangle—something Barry might have called grief, something that felt like could have been pride, a flash of loathing. It was hard to say for certain, the NAB wasn’t exactly a concrete science and the Bond was so new. He also felt a phantom burn in his ribs that told him Snart was in pain, and decided he could live without that part of the bleed. He could live without all of it, really, and spent the majority of the day alternating between focusing on it and fruitlessly trying to push it away. At odd intervals he found himself wishing, for the first time in his life, that he’d been Unmarked, one of the sixty percent of people who didn’t have a Soulmate in this life. Anything would be better than this.

He was just packing up, ready to head home and crawl into bed and pretend this day had never happened at all when he got a text from Caitlin. S.O.S—Snart at lab.

No no no no—the fucker.

Barry was pissed, texted OMW and was gone.

He whipped out the back of the precinct and away, zipping to the lab, past Snart’s car out front, down the hall and—there. He came to stop two feel from Snart in the long, circular hall that led to the cortex, pose ready for a fight, arms wide, snarling, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“We need to talk, kid,” Len narrowed his eyes.

“What we need is not to have this conversation right now.” And not here. Was Snart insane? Was coming here some form of blackmail?

“Right now is exactly when we need to have this conversation—”

“Look, just give me some space to—”

Barry cut off; there were footfalls coming quickly down the hall toward them. Not now, Cisco, not now not—

“What the hell do you think you’re doin’ here, Snart?” Joe rounded the corner, drawing his gun. In an instant, Snart had the cold gun out and powered up. A blink later, Barry had sped between them, one arm extending at each of the men, head flipping back and forth to stare at each.
“Whoa whoa whoa! Okay—no guns!” What the hell was Joe doing here? Probably waiting for him, he realized, having come here instead of the precinct after his shift was up at the museum. This was not good. He looked at Snart, face tight, trying to convey—don’t you dare do this. Barry couldn't handle it if his—if Snart and Joe started shooting one another right now.

Thankfully, Snart seemed to get that. He aimed the gun at the ceiling and powered it down, titling his head at Joe. Barry looked at his surrogate father, eyes wide and expectant until he lowered his firearm, which he did slowly, eyes not moving from Snart.

Barry lowered his arms too and felt relieved for a half second. Chasing that relief was some immediate sensation of—he frowned at Snart. Why was he aggravated by that? Then he winced because—okay it was weird feeling what Snart was feeling, and stronger this close, immediate. He turned back to Joe before he could start to suspect anything about the silent communication.

“Snart’s here because I dodged his questions about Grodd earlier,” he supplied, hands landing on his hips. He stepped back to the edge of the hall so that he could look at both of them and still be ready to step in if the guns came up again.

Joe rounded on the other man. “We don’t owe you anything, Snart. The way I see it, that damn gorilla escaping the underground is your fault, ‘n I have half a mind to take you in after that little stunt at the museum this morning. You know how many people almost died?”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Barry’s chest tightened.

“Look, let’s all just relax. I’ll talk to Snart and deal with this, okay Joe?”

Telling them to relax was a bit rich, considering Barry was thrumming and on edge.

Joe shook his head. “Not okay—nothing good has ever come of spending time with this dude.”

Barry felt annoyance filter through the bleed. He wished he could turn the damn thing off, trying to parse the sensation even as Snart responded.

“Considering you’re all harboring some maniac super-powered gorilla who went trudging around through my brain earlier, I’d say I’ve earned a few answers, detective.”

At least Snart seemed willing to keep up the lie (or maybe he actually was here about Grodd? Barry could hope). Joe looked dubious, glaring at Snart before finally turning to look at Barry. “Fine, bring him back to the cortex but—”

“I’ll talk to him outside,” Barry immediately replied, and he could feel a warm slice of satisfaction come through. That one was easy to place. Smug bastard.

“Barry, he—”

“I know—it’s fine. I can handle it, and Caitlin and Cisco shouldn’t have to deal with having him around after everything he’s done. I’ll be back in a bit.” He gave Joe a determined look, imploring him to stay put. Joe went from tense to suspicious to resigned before nodding, and at least Barry's reputation for being stubborn was getting him some mileage here. He turned and started walking toward the exit.

“Let’s go, Snart.”
He felt the other fall into step with him, leaving Joe behind in the hall.

“Well, that was fun.”

“Don’t.”

It had been just hours since he left Snart earlier and now the man was here, invading his space, his life. Barry was so angry he was almost trembling with suppressing it, hands in tight fists at his sides as he stalked out of the building.

The air outside was still warm and muggy from the afternoon’s heat, despite the sun tipping closer to the horizon now. How the hell was Snart in that jacket? At least he wasn’t wearing the goggles.

“I don’t appreciate you running off this morning, Barry,” Snart said as soon as they were outside. “I won’t have my S—”

Barry sped up and lifted the larger man off his feet, zipping to the side of the building and up a flight of steps in a second, putting them both away from the lab’s actual—if not always that useful—security cameras. Then he slammed Snart against the wall, pain flaring in his ribs when he did —shit—but he still gripped the other’s parka, and didn’t let him get his bearings before starting in—

“Don’t you dare use that word right now, Snart. My friends—my family—are in there listening to the security feed and they will not—”

“And why haven’t you told your friends about—” Snart’s eyes were wincing then narrowed while his hands shot up to grip Barry’s wrists. He shivered at the contact, wrists bare from rolling up the sleeves on his button up shirt.

“Why? How could I tell them?” His voice faded fast from a shout to soft. He was close, too close to Snart, heart rate increasing again. He breathed slowly, refusing to panic again, steadying himself.

The other man was looking at him like he was some lab experiment, eyes calculating, appraising, sliding the length of Barry’s form and he snapped his hands away from the thick jacket, away from the other’s grip and stepped back.

“How long do you plan to hide it, Barry?”

Snart’s eyes were a blue that was almost grey and green at once, catching the light in the evening sun. Barry remembered reading once that people with blue eyes were seen as less trustworthy. He looked away.

“As long as I can, Snart.”

“Don’t you think we should be on a first-name basis now?”

He shot a glare to the other man. No, he didn’t think that at all. “What are you doing here? Didn’t I make it obvious I’m not interested?”

“What you made obvious, Scarlet,” Snart stepped away from the wall and Barry stepped back, “is that you’re utter shit at dealing with things when they don’t go your way.”

Barry dragged a hand through his hair. “Look, not that I’m not—”

“Look at me, Barry.”

He closed his eyes and breathed in deep through his nose. Then he steeled himself and looked at
“We are Soulmates.” Snart waited for a reaction but Barry just met his gaze so he continued. “You need to get that through your head, kid—it's reality, not some bad dream, and it's not going away.”

Barry set his jaw. He didn’t want to do this, didn’t want to have this conversation but—“You’ve tried to kill me, Snart”—he felt a stab of something visceral through the bleed but pushed forward—“and you tried to kill and hurt my friends, tortured them and I—that is reality too and it isn’t going to just go away either. So whatever we are, I’m not about to just drop all that and forget it happened, alright?”

He was shaking his head by the end, voice raising and he forcibly calmed himself down. Snart was still impassive, but Barry could tell now, could feel how much was going on beneath the surface, roiling emotions he couldn’t quite put words to beyond low-simmering frustration and some wounded feeling in his gut. Maybe to stall for time, the man shrugged out of the parka and draped it over the railing by the stairs. He was still in a sweater with goddamn elbow patches and Barry was too warm just looking at him.

Finally, after staring at him for a long minute, Snart said, “okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, Barry. I wouldn’t expect our history to evaporate, but what I said this morning is true. I won’t be hurting you or your friends again, not if I can help it. Killing you now would be suicide and hurting your friends is a bit counter productive to my goals.”

Barry nodded, slowly, and blew out a breath. He resisted the urge to drag his hands over his face, not ready to drop his guard like that. “Okay. And what are your goals here, exactly?”

“You.”

“Not happening.” The words were immediate.

“What do you think is happening, kid?”

“Not that. I don’t care if we are…” his face screwed up and he waved vaguely between them, “this. I don’t see why we can’t just continue on as before and deal with it.”

Snart just stared at him, eyes bright and challenging, and let out an “mm” sound. Then abruptly he stepped forward, quick into Barry’s space and he was half a step back when Snart slipped an arm around his waist and placed a hand on the bare skin on the side of his neck. Barry pressed his hands to the other man’s chest, ready to push him off but the skin to skin contact on his neck was electric, intense over the sensitive skin, the bleed flooding his senses again, forming their Bond and he couldn’t convince his limbs to push. He stood, transfixed as a shiver went down his spine and up his neck and he felt Snart shudder too.

“You feel that, don’t you Barry? You think you can run away from this? Pretend it isn’t here?”

He swallowed and closed his eyes, body thrumming. He wanted nothing more than to do just that. But Barry didn’t move. Their bodies were aligned and it was all he could do not to shake, more weak than he should feel. He could feel Snart’s breath against his neck and over his ear, holding him too close, fingers tracing up and down his carotid artery where his pulse was beating too quickly.

“You feel that, don’t you Barry? You think you can run away from this? Pretend it isn’t here?”

He swallowed and closed his eyes, body thrumming. He wanted nothing more than to do just that. But Barry didn’t move. Their bodies were aligned and it was all he could do not to shake, more weak than he should feel. He could feel Snart’s breath against his neck and over his ear, holding him too close, fingers tracing up and down his carotid artery where his pulse was beating too quickly.

“Stop,” his voice was hoarse. To his surprise, Snart actually did, fingers stilling. Barry exhaled and then inhaled, nose taking in the smell of the other man, noticing it for the first time. It was crisp like Snart.
winter and a note of pine, some hints of spice. He wished he didn’t know these things about Leonard Snart.

“You don’t have to be scared, Barry. I promise I’ll treat you right.”

He did push Snart away finally, suddenly—“Jesus, Snart, it’s a little late for that! And I’m not your boyfriend or your boy toy or whatever the hell you think I—”

“You are mine, Barry—”

“You don’t own me! I’m not some diamond you can steal—I’m a human being! Just because we are Bonded does not mean—” Blood started to pound in his ears, vision narrowing onto Snart, almost like—

“You are my Soulmate and I know damn well—”

“That doesn’t mean you can—” Barry was trying to shout but stopped suddenly, vision going black around the edges, legs giving out under him and he was falling.

“Barry?!?” he felt strong arms wrap around him, catching him and he groaned, clinging automatically to the person holding him up. He was ill and weak, dizzy and his stomach was aching.

“I…” he was still standing, barely, hands clutching Snart’s biceps overtop his sweater. Snart’s arms were around his middle, anchoring him in place and his legs were shaking but holding him up. He felt too warm, sweating, and—“It’s hypoglycemia.”

“Your blood sugar?” the other man’s voice sounded so close, right in Barry’s ear and he shuddered. His forehead was pressing into Snart’s chest and he was bent partway into him. Barry dragged in another breath and tried to straighten, but only made it to the point of dropping his forehead onto a broad shoulder.

“Mhmm. I need to eat. I haven’t since last night and I…” he suppressed a wave of nausea and the chills wracking him despite the evening heat. “I’ve normally had five thousand calories by this time of day.” He felt like an idiot. How could he forget to eat all day?

“Five thousand? Where do you put it all?”

He let out a dry laugh and flexed his fingers, dropped them from Snart’s arms to his sides instead, holding onto the thick cotton of his sweater. “I run it off. I need more food for… all this. Used to faint till I figured it out.” It was too much effort to explain the details. Snart was smart, he could figure it out.

“And here I thought my concussion was the reason I felt nauseated all day.”

“You can feel that too, huh? And a concussion? Here I thought my headache was just from tension.” Barry finally felt his vision clearing and he pulled his forehead away from the warm shoulder. He managed to step back, though his fingers didn’t stop gripping the shirt for support—left hand clutched right over where Snart’s Mark must be. He wondered if that was instinct or coincidence.

“It goes both ways you know? And thanks Initial Communion, it’ll be more intense for the next few days.”

Right, he knew that. He shook his head to clear it.
“You should eat, Barry.”

“Yeah, I…I’ll order food when I get back inside.” Having Snart concerned about his well-being was almost as disorienting as the hypoglycemia.

“Give me your cellphone number then head back to your friends. Wouldn’t want them to worry.”

Cellphones. He nodded because it was a much better idea than letting Snart show back up here unannounced, or—the thought was a bit nerve-wracking—at Joe’s house.

“What was that?”

“What?” he asked, finally stepping away from the other man and to pull his phone out.

“The… was that fear?”

His eyes snapped up to Snart, who was looking at him in frank curiosity. “This is too weird.”

“It’s because we’re so close righ—”

“I know. Okay? I get it; I had to learn about it in school too. The bleed is strong right now and when we’re standing close or touching, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t weird.”

Snart looked like Barry had told him there was no more cotton candy left at the fair, like he’d taken away his fun at explaining things to Barry. On anyone else, it might have been funny, and Barry might have teased him for pouting. As it was, he just held out his phone for Snart to put in his contact info. “I was thinking about what would happen if you showed up at Joe’s house. That’s what you were feeling.”

“Ah.”

Snart was using his phone to send himself a text so he’d have Barry’s number.

“Have you considered not living with your adoptive father in your mid-twenties?”

“It’s convenient.”

Snart arched an eyebrow and handed Barry back his phone. He looked down and the other had put himself in as ‘Len’. Barry’s stomach did an interesting backflip at seeing it so succinct. If Snart felt it, he didn’t comment on it. Instead, he said, “I really do expect answers about that gorilla, by the way.”

Barry felt something in his chest loosen. Safe ground. He nodded, “text me.”

He tried to ignore the phantom tug in his gut when he turned to go. Snart missing him was not something he was prepared to process. Was it missing? It might have been longing. Or—he forced himself to stop thinking about it and walked back into STAR Labs.

**********

Barry managed to breeze through his conversation with Joe and Cisco and Caitlin after that, and also through a gross amount of take-out food. It was surprisingly easy to lie about this thing with Snart, maybe because no one would ever in a million years suspect the truth. He didn’t mention almost
fainting or anything other than that he told Snart about Grodd and that was that. Cisco asked if Cold had any ideas for them to deal with Grodd, but when he shook his head, the conversation moved on.

He accepted a ride home from Joe and they talked about cases and the world kept turning. Things were… pretty much normal, despite his exhaustion. By the time he got home, ‘Len’ had sent him an itemized list of questions about Grodd, each of which he made himself answer, if only to get Snart off his back for a while.

Then he collapsed into bed and tried to ignore the bleed. Snart, clearly, was not going to bed this early. Which was stupid because he’d been up earlier than Barry robbing a museum. No rest for the wicked, apparently. The sensations weren’t strong or constant, but the closer he got to sleep, the more steady they became. Most of them weren’t simple emotions that were easy to place. Basic feelings like sadness, happiness, surprise, anger, nervousness—those were familiar and uncomplex, and easy for the brain to parse as an incoming signal through the bleed. Other things were often lost in translation, white noise to the brain that got filtered out, if they entered at all.

But here, on the edge of sleep when he’d heard bleed was strongest because the mind was relaxed and undistracted, he could feel more and more through the connection. Snart was… working on something, Barry would guess. Solving a puzzle. A low-level frustration, the pique of something that felt to Barry like curiosity but was too muddled for him to be sure. Was curiosity an emotion? He drifted off to the feeling of working through a puzzle that wasn’t his own.

Then it was early morning, earlier than he was usually awake by the time on the clock and for a sluggish moment he wondered what had woken him. Then he felt it—a warm grip, a long pull on his—

He whipped out of his bed and stared at it. It was empty. Of course it was, he’d went to bed alone, but then what—he felt it again.

Barry looked down. He was hard as a rock. He felt incredibly turned on, and then realized it was halfway from a feeling that wasn’t his, that was coming from—he felt the phantom sensation another time, a warm grip on his cock, and—oh no. No, this was—

Holy shit.

A lecture from his freshman bio class at college filtered to the top of his consciousness—Certain Soulmates, depending on the nature of their connection, may even share physical sensations. Although this is more rare, it is a documented phenomenon that acts as an extension of the NAB. In these cases, it is believe that the neural circuitry of the Mates is particularly in sync, typically only something that develops over time and years of being Bonded. Physical transfer occurs most commonly for sensations such as physical pain and sexual pleasure. It is further believed that…

His mind let the rest of the memory fade. In sync. Physical sensations. Sexual pleasure.

Snart was masturbating, and Barry could feel it.

He sat back down gingerly in his bed, mindful of his body as though an actual hand was on it. The sensations weren’t strong, just after-images, not near so ‘real’ as they had felt a minute before, when he was mostly asleep.

Barry kept distracting himself with rational thoughts, pushing away the sensation and focusing on anything else—the periodic table of elements, atomic masses, blood splatter analysis, microorganisms present in most dirt samples around Central—until he felt a not-quite-there jolt and... alone in his room, Barry blushed crimson. Wherever Leonard Snart was, he’d just had an orgasm.
He thought about it, and tried not to think about it, for the whole day afterward. He also didn’t touch himself, because what if it went both ways? It must. They’d been Soulmates for all of a day—twenty five years, centuries maybe, his mind supplied, but he ignored it. They’d been Bonded for all of day. To feel one another’s physical sensations, already, so fast—how in sync were they? How connected could he be to a killer?

He did his best to distract himself at work, not just from the morning’s experience but from the bleed itself. All day he kept getting flashes of emotion, not to mention the occasional flare of pain near his ribs. Eddie stopped by to ask about Grodd, having heard from Iris about it, and even asked him if he was feeling off. In the late afternoon he got a text from Snart and he ignored it. It was a simple ‘hi’ and he had no idea what to say. He didn’t want this, but he couldn’t do anything about it right now. After glaring at his phone for a minute he deleted the message.

Then he started googling whether Soulmates were ever nemeses or enemies—which, of course it had happened before, it’s not like he was the first. It was almost a relief until he started reading some of the cases about great generals in ancient China on opposite sides of war, French and English rulers, Soulmates who’d killed one another only to realize afterward, and so on. He stopped reading pretty quickly. In all of the cases he read, it was presented as tragic, and the Soulmates, when documented, lamented their separation or lack of connection to their partner. Unlike him, who wanted nothing to do with Snart. Barry did make sure to skim over the descriptions (and drawings and photos) of the historical Soulmarks whenever they were included in the stories though, almost by habit. It was a common thing to do, to try and determine if you were someone famous in a previous life, or just who you were at all. Though not everyone accepted the prevailing theory about Soulmates and reincarnation, but Barry was open-minded enough to at least indulge his curiosity.

Then work was over and he needed a new distraction. He cooked dinner for him and Joe and then did the dishes, cleaned the whole house, stopped three muggings and one attempted robbery as the Flash, and the rest of his night wound down into boredom after that. Iris and Eddie were out on a date, Cisco and Caitlin had told him to go home and get some sleep because he was clearly agitated—they didn’t know the half of it—and that left him pacing in his room with nothing to distract himself, too on edge to drift off to TV or a book.

By eleven pm, Barry cracked.

He was aggravated and on edge from the day of the bleed and also his lack of release. He wasn’t exactly used to abstaining from masturbation. Quite the opposite. Since becoming the Flash, he’d become a master masturbator, which was not something he would ever say out loud (especially like that) or admit to anyone if he could help it. But his libido had sped up along with everything else, and he’d discovered that his refractory period was almost nothing, and two orgasms in a row was no problem when he was so inclined. Masturbating each morning and most evenings was just part of his routine, and skipping that morning meant his routine was offset, and it became hard to think of anything but sex for half of the day after that. Which, of course, meant his mind drifted back to the morning NAB sensations too often, in between everything else.

He needed to take the edge off. Which, well, what did he think he was gonna’ do, anyway—never have an orgasm again?

He wished he understood the bleed well enough to shut it off, at least. He’d tried to suppress it but that didn’t seem to be working yet, or maybe it was a slowly acquired skill. Then he wondered if it would freak Snart out, if it would bother him, and he felt guilt gnawing at him even as he undid his pants. Barry tried to contend himself a bit with the idea that maybe Snart wouldn’t even feel it, or would be better at tuning out the bleed, and that it was really just a fleeting sensation, and he’d be quick besides.
And he tried to be quick. It felt good—great, once he finally got a hand on himself. He slicked it up with some lubricant he kept in his side table, mostly because his hand would get too fast sometimes and chaffing was a serious and unpleasant concern. But this was good, just his hand on himself, warm, slick, tight, and he wasn’t doing anything fancy, just chasing the finish line as fast as he could get himself there. After long enough, longer than he really dared stretch it, he let his hand speed up, just enough.

He came with a vibrated shudder and bit his lip. After, body finally relaxing, he let out a long sigh and reached for the tissues.

The sensation started a moment later. What th—oh. Snart was touching himself. Barry felt his cheeks heat up for the second time that day. Len (he should call him Len if they were doing…this) had felt Barry and clearly decided… That was… He could feel his cock twitching, hardening again as phantom pleasure spread through him. Barry laid back down on his bed, tissues forgotten.

Without thinking, his fingers drifted back to his cock. Within moments he was fully erect. He felt the ghost of a grip and copied it, sliding his hand in what had seemed like the right rhythm. The sensations were just phantom, but they were stronger when he deliberately focused on them, sought them out. His free hand drifted to his Mark, grazing over it and it grounded the connection, at least mentally.

Barry’s strokes sped up then slowed back down, breathing out in frustration as he tried to match the not-his-own pace. He flicked his thumb around the head, gathering the residual cum—or was this new pre cum; hard to say—and he swirled it around. A second later, he felt the phantom of another thumb on the tip of his cock and choked back the moan threatening to escape.

This was weird, and good. It was great, and frustrating. Then he felt a not-his-own bloom of increased arousal, ghost-like movements speeding up and yes, that he could match. He copied it, hips rolling ever so slightly into his hand. Too soon he was coming again, free hand shooting up to his mouth so he could bite on it and avoid from crying out. He could feel Len’s orgasm alongside his own. It was so intimate, feeling them both together, maybe the most intimate thing he’d ever experienced.

His stomach was now liberally coated with his own cum.

When his breathing returned to normal he finally grabbed those tissues and cleaned himself up. He immediately wanted to erase what had just happened. Having such a strong bleed, to feel the physical sensations, to share them as they—maybe it just because it was their first few days? He had to hope so, because what the hell was he going to do? Right now, he was pretty sure he was never gonna’ be able to look Snart in the eye again.

Chapter End Notes

It will be explained in two more chapters why their NAB is so strong (beyond it just being their day of Initial Communion).

Also, one thing I’m always a big fan of writing is characters misinterpreting their emotions. There is a lot of research in psychology on this (and we all do it sometimes). For example, sometimes you’ll interpret a fast heart-rate as arousal instead of as fear (some of the original studies on this stuff). In this chapter and the previous ones, I’ve had Barry not realizing he’s hungry because he’s ignoring his body’s signals as shaking with
rage and not with low blood sugar, nauseated out of disgust and not hunger, etc. It’s always amazing to me that in real life its easy to miss these things as well.

Oh and that thing about people with blue eyes is true-- they (we) are seen as less trustworthy by others. You can google it :)

PS - shout out to ColdFlashCW for all these great song suggestions!

PPS - As always, come visit me at my ColdFlash blog for more of this mess.
As soon as he felt the nerves and anxiety coming through the bleed, Len dropped what he was working on in frustration. The kid needed to feel less loudly or something, his emotions were distracting as hell, popping up at odd times during the day, hard to decipher. But then the nerves were chased by something hot inside him, something that felt a lot like arousal and he perked up. This could be—oh.

Len could feel it. Which—his throat went dry. It was odd and pleasant, not really a touch but more like a very vivid imagined touch, somehow more real than that but nothing even so tangible as a dream. Could Barry feel him this morning, when he’d done the same? It would explain the nerves leading into this, since Len was pretty sure no one would be that anxious about getting himself off normally.

But the sensations were coming too fast, the kid was definitely speeding toward the finish line on this one. Len stalked out of his garage and into the house he was using, making a beeline for the bedroom. There was no way he was gonna’ focus on anything but this sensation. It was over—a warmth spreading out with a phantom experience of delectable pleasure that was unmistakable—by the time he was undoing his pants and he growled because he was hard as hell and Barry would just have to deal with it for the next few minutes since he’d been too quick.

And then, fuck, less than a minute later, his own hand on his cock, the feelings came through the bleed again. Hadn’t the kid ever heard of a refractory period? Or was that among his list of superpowers? A super-powered Soulmate, what a strange thought, but at the moment he wasn’t complaining because this felt amazing—intimate and more intense than he would have guessed. He could only imagine what actual sex would be like if they ever made it there. The thought pressed him faster, picturing Barry there with him, long fingers, pretty lips, and it didn’t take long after that. Len tumbled over the edge and it was magnified as a phantom orgasm chased his own.

When his orgasm subsided, he had time to think about how amazing what he’d just experienced was. A physical bleed like this was almost unheard of but right now he was not complaining. He texted Barry, ‘Well that was new’ and tried not to be too annoyed when he didn’t get a response. He couldn’t spare too much concern for whether he overstepped by jumping in on Barry’s self-love session—the other had joined in, and if he had an issue with it, he had Len’s number and could make it known.

The rest of his week passed similarly. Each morning after that, he and Barry had jointly masturbated. It was, to say the very least, educational. Len found that Barry tended to finish faster than him—youth? speed powers? or just Barry?—and also that the kid could definitely have two back-to-back, which was exciting and a bit alarming. How much stamina was Barry going to have? Len didn’t want to admit to any amount of worry about keeping up with the kid, but super powers and youth were going to make for an exhausting combination when they had sex. If. He needed to stop.
thinking of sex as a given thing between them, but it was almost hard not to when he was feeling a
phantom of Barry’s hand on his cock. He learned what Barry liked, and they’d slowed down and
stretched it out, communicating by no more than the pace of their hands of their swirl of their fingers,
and that in and of itself was a feat as far as he was concerned. If only sex was a viable
communication form, because so far, verbal conversations between hadn’t gone half so well as this.

Beyond the immediate gratification, it was also informative about their connection. Len learned how
easy it was to tune into those physical sensations, and then experimented with trying to block them
from coming in or going out. So far, he’d made a bit of progress on the blocking sensations, mostly
because Barry sometimes masturbated at night when Len was busy or out, and tuning out the feeling
became imperative. As for withholding the bleed from going out, he was fairly certain he’d had zero
success at this point, but it was just the first week.

Len didn’t bother trying to text or call after the first time, giving Barry his space. He decided he
wanted better control over the bleed before he saw the kid anyway, what with how intense it seemed
to be. Each day it seemed to settle a bit, easier to tune out (or in) to the sensations, at least the
emotional ones. Strong, basic emotions were harder to ignore, complex feelings were fuzzy and
easier to set aside. Physical sensations were a totally different ball game.

Len had determined that the small surges of adrenaline he would feel at odd times were Barry
running, tapping into his powers. That was... interesting. He would have to improve at tuning it out
though because it was mostly distracting at odd times and seldom prolonged except in the evenings.
There were no more injuries or negative physical sensations coming in, though his own ribs were still
mutinous and he had half a mind to text Barry and ask if he could feel them. That just left the positive
physical sensations to focus on.

Other than the bleed, Len had no contact with Barry, and things were largely the same (except that
everything was so very, very different). He checked in with Bivolo and Baez, each of whom was
laying low, Bivolo having found a job for a bit as security and now was enjoying some down time;
he found out Mick was off in Keystone and out of his hair for a little while, and dodged Lisa.

Lisa was being trouble. Len had had to talk to her before, after tracking Barry down at STAR Labs.
He told her about the fight with the monster gorilla, it’s powers and everything Barry had texted him,
but she’d cared way less about that than she did hearing about him and Barry. She wasn’t impressed
about the panic attack and the running away, but she also rolled her eyes when he told her he had
just jumped right in.

“Oh Lenny, you’re smarter than that, I hope.”

He’d left it at that, telling her he had Barry’s number and they were working on it. But after the week
went by and contact between them was at a standstill, Lisa was concerned. He dodged her questions
when she called and her calls became more frequent because of it, until he just stopped answering.

But it was harder to avoid her when she showed up at the haven he was turning into a Rogues den of
sorts. It was an older building in a sort of no-man’s land, on the outskirts of what used to belong to
the Darbynian family. There was a bar out front, one he quickly converted to his own payroll a few
months ago. It was a rundown place that was getting a nickname as the Rogues bar, something he
was subtly encouraging. Behind it, where Len was working, was a mostly-empty floor that was
designed to be for an office space before construction had halted when the Darbynians were almost
all killed by Nimbus, who still hadn’t been seen since Ferris Air. In the past few months, the office
space was being turned into a workshop of sorts, a stable location to store gear or loot, fix tech, and
whatever else came up.

That’s where Len was, puzzling over the cold gun again, still determined to find a way to alter it’s
output to give him greater control, to do something magnificent, when the heavy metal door entering out onto the parking lot slide open with a grinding sound. He looked up, apprehensive but—

“Relax, Lenny, it’s just me.”

“Sis,” he nodded, turning his attention back to the schematics he’d drawn as she wandered over, heels making a telltale click clack on the concrete floor.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

He hmm’d and stared at the drawing in front of him.

“Lenny…”

“Did you know that each of the weapons Cisco’s created have parts that are technically illegal and sourced from a research firm in Hong Kong specializing in thermonuclear research? What he’s done with the components is years beyond anything they’ve published though, decades maybe in the case of your gun.”

He flipped the schematic to one of a music amplifier that he’d downloaded the day before, considering… did the cold cylinder have enough energy to produce the output he was looking for, and if not, could he adopt the same logic from amplification to—

“Lenny, are you even listening to me?”

He looked up, concentration broken.

“I asked what you’re doing lecturing me on that gun instead of telling me about your Soulmate.”

He shot her a look then drew his gaze back to the amplifier and printed images of transformers, transistors, and vacuum tubes.

“I’m serious, Lenny! Don’t just ignore me—”

“I’m not ignoring you, Sis, I’m working. There’s nothing to tell you about the Flash.”

“I’m worried—”

“Don’t be,” he sighed but his fingers tightened by a hair on the paper he was holding.

“How can I not? He’s your Soulmate.” He heard her come around his side of the table his diagrams were spread out on, but didn’t look up. Her voice was softer when she spoke, “you can’t blame a girl for worrying, not when it’s about something like this.”

He was getting more agitated and dropped the images onto to table. He pulled off his reading glasses—not something almost anyone but Lisa and Mick had seen him wear—and briefly pinched the bridge of his nose before looking at her. “I said don’t be. You don’t need to worry about this, it’s got nothing to do with you.”

“I’m your sister, Len—we look out for each other.”

He could remember when it was just him looking out for her. That was easier to handle, somehow. “I’m fine.”

“Has he come around even once yet?”
“He wants some space.”

“You mean… are you even *talking* to him?”

Len fixed her with a hard stare that she returned and she won. He sighed and stood, needing to stretch his legs anyway, and leaned to half sit on the table, facing her disapproving stare.

“He and I have some bad blood to sort out.”

“So you have *talked* to him?”

“Not since day one.”

Lisa’s expression murderous. “He doesn’t get to just push away his Soulmate because he’s having some superhero identity crisis.”

“Apparently, he does,” he tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice but tasted it anyway.

“That’s bullshit! Fighting the Bond is just gonna’ make you both miserable. Doesn’t he know that?”

Len frowned and took the opportunity to voice something that had been rolling away in the pit of his stomach, “Mick and his Soulmate—”

“Mick’s asexual and his old lady is over eighty and a lesbian, Len, it’s *not* the same thing. You and the Flash have *chemistry* and you’ve spent more than half your life waiting to meet him!”

He let out a low sound of frustration in his throat—“Then spent every moment since I met him *hurting* him.”

“Why don’t you at least try to talk to him?”

“Because he doesn’t *want* me!” His hackles were up and the words were snarled and vicious. Then he realized what he’d said and—“I’m done with this conversation,” He turned away from her, heavy steps toward the door but she followed.

“Goddammit Len, get your ass back here!”

“I’m not interested—”

“I don’t care what you’re interested in; I will stalk down ‘Mr. Barry Allen, forensic specialist’ myself if I have to!”

He halted midstep. He felt Lisa stop behind him and he drew in an angry breath. “Do *not* threaten my Soulmate, Lisa.” It wasn’t a mystery how she’d tracked him down, he was more than certain between hearing Len say Barry’s first name and his STAR Labs connection, it must have been a piece of cake. Or maybe she’d known even before that, though he hadn’t told. Even now, new things were clicking into place, like why he’d felt so covetous of the Flash’s identity when he’d discovered it, keeping it to himself.

“Only if you don’t take that tone with me, Lenny. I’m not just one of your Rogues—and you’re *not* dad. You don’t threaten me.”

He nodded, still with his back turned to her. “What’d’you want, Sis?”

He heard her sigh. “Tell me you’re *not* gonna’ do what you always do and push him away?”
He waited a beat, staying chill and considering her words, glancing finally over his shoulder to look at her. “If I text him, you’ll back off about this?”

“I’ll be out of your hair with bells on.”

That didn’t even make sense, but he cocked an eyebrow and turned around anyway, heading back to his workbench and his phone.

_Week’s up kid. Time to talk._

He showed her the message then sat back down in front of his schematics. “Now unless you can find me some genius who knows all about sound amplification, mechanical engineering, and thermodynamics in one, I expect at least a week of peace.”

She huffed and the click clack of her heels carried her out of there.

**********

An hour later, Len felt a distracting jolt of nerves through the bleed and stood up to stretch, making no progress. He probably needed some food soon anyway, rubbing his eyes and dropping the reading glasses, feeling like they were starting to cross from staring too long. He grabbed his phone on the way to the bar out front, still nothing from Barry. He tried not to be too annoyed, wondering if he was going to have to do something drastic again to get Barry to come around.

He’d just finished ordering a beer and some food when the nerves settled in again. That was one of the weird things about the developing bleed—he was getting better at recognizing Barry’s emotions without actually experiencing them himself, as though they were alongside his own but he wasn’t living them. He could now understand why it had been so hard to make sense of it in textbooks when they described it—nothing could really compare to living it.

Then his phone pinged.

Len arched an eyebrow at it, even as his beer was dropped off at a table. If it was Lisa pestering him…

_OK. Tomorrow, somewhere neutral. No costumes._

He blinked. Barry had texted him back. He sipped his beer and focused on the bleed instead of trying to push it away, feeling Barry’s anxiety again, laced with things too hard to define.

Neutral, no costumes, he could work with that.

_4pm, Chubbuck park by the bridge?_

He made it a question so Barry would be forced to confirm.

_I’ll be there._

Len put the phone down and finished his dinner, feeling Barry’s speed and adrenaline waking up his own nervous system a bit. Maybe he’d manage to make some progress on the schematics after all.

The re-assembled cold gun was on his workbench two hours later when he was fiddling with an
actual amplifier circuit board, soldering on a new piece to test a theory. Len heard the outside door of his workshop creak and he reached immediately for the gun, cool power surging, chill reverberating down his arm as it came to life. It was aimed and ready before he registered who was in the door, ready for a fight.

“Hey now, pal, ease up a bit.”

Mark Mardon was in the doorway, a small cloud over one outstretched arm. It was about time he showed his face.

“I will if you will,” Len wasn’t ready to take chances with a loose canon like Mardon yet, but the other smirked and closed his fist, cloud dissipating. Len lowered the gun, intense cold abating but still chilled to his elbow.

Mardon was walking in, looking around, “Some clubhouse you kids have here.”

“Heh, what’s the point of gathering a merry band of criminals if you don’t at least have a home base to meet at?” He placed the cold gun down behind him and leaned against the table, crossing his arms and watching Mardon survey the area with open curiosity.

“That is what you’re doing then—gathering ‘Rogues’ together?”

Len nodded carefully, “Bivolo tell you where to find me?”

Mardon looked at him then, coming over to the other side of one workbenches set up, dropping his hands onto the back of a chair. “He may have pointed the way. Seems to think you’ve got a good thing going here.”

He looked skeptical, maybe not impressed by the current state of their setup but Len smirked.

“If you’re interested in our clubhouse, let me explain. There’s a bar out front on my payroll, this workshop, a bit of a trophy room of ‘collector’s items’ downstairs, and we’ve got a med room set up over that way, for starters. If you want to poke around, be my guest.”

The med room seemed to surprise him, and Mardon actually looked over his shoulder in the direction he pointed before turning back to Len with a more impressive poker face this time. “Bivolo said you’ve got a code of rules he has to follow?”

Len felt his own excitement pick up—if Mardon agreed to work with him, it would open up several new possibilities. The guy had taken a plane out of the sky from inside a truck and Len would not be sad about harnessing that kind of power. But it also meant he had to be careful. Baez wasn’t interested in crimes but was happy to hang around. Bivolo could be controlled without too much issue, and Len’s goggles blocked his red fury—they’d tested that deliberately, with Lisa around ready to shoot Bivolo if he became an issue. Mardon, on the other hand, posed a bigger threat if he didn’t want to play Len’s game.

“We do. Rule one is we don’t kill innocents.”

The other’s eyebrows went up—“That’s not what I’d heard about you, Snart.”

“New game, new rules. Not killing means we stay under the Flash’s radar except for when we’re doing jobs, and helps keep everyone out of that little pipeline of his.”

“How d’you—”
“I know a lot about his operation. See there’s a deal we have, me and the Flash, one that keeps us at an impasse most of the time. You want in on everything the Rogues can offer, you don’t kill anyone.”

Mardon looked dubious and Len felt himself tensing. Bivolo had actually looked relieved when Len had shared the first rule, and if this was gonna’ be a problem…

“What about cops? Do they count?”

He narrowed his eyes, “Why would you want to kill a cop, Mardon? You know what kind of heat they bring down on you when you do that?”

“Joe West—he killed my brother. I want revenge.” He said it plainly but there was growl in his voice, rough and angry. Len couldn’t blame him, but that presented a rather particular problem.

“And I can’t blame you for that. But if you want to work with me and my Rogues, you’ll set that aside. Cops count as innocents unless they’re shooting at you. You’ll have to put aside any murder plots you have if you want to work with us.” It wasn’t strictly true, in that Len very much believed in a good revenge and would absolutely kill a cope if they hurt, let alone killed, Lisa. But letting Mardon kill Barry’s adoptive father seemed like a bad idea.

“And if I decide not to work with you?”

Len titled his head to the side, considering. “Then you’d better stay out of our way. We don’t kill innocents—other criminals are another story.”

To his surprise and delight—not that he would show it—Mardon laughed, low and rich. Len might be able to get along with this guy after all. “At least you’re up front about it. I’d hate to think I was wasting my time on a guy who didn’t live up to the hype.”

“I’m not too worried about my reputation—I do what I do because I enjoy it, and I’m good at it. I walk around with just a gun and still keep up with you super-powered—”

“Meta-humans.”

“So that’s what they’re calling you,” he added that to his growing understanding of the Flash’s little world and what was going on in Central City.

“The Flash is one too—what’s the rule on killing him?”

Len’s immediate response was for his gut to clench, hard and angry, half ready to pick his gun back up at the suggestion. Instead, he forced himself to relax, assume an air of calm, and inject some amusement into his expression. “There’s no game with no opponent. We don’t kill the Flash.”

“But then we could—”

“But nothing. Having the Flash around keeps this city moving. Take him out, and all those people he busts—meaner meta-humans, military, and things even I wish I hadn’t seen—those all go running loose. I don’t want to mop up Central just to steal things in it. Let the Flash do what he does and we don’t have to.”

“Is anarchy such a bad thing, Snart?”

Len leaned forward, letting more steel into his voice, “we aren’t talking anarchy, Weatherboy. We’re talking inviting bigger and meaner fish into our small pond and having to deal with them ourselves.
Not that we can’t handle it, but right now we don’t have to, because the Flash is the shiny red beacon for all Central’s messes, not to mention that he’s the clean up crew. Take him out of the equation and you’re looking at a bold target on your back instead—yours and everyone else’s,” he smiled coldly and splayed his hands in front of him, open, nothing to hide. “Trust me, Mardon, the deal we have with the Flash is the reason we get to play this game. Interrupting that balance by killing others brings him down on us in a bad way, and killing him opens an ugly can of worms festering around here. I’ve done the math.”

He had, not so much in equations but mental renditions, ready for an argument such as this long before he found out Barry was his Soulmate, or even that there was a super-gorilla prowling the subways and sewers. After the time he lost to the Flash and had to get Lisa to get him and Mick out of prison transport, Len had done some serious thinking and planning, all of which had led him to first wanting to discover the Flash’s identity those months ago.

Since the particle accelerator had blown, Central had gone slightly haywire, and only when the Flash started to operate did things calm down again. Not that there hadn’t been plenty of messes since Barry had woken up out of his coma—nuclear ‘testing’ bombs, military ‘drills’ with underwater bombs, more unexplained occurrences than Len could fully tally—but the benefit was that Central itself wasn’t destroyed by any of this crazy shit and most people hadn’t connected the dots yet. Not only that, but the Flash operating meant Len hadn’t had to go head-to-head with any other meta-human who might want to gain control of the criminal underworld. He figured that that was only a matter of time though, hence the gathering of group of ‘meta’-humans to his side.

Mardon met his gaze in a staring contest that had them both tense. After a long minute, he came around the desk and Len straightened to his full height, ready for a fight. But Mardon extended his hand—no miniature storm in sight—and Len clasped it.

“So tell me Snart, how d’we play this game?”

Chapter End Notes

Len is making friends!! I feel like a proud parent (jk – I am a worried parent. Who know what could come of this friendship....)

Also I know this is dense and the pace is kind of slow. This is chapter 5 and so far it isn’t clear where things are really going yet, so I just want to say thanks for your patience, everyone :) This whole thing is going to be long and involved, but I hope I'm at least making you curious where things are going.

ps - had less time to proofread than usual so sorry about typos and such!
NeuroAffective Bond

Chapter Summary

Bad Medicine by Bon Jovi and Very Good Bad Thing by Mother Mother

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One thing Barry was learning about Leonard Snart in the days that they’d been Bonded was that the other man was always angry. He wasn’t always in a rage (Barry assumed), but in navigating the bleed, he found more flashes of anger coming through than anything else. The bleed, at least at this distance from one another, wasn’t nuanced enough for Barry to examine the subtle variations of anger—some of it was probably more like annoyance, frustration, contempt—but he could tell the basic feeling was there, lacing most of Len’s days.

It wasn’t just that it bubbled up through their connection, though, more like it was just sort of always simmering away in the backdrop of the bleed. When he’d first noticed it, put a name to that sensation he kept feeling, Barry almost had half a mind to text Len and make sure Rainbow Raider hadn’t gotten to him, but as the days wore on and he noticed the feeling didn’t change or escalate, he realized that it was just Len. He was always angry.

Barry didn’t really know what to do with that information. It seemed sad, in it’s own way, for someone to be so unhappy and holding onto that all that time. If anything, it reminded Barry of how he felt for the years after his mother died, and the months after discovering Wells killed her. But at the same time, Barry had also seen how Len went about taking that anger out on others: the cold gun was an extension of Len’s fury. So he left it be and tried to ignore it, practicing tuning out instead.

By the time a week had passed, Barry was getting better at disconnecting from the steady emotions through the bleed, and he found he felt almost nothing when he was running, probably because everything else fell away when he did. Even at work and at STAR Labs, basically anywhere with more to distract him, he could tune out and suppress the bleed, though the stronger flares of emotion were harder to push to the side.

What was easier to tune out was the physical sensations though, which had only taken a few days to shut out or—he’d almost been embarrassed to discover—tune in to. In a strange way, it reminded him of connecting to the speed force and slowing back down. With concentration, he’d found himself lying in bed one morning trying to tune into the bleed, trying to connect to the physical sensations, then feeling water hitting him and running down his skin, only to realize Len was showering. It was kind of pleasant though strange, but then he’d clued in to was what happening and had immediately snapped out of the bleed.

He was pretty sure that wasn’t normal. So sure, in fact, that he was driven to actually asking about it, sooner rather than later.

Barry got the idea to ask Caitlin, of all people, after he spent yet another evening of canvassing the city subway tunnels for Grodd with no luck, since he hadn’t turned up in the museum basement after all.
Three days after the museum cave in, General Eiling had shown up to demand information about Grodd’s involvement. Apparently, the statements of the museum curator and security guards had sent some red flags off in Eiling’s information network, leading him to STAR Labs. He wanted the Flash’s information and help in catching Grodd again, neither of which Barry was interested in providing to Eiling after everything that had happened with the man, even if Grodd was an ever-present danger to Central. Joe had helped him, Cisco, and Caitlin in putting up a united front against the General, with Caitlin particularly adamant about their unwillingness to help ‘that torturer.’ Eiling had decided to leave them be, but he’d promised he’d be back.

After that, Cisco suggested they increase their search and try to get Grodd in containment at STAR Labs, hopefully in the pipeline for the time being at least, and wanted to find him while he was still injured. To that end, Barry had been going out each night after his usual rounds in the city to check the sewers for any sign of the gorilla. When this failed, Caitlin finally agreed to let them do a recording of her voice asking Grodd to ‘come home’ so they could help him, since she seemed to be the only person Grodd had responded positively to when they had the mind-controlled Eiling in captivity.

They had just finished recording her voice when the idea struck Barry to talk to Caitlin about Soulmate bonds. Cisco was packing up to head home and Barry was about to call it a night when she got a call from Ronnie.

“You did what?! How did you and Dr. Stein ‘accidentally’ explode a—are you okay?!” there was a pause where she listened and Barry exchanged a worried glance with Cisco, but… “Yes, yes, fine, I get it. But no more explosions, mister. Just because you can… of course… mhmm… about an hour? Yeah, I love you too. Bye now.”

She looked up to them staring, “Oh—oh, don’t worry about me. Ronnie and Dr. Stein were just practicing exploding things, you know them. I’m just gonna’ finish up some work until Ronnie’s done cleaning up then he’ll come and pick me up.”

“Alright, night then. You comin’, Barr?”

He looked between Cisco and Caitlin, a thought suddenly occurring to him, “Nah, I’ll wait around, hear about the latest exploding adventures.” And they had been hearing a few, ever since Ronnie started working with Dr. Stein’s lab at the university. Cisco bade them goodnight while Caitlin took a seat and pulled some papers closer. Barry went to lean against the nearest table, trying to figure out how to ask his question. Caitlin was one of his only friends who knew he was, had been, Marked and Waiting. She was also one of his few close friends, aside from Iris and Eddie, with a Soulmate, and the only friend who’s Soulmate was a meta-human.

“I’m happy if you want to wait around, I could use the company, but I promise the story wasn’t that exciting—they were just continuing their experiment on fusing a gold alloy and—”

“I actually…” she looked up from her papers and he scratched the back of his head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to cut you off.”

“You’re not waiting to hear a story about Ronnie blowing things up, are you?”

He shook his head. “I had…a question for you.”

“Is it something about Ronnie?”

“Kind of. It’s actually about… I’ve wondered for a while, about your NAB bleed with him? I know that’s totally personal and all and normally I wouldn’t ask, it’s just that you said before, back when
he and Dr. Stein were connected, that you could feel physical sensations from him? But now it’s like…”

“Like I don’t have much of a bleed at all?” she smiled and her shoulders dropped and he knew she wasn’t offended. “You’re not wrong. It’s something I definitely noticed—back when we first separated him and Dr. Stein, our NAB was very intense; it felt like every little thing would transfer, and then when he was far away we would seek it out and it was still strong. But now…” she splayed her arms to take in the room, and then shrugged and dropped them, “it’s back to how it was at first. It hardly ever interrupts our day and we only really notice it when there’s some intense emotion.”

“I… is that because he’s a meta-human? Is it… different?”

Her eyebrows went up then her eyes took an understanding quality and she turned her chair to face him more fully. “We haven’t found any evidence of a meta-human ability impacting the NAB yet, Barry. I’m sure it’s possible, but there’s no reason to believe that your powers will impact that part of your Bond with your Soulmate when you find them.”

His jaw worked and he struggled to find words. None were forthcoming.

“Barry?”

“I—it’s just—never mind.” He shook his head and then focused again. “If it’s not because Ronnie’s a meta-human now though, then, why did your bleed change after he was unstuck from Dr. Stein?”

“I—hmm. Well if I had to describe it, I suppose I would say it was like we had a second Initial Communion after he and Dr. Stein separated? Like it all came rushing back, new and sharp and intense. But it was different after they separated, because our Bond never transferred physical sensations at first and then after they were unstuck it did, and that hasn’t gone away.”

“So you guys have a physical bleed? That’s supposed to be rare, right?” he was relieved that he wasn’t the only one who felt these things. “How much transfers?”

“Well,” she looked considering, leaning back in her seat, “not much anymore. At first a lot did, to the point that one time there were flashes of sound, and another I could smell what he did all day. Now, like I said, it’s back to how it was at first.”

“So the bleed dies down with time?” he sat on the edge of the table with his hands on the edge by his thighs, legs over the edge.

“I don’t think that’s exactly it, to tell you the truth. I’m working on a bit of a theory about the NAB, if you want to hear about it? I’m thinking of writing a paper.”

“Oh?” he leaned forward.

“Well, this might get a bit long-winded so stop me if I get boring but—I’m working with trying to understanding role of the NAB and its evolutionary function of maintaining a connection among Soulmates, based on what I understand about how it changed between me and Ronnie after the accelerator accident. And—this runs contrary to many of the prevailing theories right now, but—I’m proposing that the bleed is strongest when people try to reject it.”

His knuckles went white on the edge of the table. “What.” His voice was too flat for it to be a question, but she answered it anyway.

“It makes the most evolutionary sense—there’s no need to connect Soulmates when they’re together and in constant contact already. But in our evolutionary history, humans faced a lot more survival
risks and the bleed would have helped Soulmates navigate those risks if they were apart, and would have helped humans stay closely connected if there was friction, forming into family units. I’m guessing that a lot of our ancestors had much stronger bleeds than current Soulmates, actually.”

“That… makes sense, I guess. What does that have to do with rejecting it though?”

“Well, since those survival pressures don’t apply for most people now, at least not in most countries, the bleed only develops to that intensity when Soulmates are separated or facing conditions that cause them to suppress or disconnect. Based on my experiences with Ronnie, where our Bond was suppressed for almost a year because he was sharing a body with someone else, I predict that the more actively one aspect of the bleed is suppressed—say for instance, the emotional part—the more likely it is that the NeuroAffective receptor cells in the brain will strain for input and become increasingly sensitized. I think they would even develop connections along different neuronal pathways, a synaptogenesis of sorts. This should lead to a more multifaceted and intense NAB in most cases.”

“Uhm, I mean I took bio classes, but can we do that in English?”

She rolled her eyes but smiled at the same time. “Basically, it’s likely that if a person rejects or can’t connect with one part of the bleed, it would develop in a different way instead. Then when the Soulmates are close and all is well for long enough, the NAB will relax and only flair back up if there’s an issue. In the case of me and Ronnie, losing our bleed for a year meant that when it came back, not only could I feel his emotions, but also sensory input. It was—it was amazing.”

He thought of the feeling of water on his back while laying in bed. “Yeah it—it sounds like it.” He swallowed.

It was a lot to process.

“Sorry, was that a bit too much?”

“No! No, it was great. That’s gonna’ be a really fascinating paper.”

“If I can publish it. I’m hoping to collect archival data on Soulmates who were separated, but getting ethics approval to put Soulmates in an fMRI and have them try to suppress their bleed would probably go against the Copenhagen Convention, not to mention trying to separate them over a long period of time or have them suppress in that way… it’ll probably just remain as a theoretical paper, actually.”

He nodded, but she seemed cheery despite that, casually talking about research in a way that reminded him that before all the Flash business, Caitlin and Cisco had both been at the forefront of science, doing cutting-edge research that was advising policy and inspiring other academics.

“Can I ask one final thing?”

“Oh course! I only ever get to yammer away to Ronnie about my theories like this. It’s kinda’ fun to have a captive audience.”

He tried to smile, but his stomach was roiling because…“What would happen with a bleed if Soulmates separated during Initial Communion? Like if someone had a panic attack and ran away during that first hour?”

She blinked. “In the first hour? I have no idea why anyone would ever do that, Barry, not unless they were forced apart but… in that case, if my theory is correct, knowing how strong Initial Communion is as the time that the NeuroAffective pathways are just configuring themselves,
especially during those the first few hours..." she paused to consider, not even looking at Barry anymore, almost lost in thought. “Technically speaking, the amygdala hosts the majority of the NAB cells and also feeds into a few other structures, so if the NAB connection was being cut off or suppressed as it was being formed, you’d probably see a multitude of neural pathways stretching out, not just to the amygdala but the hippocampus and maybe even the thalamus. Some research has suggested the thalamus *does* host NAB receptors which *would* explain me and Ronnie’s more sensory connection, but then, with Initial Communion, how far that could spread, it’s almost impossible to guess. In theory, those kind of connections could lead to physical and sensory transfer but maybe beyond that, memory processes from the hippocampus or if it stretched all the way into the hypothalamus then a shared fight and flight response, shared arousal and hunger too... oh, and then there is the basal ganglia right there, and there’s a lot more that could happen with—Barry are you okay?’

She’d looked up and—no, he was not okay. Shared senses, shared hunger, shared arousal—everything he was feeling with Len. He was *not* panicking again. He wasn’t. He was just breathing very fast. And shallow.

“Barry?”

“Wh—I’m fine! Fine, I just—wow, that would be something, haha,” he laughed and it was too strained but he jumped off the desk anyway. “Look, thanks for sharing your theories, Caitlin, I know it was a weird question.” He was already backing away toward the door—

“Barry—?”

“Really, I just gotta’—I’m gonna’ be late for this thing, with Joe—and Iris!—so I just—“ He pointed to door—

“Barry?!”

He was gone.

**********

Barry had no idea how to properly digest that information. He’d screwed up—royally. And maybe, if he was being fair, he might let the other man know what was going on with their bleed, and how to fix it. Except that apparently, fixing it meant giving it more input, spending more time with Len, and “relaxing” the bleed.

Barry wasn’t really sure he could handle that, not with everything that had happened between them. Len’s promises not to hurt him or his friends might mean something if he’d ever given Barry a reason to trust him about anything before, but he wouldn’t—couldn’t—make that mistake twice. Just because he couldn’t kill Barry didn’t mean he wouldn’t hurt Cisco or Caitlin—or hell, Iris and Joe—if he thought it would help him. It didn’t help that Len talked to Barry liked he *owned* him, like being Soulmates meant that it was a given that Barry would just fall into his arms. He talked like Barry was some sort of diamond or gem, something to covet and command, and it made his skin crawl. He didn’t want someone who saw him as a *thing*, Soulmate or not.

Despite that, and despite how those thoughts made his teeth grind and his fists clench and his stomach knot, he still found himself reaching between his legs the next morning, seeking out the
bleed and the hot lick of arousal he felt in return, the intense and strange sensation of a not-there hand on him.

Before Barry could decide what to do with his new understanding of the NAB though—and he didn’t doubt for a second that Caitlin was correct—he got a text from Len while he was at work, telling him time was up. He scowled, suddenly tense. He hadn’t even realized he was on some sort of stupid timer. He waited an hour to respond, but ultimately… unless he wanted the bleed to continue intensifying, he’d have to talk to Len sooner or later. Might as well bite the bullet and get it done with. He responded and they set up a meeting for the next day at Chubbuck park.

He spent the whole next day tense and staring the clock, increasingly coiled as the minutes ticked closer to 4pm and he walked toward the bridge at the edge of the park, the one that crossed the river over to Keystone city. He was in a t-shirt and jeans, almost too warm considering the early-summer heat but he wasn’t sure if he could handle wearing shorts around Len. For some reason, the thought of exposed skin was nerve-wracking.

Len was already there, waiting on the bench just off the footpath, underneath a canopy of leaves. Barry’s stomach tightened when he came into view—still impossibly wearing a light jacket over a white shirt, dark jeans and boots, arms stretched over the back of the bench as he reclined. Something about him captured the essence of… cool, Barry thought dryly, even as Len noticed him and looked over. Their Bond was making him pun inside his own head.

“I was starting to think you might not show, Scarlet.”

Barry felt his eyes narrow but started walking over. “Thought we’d drop the nicknames along with the costumes. Unless you want me to keep calling you Cold.”

He stared at Len’s arm on the back of the bench until the other man noticed and cocked his head, looking—feeling—too smug. After a beat, he moved it to his lap and Barry sat down.

“If I make a concession on the nicknames, will you stop being such a prickly pear, Barry?”

“Prickly—” he turned enough to be facing the other on the bench, keeping a half foot of space between their knees, “Excuse me if I’m not exactly accustomed to suddenly developing Bonds with —”

“We’ve been over this.”

“Then you get why I’m on edge, Len,” he snapped. He felt a jolt through the bleed and then realized he’d said the other’s name and looked away to fruitlessly attempt to mask his sudden embarrassment. Len didn’t comment, and there was a moment of silence. Barry angled his body to face the park but barely noticed it around them—the joggers, the lush green, the sunlight. Instead, he ran his fingers through his hair and tried to gather his thoughts, what he’d been planning to say.

“Look I—”

“The reason I—”

They each stopped. “You first,” Barry offered, head tilting to look at the other man. The sun and shadows from the leaves were dancing along his form, highlighting and lowlighting his face, his short shorn hair catching the light and looking almost grey. Barry swallowed. How old was he?

“The reason I asked you to meet me was because you needed some space, time, and I respect that, kid. But even you’ve gotta’ know that this isn’t going away, and we’re gonna’ at least need to come to an understanding here.”
Len’s gaze was intense and didn’t waver from his own, and Barry found himself turning his head back to face forward again, out at the path. After a moment, he nodded.

“Yeah… yeah I know.”

“Gotta’ say, I didn’t expect you to come around so easily on that one.”

“No, you’re right. The bleed is… apparently, fighting it isn’t really a viable option.”

“How’d’you figure?” Len leaned forward too, pose mimicking his own, elbows on his thighs and he was in line with Barry, could see his expressions if he glanced out the corner of his eye. He wouldn’t even need to though, thanks to… this.

“Caitlin’s done some research on bleeds, and I asked her—not about us, I didn’t tell her that—” a spike of disappointment, he pretended not to feel it—“but about the NAB and…” he went on to explain the gist of what she’d told him under the scrutiny of Len’s gaze, trying to focus on how suppressing it and rejecting it was going to make it spread, though he didn’t leave anything out.

After he was done, Len took a minute to process it, and Barry caught himself trying to suppress the bleed almost unconsciously and forced himself to stop, letting it in. He could feel confusion, regret, sadness, anxiety, and more besides, tense and coiled, too much to parse and too similar to his own emotions right now to fully distinguish between them, sitting so close. It was never going to stop being unsettling.

“So what you’re saying, Barry, is that you running during Initial Communion gave us a Bond that’s as strong as it can possibly be, and there’s nothing we can do about it?”

Barry frowned because it wasn’t only his fault but then he swallowed. How well could Len feel his nerves? “That’s basically, yeah, that’s it.” He steeled himself. “Except there might be something we can do about it.”

“Do tell.”

“Caitlin says that the bleed can ‘relax’ if you don’t fight it. With increased connection and contact, it might not be quite so…intense, after a while.” He gaze was fixed on a tree in the distance, dutifully ignoring the sound of Len shifting by his side.

“Contact, Scarlet? Like this?” Len’s hand dropped onto his thigh, only a few inches above the knee but still too close, too insinuating. Barry felt the unsettling and sudden experience of heat pooling low beneath his navel while apprehension clenched and erupted in his chest.

“It doesn’t have to be that kind of contact—just normal contact like normal people do, not anything more.”

“We need physical contact and connection, I don’t really see the issue.”

“I thought I made it clear that that is not on the table, Snart!” he hissed through clenched teeth. His brain and his body were already at war, wanting to pull Len’s fingers off but wanting them to slide higher.

“It’s a hand—I didn’t mean you should just jump into my bed, Barry. Even if I did, though, it’s not like you’re not getting hot and bothered just from—”

“I know, okay, you don’t have to point it out,” he blushed. Wasn’t it breaking some social convention for Len to point out that he could feel what a simple hand along his thigh was doing to
Barry’s insides, how starved for this he was? “That’s just a physiological reaction—it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Like every morning this week hasn’t meant anything?”

“Hey o-kay!” Barry jumped up and whirled to face the other, “That’s not even fair! It’s not like we can really control that!”

“I’m just saying, you don’t seemed to mind?” he arched an eyebrow and leaned back, ankle crossing up onto his opposite thigh, arm stretching out again across the back of the bench, all confidence. But Barry could feel it, below the cool façade and smirk teasing his expression, a roiling in his stomach and something that felt to Barry like stress or anxiety. It didn’t matter either way, because regardless of what Len had to say, Barry had only one opinion to voice on the matter—

“We’re not talking about this.”

“Considering it’s the only time we seem to get along, you might want to reconsider that.”

He swallowed and looked away, then up at the sky, exhaling, then back down at Len. “Whatever else this Bond means for us, I meant what I said before. We’re not… I’m not your boyfriend, and I’m not sleeping with you. The rest of it is just… whatever it’s going to be, and it’s staying as that. And I don’t care what you think you know about me, but,” Barry’s gaze dropped, voice getting quieter, “you don’t love me.”

Something lead dropped into his stomach and then there was a low almost-buzz, a feeling of emptiness through the bleed. Len must have shut it down and the sudden lack was almost alarming, but then he could feel Len’s—hell, he could feel his everything. Len’s shoulders and chest were tense, too tight and his throat was too, jaw clenched, grinding his teeth and—

Barry took a step forward, almost pivoted, stopped himself—“Stop that.”

“What?”

“You—I can feel—what are you doing? I can feel your heart beat.”

Len’s eyes widened and Barry caught a whiff of his own cologne, the wind carrying the scent to Len’s nose and—“What do you mean you can feel my hear—”

“I can smell—holy shit,” he dropped onto the bench again, head in his hands tried to orient himself in his body. “Stop suppressing it!”

Suddenly Len’s feelings were back, sharp and almost too much because they settled on top of the physical sensations, coming through almost as strong as his own feelings and senses—worry of a few different shades, restless legs, something that tasted bitter, something that tasted sweet, some feeling that left his fists clenched, some feeling that—

“Touch me.”

“You just said—”

Barry didn’t bother to repeat himself, his hand shot out and grabbed Len’s, entwining their fingers without a second to be embarrassed about it, before the other could blink. The emotions still felt like a tidal wave and he tried to push it back, heard—felt?—the other drag in a breath—“Barry, this is…” his voice was hushed and maybe he had no words for it either. Barry just swallowed and nodded.
Then Len was slotting himself alongside Barry, sitting so that their sides were connected knee to hip to shoulder, disentangling his hand from Barry’s to wrap it around his waist, his other hand coming to grip Barry’s instead. He could feel each part where they were pressed together, grateful and hateful of all the clothing in the way, needing more of this connection. It was the only thing grounding him in the sensations, the points of contact, the feel of Len next to him. Barry couldn't focus on anything but the points at which they were touching.

It lasted a full few minutes, slowly levelling off and then fading. Barry realized he was sitting on a park bench in broad daylight, cozied up with Leonard Snart. He pulled away. Len’s hands dropped back into his own space, letting Barry put distance between them on the bench. The bleed was still strong, still every emotion coming through—a pang that felt too much like loss—but it wasn’t on the verge of driving him insane anymore.

“Sorry,” Barry’s voice sounded raw.

“What for?” Len’s, on the other hand, seemed calm as ever. Barry rubbed a hand over his face.

“Just… all of that.”

There was confusion now, on the edge of his own feelings of impatience and frustration, but Len didn’t ask. Instead, he moved and pulled something from his jacket pocket. Barry felt a spike of something at the edge of his perception and it reminded him of that same anxiety from a few minutes ago. It made him tense.

“I got you this.”

Barry looked over and Len was holding a small box with a ribbon around it. “You... got me... a gift.”

The other man was holding it toward him with an intense gaze and Barry had no idea what to do.

“I, ah… no.”

“No?”

“I don’t want any gifts from you.”

Len frowned. “I didn’t steal it if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I—” it had crossed his mind, “it doesn’t matter. It’s bought with stolen money.”

“You know, not all my income is stolen goods.”

“Oh?”

“I have investments, properties, a bar…” there was more he wasn’t saying. Barry could feel it.

“What else?” he ground out.

“Protection money.”

“Protection money?! You’re not the mob! Wait—are you the mob?”

“There are parts of town where people know me and I have more than one enemy. But I look after my own, Barry,” his eyes glinted in a meaningful way.

Barry didn’t know whether to interpret that as a yes or as a no but he was steadily more frustrated.
“I’m not accepting whatever’s in that box or anything you try ’n give me, Len.”

“Didn’t we just agree to stop fighting this Bond?”

“We won’t fight the bleed, Len. Gifts aren’t the same thing. I thought I made it very clear that I don’t—that I’m not interested in being your boyfriend, okay?”

Len’s eyes narrowed and Barry swallowed. He looked like he was ready to challenge that assertion. Instead, he re-pocketed the gift. “I got that, but as Soulmates who need to cozy up and also masturbate together, what else do you plan to call us, Scarlet?”

Barry winced and stared at the ground. “Arch enemies who sometimes meet on a park bench to hold hands?”

Beside him, Len snorted. “You’re something else.” He got up then and Barry’s eyes trailed him. “Text me the next time you’re ready to hold hands and pretend you don’t want me.”

Chapter End Notes

Welp. Barry kind of fucked up, didn't he?

Okay so we're actually finally done with chapters being named some variant of "the bleed". Yay! Also I've been subtly sliding in another word or two to the glossary so that I have more chapter titles, so if you see a chapter title you don't recognize in the future, it'll have a full definition in the glossary.

ps - edited this chapter while sitting in an uncomfortable chair in the breakfast room of my hotel here in London so if there's any typos or problems, I won't be surprised. let me know if you see them?
Infitiales Animarum Compares

Chapter Summary

I Don't Care by Fallout Boy and Use Somebody by Kings of Leon

Chapter Notes

Extra trigger warning for this chapter: mention (in quote) of a bigoted slur (f*g)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hartley Rathaway had been many contradictory things in his life—favorite child, hated child, respected physicist working with a prestigious company, disgraced physicist with no job prospects, and many other flip flops besides. However, some things about him had also remained constant through all of that—he was a genius, he was hard to get along with, and he was very, unapologetically gay. Each of those traits had got him in trouble at some point or another—sometimes the combination of them being the issue—and today, it seemed, it would be his genius causing him problems.

The evidence: a very pretty brunette woman with a very dangerous looking gun pointed at his face.

Hartley’s fingers itched toward his sonic gloves stashed away in his cabinet and her eyes narrowed while her smile grew.

“Try it, cutie. We’ll see how well that goes for you.”

She was the type of dangerous Hartley tended to avoid. Still she had an easy confidence he didn't mind too much, except in the lab. Arrogance in a lab was a recipe for bad science.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, Miss…?”

“Golden Glider, but you can call me Lisa for now.”

He raised his eyebrows. Another person with an alias—the city was starting to crawl with them, it seemed. Hartley wasn’t sure if it was that the Flash had started a revolution or that it was an inevitable outcome of the particle accelerator reaction. The data was inconclusive courtesy of how the event timeline lined up, too many variables in the equation. None of that was particularly helpful right now, quick though it flashed through his mind, so he put on a smile that would make a pissed off southern housewife proud.

“As much as I enjoy having phallic objects thrust in my face, unless you plan to shoot me in the next minute I don’t particularly see the point of you holding that so close.”

“Oh, I heard you could be bitchy but you are just too cute,” Lisa was smirking and cooing all at once and he was undecided as to whether he was especially annoyed or intrigued by her facsimile of friendly teasing. “The gun stays put until we’re on the same page though.”
Hartley assessed. This Glider woman wanted something from him, that much was obvious, and had knowledge of him enough to find his small and immaculate (if rundown) apartment. She was bold and dangerous enough to wait until he was ready to leave and point a gun in his face, walking him back inside and kicking the door closed behind her.

“And what page is that, Lisa?”

“I have a job for you. A weapons upgrade, the kind that only a genius like yourself can make work right.”

“What sort of weapons?” he found his eyes crossing as he tried to stare at the barrel of her gun, wondering if it would be this.

“You’ll find out if you take the job. I promise it pays—quite well in fact—and it looks like you could use the cash.” She cast a glance around the apartment as she spoke and he felt himself stand up a bit straighter.

“I’m a genius with more than one Ph.D and I’m fluent in six languages. You’ll have to excuse me if I’m not too concerned about the opinion of a common criminal on my abode.”

“If you’re so smart, why are you living unemployed in squalor?” she didn’t drop the sweet voice as she spoke and he was already grinding his teeth as she continued, “Oh right, I remember, it’s because you’re disgraced from being kicked out of STAR Labs’ research facility and the silver spoon you were born with means you won’t demean yourself with work your hands like the common folk. Isn’t that right, Mr. Rathaway?”

“If you intend to use me as some bribe to my parents—”

“Come on, cutie, I already told you I have a job for you.”

He glared at her around the barrel of her gun. She was strong, her arm hadn’t faltered once while holding it straight ahead and it didn’t look light. The scientist in his was itching to look at it though; he could tell the components weren’t exactly standard issue. “Why do I get the sense that if I take this ‘job,’ the weapon I build might be tested on me before anyone else?”

He’d helped build a particle accelerator that killed and injured hundreds, he wasn’t exactly keen to put weapons in the hands of anyone else but himself.

“You’ve gotta’ have a little faith, sweetie. The weapon is for the Flash, not anyone else. I take it that interests you?”

He felt his eyes widen, and a slow smile break out onto his face. “Why didn’t you just say so, Glider? And for the record, I go by Pied Piper.”

**********

She took him to a dive bar with an actual, functional jukebox, something he was sure couldn’t really exist anymore, and yet here it was. But they by-passed the front end and bar, past a few pool tables and down a short hall, through to a... warehouse-like space. Based on the front, he’d been expecting more of a shady mobster poker-room, but this would work too. It had an unfinished air to it—a high ceiling, tables set up haphazardly, shelves, doors to other spaces, a big bay door and an old car near
it. It wasn't exactly his usual labs but he'd worked in far worse spaces by now.

“Knock knock.”

Hartley looked around while Glider announced their entrance. There was a man at one of the tables, looking annoyed—he was a bit older and more than handsome enough to catch Hart’s eye.

“Lisa”—had a nice voice too—“I thought I told you to leave it for at least a week.”

“You did, Lenny,” she walked down the few short steps and Hartley fell in line behind her, “but you also said unless.”

“Unless you happened across a genius in at least three different fields that I need.” Hartley blinked and the man—Len? Lenny?—looked at him, “Which I take if you’ve done after all, Lise?”

“Only the best for my brother,” her voice carried a definitely smirk and... Lisa and Len, Leonard—oh, oh no. Cold. This man was Captain Cold. That was worrisome. Before Hartley could decide what to do with the new player on the board, the man was standing up and walking over.

“What’s your name, kid?”

Hartley bristled, “Hartley Rathway, and unless you want me calling you ‘Daddy’ I don’t suggest you call me ‘kid’, Leonard Snart.”

There was a beat of silence and Hartley had the presence of mind to wonder if running his mouth might actually get him killed this time, but then the man just raised his eyebrows and looked like he was trying hard to hold back a laugh, “Where’d you find this brat, Lisa?”

Hartley glanced over and Lisa was giving him an appraising look, arching an eyebrow with a smile teasing at her lips like he was some kind of particularly amusing circus attraction. Thinking of the circus sent a jolt of something unpleasant through his stomach though and Hart refocused on Cold even as Lisa answered.

“I did a bit of digging, Len. He’s the best though—genius like you want, specializing in physics, everything to do with sound. He even worked on the particle accelerator with STAR Labs.”

Cold’s eyes glinted at that, zeroing in on Hartley with interest. “Is that so?”

“Not my finest work, considering what happened.”

“Mmm.”

With that noncommittal sound, Cold—Leonard?—turned back toward the table and walked over. After a questioning look at Lisa who nodded at him, Hart moved toward him.

“I’m working a project you might be able to provide some assistance with, Hartley.”

“I hear it’s a weapon,” he glanced back over his shoulder at Lisa then toward her brother, “but I want to know exactly what’s in it for me if I help you.”

Hartley stayed a few steps away, still nervous around a man with a reputation for organized crime and murder. He’d kidnapped Caitlin too, and broadcasted it all over the news. Maybe he should phone her up after this, compare notes. Somehow he doubted she would be interested.

“Aside from walking out of here with all your limbs intact? I can be generous. I’ll give you the details and we can negotiate your price?”
Hartley analyzed the statement for a catch but found none, and came over to the table. Lisa wandered instead to a chair at another table with chunks of what looked like gold all over it, but Hartley was focused now and barely noticed. Leonard had diagrams laid out of amplifiers and some calculations, and was saying that he wanted to take part of his gun and amplify it. The cold gun.

“I need to see it, to know if that’s possible.” Well, the way Leonard was considering wasn’t strictly possible, not from a quick skim of those diagrams, but in theory amplifying the cold should work, depending on, “and what’s the goal? Just to make the beam stronger?”

The other man was silent until Hartley looked up from a circuit board schematic and noticed Cold’s eyes were on him, intense gaze sizing him up. His eyes were very blue this close. Eventually, he seemed to mull it over and launched into an explanation.

“I want to create a cold field. Something the gun can unleash that would make a wave of cold in front of me or around me. Not like a sheet of ice, just cold. It would be invisible but there, something that works on the absolute zero principles of the cold gun—the type of things that could stop bullets from moving it’s so cold, could really slow things down.”

“You mean the Flash?” Hartley couldn’t quite suppress his growing smile.

“Him too. It’s hard to get a good hit in while he’s zipping around. A cold field would level things out a bit, make ‘em interesting if I can catch him in it.”

“I bet it would. For that to work though, you’d have to act like the eye of a storm or else you’d freeze as well—even in that oversized jacket I know you wear.”

Leonard looked amused, then serious again, stepping closer and tapping the table. “So it can be done?”

“In theory—yes. But again, I really would need to see the gun to know for sure.”

The man gave him a half-smile, satisfied, and turned away while Hartley sat down and started flipping through papers. Clearly, Captain Cold wasn’t a total idiot. Still, the man definitely didn’t have the knowledge or skill set required to mod his weapon—unsurprising given that it was advanced enough that he doubted anyone without a Master’s degree or PhD could figure it out. That Leonard had got this far was impressive enough. But if he couldn’t mod it then he couldn’t have built it in the first place, which raised the question: who did?

He didn’t have to wait long for the answer. Leonard placed the heavy gun down in front of him, an ugly and metal monstrosity with a bulky hand grip and trigger that could only be the work of—

“Cisco Ramon?” He whirled to face Cold, “Cisco Ramon built your cold gun? How in the hell did you convince him to make a weapon that would hurt his precious Flash?”

He was incredulous and impressed and amused and—oh no oh no—Leonard did not looked pleased that Hartley had figured that out. Even as the man stared at him in bright anger he could hear the click clack of Lisa’s heels rushing up and over.

“How d—”

“I worked with him! I worked with Cisco for over a year and you think I wouldn’t recognize his handiwork? Call me whatever you want, but don’t say I’m not capable of that much at least. It’s like a calling card—it’s obvious to me.”

He was holding his hands up in surrender because although he’d been punched as often as the next
geek growing up, he really didn’t want to experience Captain Cold’s wrath while his sonic gloves were so far away. But Leonard hadn’t moved to hurt him yet so Hartley glanced at Lisa. She still looked suspicious and ready for a fight. Cold was settling down though, at least.

“You know what—never mind. You clearly stole it from STAR Labs and Cisco obviously made it ages ago, I don’t know why I’m even asking. But I’m in. Whatever he can do, I can do with one hand tied behind my back and a blindfold on.”

It was a bit of a boast but he didn’t care, because if it was Cisco’s work then he would definitely be able to work it to what Leonard wanted. Cisco’s designs were always flexible and he’d have the necessary components to make it work. Not that Hartley was going to admit that part, as it might come off sounding like praise.

“Okay, Rathaway—let’s talk business.”

**********

The next few days, Hartley went by in the mornings to Leonard’s odd bar-and-warehouse setup, something apparently called ‘the Rogues bar’ by those who frequented it, regardless of the actual name of it, and it was a ‘safe house’ of sorts. There were codes to get through the doors into the warehouse from the bar, ones Lisa gave to him after his second day there, and apparently this was a meeting ground for a few of their friends. On the second day, a man named Bivolo checked in while Hartley was running calculations, and on the third day a man he’d heard of stopped in for a drink at the bar and popped back. It was Mark Mardon, who’d rather infamously held up a bank only a month prior, lightning and storms and the whole thing, then barely managed to slip out of there without the Flash getting him. Apparently, he was working with the ‘Rogues’ now too.

“You around, Snart?” the man called as he entered, distracting Hartley from his soldering.

“He stepped out,” Hartley replied, looking up before realizing who was there. Another gorgeous man, just his luck. He put on a flirtatious smile, “You’re welcome to keep me company until he gets back though.”

Mardon stepped closer to his workbench, “Who’re you, then?”

“Hartley Rathaway. Although, it turns out Pied Piper seems to be a functional nickname around here.”

Mardon chuckled—a sound Hartley would never be sad to hear—and extended his hand, “Mark Mardon, but yeah they’ve been calling me Weather Wizard.”

Hartley shook his hand and leaned back to smile. “Captain Cold sure likes to collect some interesting people to his little team, doesn’t he?”

“Seems that way, yeah. What’s your thing?”

“Intellect around here, but sound manipulation in general. And you rob banks with hand-held storms, if the news doesn’t lie?” he did his best to remove the typical scorn from his voice. Robbing banks hardly seemed like a useful application of such an incredible meta-ability, but his hair was quite literally flawless so Hartley had a good incentive to play nice.
Mardon leaned on the table and crossed his arms, “Yeah that’d be me.”

They managed to have a pleasant conversation for a few minutes, Hartley garnering what information he could about the setup around here until Leonard walked back through the door. He blinked when he saw Mardon then immediately came down the stares toward them.

“Mardon.”

“Where’ve you been, Snart? Thought you were supposed t’ be punctual?”

Mark straightened his spine considerably as Leonard approached and Hartley immediately bent back over his work. He’d seen enough alpha male pissing contests in his life and he knew the best way to steer clear was the pretend to be preoccupied elsewhere. Because sure, it could be annoying, but it was also hot as hell to watch two attractive and strong men posture and push at one another so it always paid to stick around but out of the way.

“I was out.”

“Doing what?”

“I don’t remember agreeing to tell you where I am at all times of the day, Mardon. Now should we plan this job you want lined up or are you gonna’ waste my time with questions I don’t intend to answer?”

Oooh, snap. Hartley tried hard not to smirk at the metal he was soldering together. It was clear who was in charge around here.

They went off across the warehouse and talked too low for Hartley to hear, though he definitely caught the word ‘Brighton Tower’ and he was pretty sure the words ‘awards dinner’ and ‘the Flash’. Then Mardon was leaving and Leonard was coming over to check on his progress.

“How’s it coming?”

Hartley smiled, “I’ll be done by tomorrow night.”

“Good job, Piper.”

Leonard clapped him lightly on the shoulder before heading back toward the bar and Hart shivered. His hands were cold.

**********

One thing about Hartley, one awful flaw he knew about himself, was that he just had to push things. It was part of what made him a great scientist—pushing boundaries, theories, convention—but also what had gotten him kicked out of his parents’ house, kicked out of STAR Labs and, at least until Harrison Wells had disappeared, from advanced science forever, and had even cost him a potential life with his Soulmate.

But Hartley couldn’t help it, he had to push. As such, he couldn’t quite stop himself from flirting with Leonard over his few days at the man’s warehouse. And the first time he’d done it, after they were properly introduced, at least, he’d been pleased and surprised to find that the man flirted back.
Leonard had brought him coffee when he was working late into the evening the first night on schematics and calculations, and it had just slipped out—“Cool and kind, now that’s my kind of man.”

Hartley had stilled as soon as he said it, because he knew that type of comment could really piss some people off—his Soulmate, for one, but guys like Captain Cold were probably on that list as well. But then—“Your puns are worse than mine, Piper, and I’m hard to beat. Might want to up your game.” Leonard said it with a smirk and left him to his work.

That could be interesting.

Mostly, Hartley let it be though, although he didn’t miss that Leonard gave him an appraising look whenever he did toss some innuendo the man’s way, something that only encouraged him. He really wouldn’t complain if Cold did want to go a round or two after the cold gun modifications were complete.

And when he was done, he discovered that Leonard had to test the gun to his liking. It was the scientific process, he supposed, though he hadn't expected a criminal to be quite so methodical in his weapons testing. The military should take pointers. Being so thorough, the testing took a while—Leonard pointing it at targets, having Lisa and Hartley throw things at the cold field to see how it worked and it’s range, then going so far as to have Lisa shoot a (regular) gun toward him but just barely to his left to see if the field would stop the bullet. It did. Either Leonard was crazy or he had a lot of trust in his weapon, and in his sister’s aim.

Eventually, Lisa left them to head out on a date while they were still gathering data, ensuring the perimeter of the field was as expected, assessing how long it lasted, and more. Hartley was increasingly surprised by how detailed Leonard was, including recording notes about each step, but he supposed he wouldn’t have built up his Rogues Gallery and the associated properties without that quality. Eventually satisfied, Leonard went to grab Hartley’s sizeable payment and, apparently, an also sizeable bottle of top shelf vodka.

“You drink?”

“Hell yes.” Hartley hadn’t been drunk in a while but tonight seemed like a good time for it. Leonard was a surprisingly good drinking partner, able to keep up with most topics of conversation until he became too technical in his jargon. The man was highly interested in all of the physics relating to the cold gun, and even asked Hart about his time at STAR Labs and how he’d gone from that to being the ‘Pied Piper,’ since he’d already told Leonard about his face off with the Flash.

Asking him about his fall from grace put a sour taste in Hartley’s mouth though, and it must have shown because Leonard was already saying, “Forget about it. We all have a history.”

“No, it’s fine, it’s not even a secret, really. I knew there was something wrong with the accelerator and I tried to stop Harrison Wells from turning it on. That… well, that led to me never having a job in physics again, at least until he disappeared off the face of the Earth four months ago. And you know, I'm still not sure what happened there.”

He was curious, but also fairly certain Caitlin and Cisco wouldn’t exactly give him an answer if he asked. “And since then, I don’t even know if I want to go back to that. The attraction of science was its meritocracy—science and data speak for themselves, they’re self-evident truths. A good scientist should be able to find good work based on his skills and qualifications, not on…” he screwed up his face and finished his drink. Leonard poured him another.

“And in the meantime?”
He sighed at then tried, tentatively, to explain, the alcohol loosening his tongue. “About a month after the accelerator malfunctioned”—after he’d sorted out the ringing in his ears—“I joined a travelling circus and left Central for a little while.”


Hartley almost laughed himself because—okay yes, it was ridiculous. But the reality was too bitter for the amusement to do more than twist his lips up. “I wasn’t in the circus. I moved around with them—with him. James. He... he’s my Soulmate.”

Leonard blinked. Hartley watched his face flit quickly from surprise to calculation. “You come on pretty strong for someone already Bonded.”

“He and I, we’re not really together… or anything, really, not anymore.”

He glanced back up at Leonard then down quickly again. Most people didn’t like hearing about Soulmates who didn’t work out, about Infitiales Animarum Conpares—Denied Soulmates—or Infitalis Dimidum—the Rejected Half. Most people didn’t even know the words for it, old terms that hadn’t been updated because cases like his were brushed under the rug by society.

“It’s…” he shook his head. “You don’t really want to hear this.”

The other man wasn’t looking at him with pity or disgust yet, but Hartley knew from experience that it was only a matter of time if he told his little tale.

“I’m curious, if you’ll tell me.” He seemed genuinely attentive when Hart’s eyes flicked to him again—leaning forward, eyes steady. It was strange to have a captive audience instead of someone telling him to shut up about this. So he sucked back another drink and let it do its work helping him talk.

“He was—is—an acrobat, a handsome one, blond and just… when we met, I thought he perfect. But straight. Or so he thinks. A ladies man.” He couldn't keep the sneer from his voice “Homophobic?”

He held out his glass for Leonard to fill. “Very. And when I… when we shook hands, the light in his eyes died.” He couldn't help but remember that moment, vivid, his face falling from anger and indignation to something lost, almost despairing.

“Did you know who he was, before?”

“I figured it out, and then I pointed it out to him. It’s not like our Mark is easily hidden.” It wasn’t. His Mark was on his ear, an intersecting array of circles in a pattern that was mathematically astonishing. Hart had always loved his Mark. Having been born deaf and undergoing far too many surgeries as a kid to provide him with the ability to hear—because God forbid a Rathaway child be deaf or in any way imperfect—he was protective of anything to do with his ears, and his Mark especially. So when he saw it on a poster for the Flying Jesses, an acrobatic act, he knew.

“I saw his act on a poster, bought a front row ticket with a backstage pass for the circus. It was the tail end of my dwindling cash but I didn’t care.”

His heart had raced the entire time he sat in the crowd, then worse when he saw his Soulmate. The man was gorgeous—Italian and blond with a chiseled jaw, looking cut even in his ridiculous and flamboyant outfit. He flirted with the crowd with the kind of easy confidence and charm that Hartley had always envied in others, grinning and cocksure. Then he was up on the tightrope and Hartley could have fainted. What if his Soulmate died right there, falling forty feet and—he was fine. He
didn’t die. He ended his show to a rousing applause and Hartley was in love.

He explained to Leonard that James was there after the show. And he was nervous, knew he couldn’t shake the man's hand but had to keep reminding himself of that. James was surrounded by beautiful women. It stood to reason, someone as handsome as he was, as charming and flirtatious. But then his Soulmate was *looking* at him and it took his breath away.

"He thought I was just a fan, tried to be polite at first but I was too eager. I pointed to my ear, told him we needed to talk. He thought I was some crazy fan with a tattoo but he spoke to me in private. We argued but and he didn't want to shake hands, and then changed his mind and thought I was bluffing, decided that shaking my hand would be the best way to prove I was crazy."

He didn’t look up, could feel the weight of Leonard’s gaze. “Did he run?”

“Run?” Hart’s laugh was bitter. “No, he didn’t. He dragged me back to his trailer and had questions, and when he found out I was gay he yelled for an hour, told me how our Bond was wrong, the Mark must be incorrect, I was wrong, it was all wrong—completely ignoring the evidence in front of him. He said he wasn’t a faggot, that his Soulmate couldn’t be one either.” He couldn’t help the way his mouth twisted down to spit out that word, harsh and angry. “By the end of it I was almost convinced myself though, because no matter how handsome he was, such an obtuse person couldn’t be my Soulmate. Of course, I was willing to be a little more rational about it.”

“Was that the end of it?”

He finally chanced a glance at Leonard. He was still leaning forward, still interested and Hartley was almost surprised, if a little grateful. Normally by now people were uncomfortable, if not for him being gay—he was certain Leonard was too, now—then for the discomfort of hearing about Soulmates with such a broken Bond. Most people were uncomfortable considering that this thing that was supposed to be everything could be empty and awful instead.

“It wasn’t the end,” he looked straight at Leonard. “Just the beginning. I’m proud, Leonard, but I’ve seen what pride can do to people. I saw pride turn on a particle accelerator and almost destroy this city. So a week later, when I was evicted from my apartment with no place to go, it was either beg for help from parents who I *know* hate me, or from a Soulmate who might not hate me if given a chance. I didn’t really have any friends left to ask.”

“He let you stay?”

“He did. In his tiny ass trailer that wasn’t even big enough for one person, let alone two. But yes, he let me stay. There were rules, things I wasn’t allowed to do, say. Clothes on at all times, even to bed despite the heat, not like he had a/c.”

The memories were coming too quick now and he pushed them back, sipped his drink. He didn’t want to be in this conversation any more because nothing pretty happened after that.

“You shared the bed?”

He laughed and it was bitter. “Sure—except when he kicked me onto the floor. That happened whenever I accidentally touched him in our sleep, rolled over or stretched. It was fine when I showed up at his place at the end of summer, the floor was cool, but it was worse in winter.”

“He just kicked his Soulmate onto the floor? Just like that?” Leonard had an empty glass and an intense expression, but Hart just tipped his head forward.

“Some nights. I now excel at not moving in my sleep.”
“How many months...?”

“How many months...?”

“Almost nine.” He didn’t bother trying to explain how badly he wanted to make things work, how
easy it was to see, after the first little while, how compatible he was with James, all of the good times.
Those memories hurt too much more to explore.

“So what happened, Piper?”

Even through the liquor, Hartley felt his chest tighten and he stared into his empty glass. He didn’t
talk about this part. No one asked, no one wanted to know how it ended. But Leonard was asking,
and he didn’t know how anymore if he should be grateful about that. “I could’ve handled it, being
just his friend. We made good friends—we would... it doesn't matter. I would've found someone else
eventually to fulfill the other parts of me, to give me what I thought James couldn't. But then he,
we... it seems he was repressing and it finally bubbled over.” He steeled himself, "We had sex, a
few times, always him initiating, and it was...”

How could he possibly explain how wonderful and horrible it had been? How some nights James
would have one too many to drink, press up behind him and kiss his ear, call him pet names, press
him into the mattress and take what he wanted, and other nights he would still kick Hartley to the
floor for brushing his arm? How it was impossible to know what kind of evening it would be, and
how James was liable to put on a porno in the background as often as not, listen to a woman moan
and beg while he fucked into Hartley, the sound distracting and upsetting? How much he’d wanted
it, craved it each time, but then how empty and how unwanted he felt after each instance of it?

Hart could explain particle physics to anyone who would listen, but he didn't have the words for that
kind of explanation. Instead, he settled for a ragged attempt. “I couldn’t have it both ways—
pretending to be just a friend, letting him fuck me when it suited him and not touching him otherwise.
I couldn’t handle the middle ground. I wanted all or nothing.”

“So you took nothing.”

“I left when I realized we’d never actually kissed.” Leonard refilled his glass and Hartley sucked
back a mouthful. “I know it’s awful, I know you aren’t supposed to leave your Soulmate, but I—”

“It's not—awful, I mean. Seems like basic survival instinct to me.”

Hartley leaned forward, swaying precipitously on his chair in surprise. The alcohol was going to hit
him a lot harder as soon as he stood up but he knew his own voice was more slurred than he could
reasonably account for already. “Really? Most people...”

Leonard took a swig from the bottle, “I’m not most people. Some of us can actually relate.”

He took a second to process that, and then realized the implication. “Wait, you mean you—”

He cut off his words at the long stare Leonard shot him, then the other man took a swig again and
nodded, halfway to the side in that particular way of his. “What the hell, might as well tell you, kid.
My situation’s similar. Not there yet, but it's hard to tell where it'll land. We’re working on it, trying
to fix our mess of a bleed. And it is a mess—too intense, too crazy. The things we can feel, I can't
begin to describe.” His words were ever-so-slightly slurred and Hartley realized that while he’d been
talking, Leonard had mostly finished off the bottle. He doubted the other would be saying anything
at all otherwise.

“Why is—are they, like James? Not interested.” He wanted to know. Leonard’s curiosity about
himself and James made so much sense now. Hartley had never found another person rejected by
their Soulmate and there was something incredibly soothing to find another person like himself, another lost soul.

“No—at least, he hasn’t said that’s an issue. It’s the criminal part.”

So it was a male. “So he knows what you do?”

Leonard actually dropped his head back, leaned his whole body back really, languid with drink. “Oh he knows, intimately.” He smirked, ”I have a reputation, you know.”

Hart nodded, not that Leonard would see it, staring back and up at the ceiling as he was. Even relaxed and loose like this, he still emanated a type of confidence and power.

“He is a good and righteous man. The most righteous I’ve met. And this,” he waved vaguely to himself, “doesn’t really fit his image so well. Especially with our messy history.”

“He’s an idiot not to want you, Leonard.”

The other man sat up and sighed, scrubbing his hands over his face as if to wake himself. “No, that's the thing: he’s really not.” He stood up and stretched, the empty bottle clinking by his feet on the ground. “That’s enough for me for one night.”

Hart sipped the last of his liquor. “Probably a good idea, I have a bad track record with handsome men and alcohol.” He winked at Leonard and at least got a half-smile for his trouble.

Then he watched the man cross the room and head for the exit then turned back to the workbench to tidy up. With a creak of the unoiled hinges, he heard Leonard stop in the doorway. “Does it… if you leave, does it get better?” His voice was quiet, loud enough to carry across the space but low, somber.

Hartley wished he had good news for him. Instead he just stared down at his equations. “I still haven't figured out the answer to that, myself.”

There was a pause. “Thanks for the help with the cold gun, Piper. Stick around as much as you want, we could use a guy like you around here.” Then he heard the door close.

Chapter End Notes

ooh Hartley :( Sorry James is such an asshole. We haven't seen the last of Hartley and James, don't worry, but we return to your regularly scheduled Len pov next chapter!

As always, come visit me on my tumblr for more of whatever this is. And for the record, this whole Hartley/James angst? ColdFlashCW is 900% to blame. Just sayin'.
Bond

Chapter Summary

Fidelity by Regina Spektor and Everything Has Changed by Taylor Swift ft. Ed Sheeran

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Len’s week had been a good one. Lisa had found him a scientist to rival Cisco, Mark Mardon set up a meeting because he had a plan for a heist, and Barry had texted him only four days after their last meeting. It was perfunctory—Chubbuck park 2:30?—but it was enough. Len had gone to meet him without hesitation.

Barry had been waiting when he got there, which was new. Len was even early. The kid was standing still, wearing long shorts and a t-shirt and an expression that went from nervous to a scowl after a half second. Len reigned in his thoughts about how good Barry looked in that shade of red, knowing the accompanying feelings were filtering into the bleed and making the other uncomfortable. Insofar as things were going, he was trying to play nice, since the kid had swallowed his pride and texted Len first.

It had gone better than their first bench meeting. It started tense, because Len had brought another gift. The first one had been a hand-crafted pendant of their Mark, something he wanted Barry to have but the kid hadn’t even taken it out of the box. This time, he tried his luck with a bottle of cologne, one that reminded him of the smell Barry had worn the last time they met on this bench. But Barry was shaking his head as soon as he saw the box.

“Is that a different present? I thought I told you I don’t want gifts.”

“You’ll have to accept something from me sooner or later. Like I told you before, some of my income is legitimate, kid.”

“Stop doing this. Please. I don’t want anything from you.”

“Except the comfort of my touch.”

“He smirked, because if Barry was going to be an asshole about the gifts then he might as well be one about the cuddling. Barry scowled again but sat down, and when Len dropped beside him, he awkwardly held out his hand for Len to hold. Len almost had to laugh but didn’t, glad that Barry wasn’t going to deny it and run off at least, and they lapsed into silence for a few minutes. To him, it was a comfortable quiet, watching joggers, enjoying the cooler breeze that came off the river near their bench. He was itching to put his arm around Barry’s shoulder and extend the contact, about to do it when Barry shifted and moved to face him partway.

“D’you think this is helping?”

Len leaned back, having almost forgotten that they were here to smooth over the bleed and not just
Barry scowled but leaned back as well, letting himself brush up against Len’s side. He took the opportunity to wrap his arm around Barry after all, silently pleased with the change, then amused when the kid scowled at him again.

“You gonna’ pout the whole time?” he teased.

“You don’t have to be so smug.”

He shrugged, might as well make the most of the moment in his opinion. And after a minute, Barry did relax against him, even dropping his head onto Len’s shoulder before too long. Actually, after a few minutes, feeling almost sleepy in the midday warmth and quiet, he glanced over and noticed that Barry actually was asleep. It must be a light sleep, a kind of surface drift, but for whatever reason, the kid had actually dropped off into a doze. Len supposed that even for the Flash, spending every evening running around the city until late at night and most days at work had to take its toll one way or another. He couldn’t help but smile down at the kid, refusing to move and jostle him.

By the time Barry did wake up and stretch, embarrassment coursing through the bleed, the kid had realized he was late to get back to work and bolted out of there. It reminded Len that he was gonna’ be late for his meeting with Mardon, but he couldn’t much care.

Then he met with Mardon and started to feel a slow burn of tension rising in him—the game, the job, the score, but something more now. Barry was meeting with him, once a week and on a park bench, but he was meeting with him nonetheless. And Mardon’s job, the set up, there was no doubt that the Flash was going to make an appearance. Len was eager to be there, in part because the job would be fun and in part to make sure Weather Wizard could toe the party line, play by the rules, but he knew it was going to complicate things.

In the past weeks of being Bonded, they had somehow managed to slowly put aside their Flash and Cold dynamic. As deliberate as he had been in skirting those topics, it meant that now he was likely to end up head to head with the Flash with no idea how Barry would react. Would he find it fun, like Len? He had during their first encounters off and on, grinning on the train, exchanging barbs. But everything was different now, and different meant new rules, new dynamic. It made him want to discuss it with the kid—not the heist, just their rules, establish an understanding.

Thankfully, Hartley finished the modifications to his gun shortly after sorting out the plan details with Mardon. The genius was handy, their own version of Cisco, and Len was keen to keep him around if he was interested in it. Even Lisa was warming up to him. But celebrating after it was done left Len with a rough hangover and a heavy heart the next day. Nine months. The kid had tried to make things work with his guy for as long as Barry had been in a coma. Nine months of misery, chased by what seemed like a barely-more tolerable lack of connection. Len wondered if Hartley knew about the strengthening of the bleed with distance and doubted it.

Mostly, he tried not to wonder if that’s what was going to happen to him—tense park bench dates that would never turn into anything else. Or maybe one day Barry would throw caution to the wind and sleep with him, only to regret it and hate him. Or what it, and what if, and what if… The thought churned away inside him, useless. There was no point wondering and nothing to do but wait. So he did. The days stretched out, but patience paid off just shy of a week later.

Len was finished his dinner when his phone rang. He blinked at it, almost sure he was wrong because, an actual call, not a text? And then it clicked as he recalled an order he’d placed the day Barry passed out on his shoulder. He was smirking into the phone even as he answered. “Good evening, Barry.”
“Shoes, Len? Shoes?! You had them sent to my house? D’you know what happened? Joe asked me about the package that came in the mail. I had to pretend I ordered them myself.”

He chuckled, “that was the point, you know.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t let me give you anything, so I worked around that.”

“Because I don’t want your gifts! I don’t want anything you buy with your stolen money! Or your ill-gotten and illegal money.”

“Ill-gotten, Barry, really? Surely you can do better than that for insults.”

“I’m returning the shoes.”

He frowned into the receiver. “Do they not fit?”

“I haven’t even tried them on!”

“But you’re a size—”

“Yes, you got my shoe size right, and high arches, and the lightning bolts on the sides and—look it’s not an issue with the shoes, Len. Please stop buying me things.”

He sighed and leaned back in his seat. “Then what else can I do, Barry? I enjoy giving gifts.”

“Well I—” Barry huffed into the phone. “Look, stop, please. I shouldn’t even have to ask.”

He pursed his lips. “If that’s what you want—”

“I do.”

“—then I should probably cancel the flower delivery to your work for next week.”

“The—wha—Len!” he hissed and Len smirked, glad Barry couldn’t see him. There was no flower deliver actually in the works, but Barry didn’t need to know that.

“Don’t worry, kid, I’ll call it off.”

“Good. Jesus, how would I even explain that?”

“A secret admirer?”

“Just—don’t.”

“Got it.”

“Thank you.” There was silence for a minute. “So… I guess I’ll let you go then?”

Right, not like they had anything else to talk about. Len felt his eyebrows draw together. “Dinner, tomorrow. It’s been almost a week.”

“Dinner? I—uh, what about the park?”

“Afraid to be seen out in public with me, Barry?”
“The park is public.”

The park was unproductive, sitting on a bench, holding hands and not talking. Len didn’t want to get too tied to it, and didn’t want to let that become their habit.

“Tell you what, we compromise and do lunch, and I won’t bring a gift.”

“Make it breakfast and you have a deal.”

“Alright—meet me at Mill Creek diner, say eight o’clock?”

“Got it.” There was a pause. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Barry.”

He clicked off the phone and let himself smile. Progress. Some of the tension from his conversation with Hartley eased off his chest.

**********

The next morning he noticed Barry didn’t join in on their now-usual session together, which was fine. The timing didn’t always work out—though Len did try damn sure to be available if he felt that phantom slide along his cock—and when it didn’t, it wasn’t too hard to tune out the sensations. Part of him wondered, though, if Barry was staving off simply so he didn’t have to look at Len so soon after sharing that connection. They still hadn’t discussed it, not properly, and he made a mental note to do so if he could over breakfast.

The morning was cool enough to warrant a sweater, even though he knew he’d hate it later when the heat came out. It was only July—how he managed to survive each summer was still a mystery to him. He took his motorcycle to the diner mostly to feel the wind, and let the adrenaline of the ride take him away from musing over Barry’s slowly developing sense of apprehension and dread coming through the bleed.

The brunette was five minutes late. Len hid his annoyance, knowing Barry would feel it anyway.

“Guess I can’t pretend I was stuck in traffic,” he opened with, dropped into the booth seat opposite to Len.

“You could try, and I would gracefully pretend I don’t know better.”

He was rewarded with an actual smile from Barry as the server brought them coffee and water.

“You’re pretty punctual, aren’t you?”

“Pays to keep an eye on the clock. Guys like you change the game though, that’s for sure.”

Len noticed that Barry took one cream and no sugar in his coffee. He felt it might be pertinent knowledge at some point in the future. They managed to get through awkward small-talk until the server took their order, and then Barry was leaning forward, a quick spike of anxiety coming through, letting Len know he was about to ask or say something that worried him.

“So why a meal?” That didn’t seem that nerve-wracking, but Barry continued, “I mean, we’re
supposed to be touching—holding hands—and this isn’t that conducive to uh, physical contact.”

Len hated the way he talked about it—’supposed’ to be touching, like it was a prescription to an ailment.

“Getting to know each other also seems like a necessary step, Barry. If you’d rather though, we can always go back to my place and cuddle on the couch. Consider that an open invite.” He flashed a grin and Barry scowled.

“I’ll pass.”

“You’re the one who wants us to touch more.” He teased and then when Barry looked ready to protest, he let himself get serious. “And I promise, Barry, I wouldn’t try anything if that’s what you’re worried about. I know you seem to think that every time I touch you, my goal is to get down your pants but it’s not. Even us criminals have some morals.”

Instead of the relief he was halfway expecting to feel through the bleed, something tense and angrier came through. He didn’t need the NAB to tell him that though, it was written on Barry’s face and came through in his tight words a moment later.

“Oh yeah? And that’s why you kissed me during Initial Communion, right? Your morals?”

Len winced. He’d really almost forgotten about that. Time for some damage-control. “Admittedly, not one of my finest moments. I was… overcome, and not thinking straight. But it’s not like my aim was to seduce you, kid—I was just trying to…”

“To what?” he snapped. Len glared.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Tell me.”

“Connect.”

Barry scowled and looked away. Len didn’t have a better answer. It was the truth and a pain to admit it. Their food came; neither touched it.

“Why do you keep touching me like you…”

“Want you?” Len could feel the other’s discomfiture through the bleed and watched him finally stab an egg yolk with his fork. “Because I do, Barry. But not just as some paramour like you seem to think. I want to be intimate with my Soulmate—that’s only natural—but I don’t want it if you’re not enjoying it.”

“So why touch me at all?”

He sighed. Instinct was a cheap answer. Desire was worse. He chewed on a strip of bacon and tried to come up with a decent one. The only thing he landed on was, “connection.”

“So why not stop at holding hands? That’s connection.” Barry looked annoyed but Len was getting frustrated himself.

“Have I asked you to kiss me, Barry? To expose your skin and let me run my hands over it? To let me slide my tongue along—”

“No! Je-sus, we are in a diner, Len!” Barry was blushing and leaning forward, talking in a hushed
“No—you haven’t asked me to do any of those things. God. What’s your point?”

Len didn’t miss the spike of arousal, the heat in the bleed and in Barry’s eyes. Calling him on it seemed callous and counter-productive though. “My point, kid, is that despite what you seem to think, all I’m asking for is to hold your hand—or cuddle you or whatever I can do that doesn’t make you panic. If you’d relax around me for half a minute you’d see I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable. What part of ‘I won’t hurt you’ don’t you understand?”

Barry stared at him, gaze wide and then intense, finally sitting back and returning to his meal. They ate in silence for a few minutes and Len was grateful for a chance to try and analyze Barry, sitting across from him and feeling too many things at once. Did he really think Len just wanted to sexualize him, seduce him? He thought about Hartley’s Soulmate, and…

“I find it incumbent to ask, Barry—you’re not gay, are you?”

He blinked. “Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Um, no. I’m… I guess I’m bisexual? Probably? I mean, I’ve never really thought about labels too much. I’ve mostly dated women. I had a—a brief thing with a guy in college, but that was years ago and I sort of figured it was just a phase. Mostly, I just never really thought too hard about it.”

Len nodded. This, right here, was why they needed to have breakfast and not just hold hands. “Good to know. So the idea of being with a man doesn’t disgust you?”

“What—no! This isn’t about your gender, Len. I don’t care that you’re a guy. It’s about us, who we are, and what you’ve done. You keep saying you won’t hurt me but that doesn't mean I’m ready to just chill and cuddle you. I still barely know you, and what I do know has been… not great so far.”

“How do you plan to get to know me if I have to bully you into sharing a meal, let alone talking to me?”

If nothing else, Barry looked chagrined. “I’m just adjusting right now, okay? This isn’t really what I expected my Bond to be like and I… there’s just a lot to sort out. You can’t honestly say it isn’t weird, you and me, like this? We’re total opposites.”

Len considered that, leaning back. “We both wear costumes and run around making a name for ourselves in Central City. Can’t say too many people have that in common.”

Barry rolled his eyes, leaning forward on his elbows, “You know what I mean.”

“I do, but here’s the thing—regardless of what you or I think about our compatibility as Soulmates, fate dealt the cards for us. I’m willing to have a little faith that there’s something about this that makes sense, even if it’s hard to see right now.”

Barry swallowed and Len felt his tension increase through the bleed. “Faith? Just trust that the universe has perfectly matched us?”

“Why not? Not much we can do to change it.” Roll with the punches; Len knew how to do that much, at least.

The brunet frowned then exhaled, leaned back and nodded, somehow both decisive and resigned. “Okay, faith. Somewhere, fate’s little joke makes sense to someone. So why don’t we compare notes? Let’s see how good fate did.”
He arched an eyebrow, wondering what Barry was getting at.

“What’s your favorite song?”

Oh, they were doing that. It was adorable and juvenile and pretty much what he’d expect from Barry. “We’re going to swap favorite songs, books, movies, all that? See just how incompatible we are?”

Barry actually looked sheepish through something like a smile, “well I’m guessing you’re not really a fan of Lady Gaga, so…”

“Oh—no you’re right, the universe made a mistake. There’s no way I’m Soulmates with someone who likes shitty pop music.” He huffed out a laugh as he said it and Barry sent him a wincing smile in return.

“In my defense, apparently Cisco played her albums on repeat while I was in the coma because I liked her Facebook page.”

Len found himself laughing because he could almost perfectly picture the genius doing that. But even so, “Look, Scarlet, we’re born in different generations, of course we’ll have different tastes.”

He felt a quick flash of something that he could interpret at surprise from the look on Barry’s face.

“What?”

“I just—I keep forgetting to ask,” Barry leaned forward conspiratorially, “how old are you?”

Len let out a startled laugh. He couldn’t help it. Barry looked affronted as he chuckled and clasped his hands, leaned forward challengingly on his elbows to mimic Barry’s pose. “How old do you think I am?”

“Oh come on—that’s not even fair. There’s zero way to win that question. I would’ve looked it up if someone hadn’t made me delete all his records.”

“Mm, so you have thought about it?”

“I—well it’s hard not to wonder! You call me kid’ enough to be an old man. But look, if I guess older than you are, I’m calling you old, and if I guess younger than you are, you’re gonna’ think I want you to be younger.”

He acknowledged that with a tilt of his head. He wasn’t quite so sensitive, but he could let Barry have this one. “I’m forty-two. And you’ll be twenty six in September.”

He watched Barry process that, complex expressions flitting across his face. Finally, he landed on, “I can’t believe you were almost done high school by the time I was born.”

“Huh, I never did finish high school.”

“See this—that’s what I mean when I say I don’t know you. You didn’t finish high school?”

“And here you wanted to talk about my favorite song.” Len leaned back and their server dropped off the check, so he got up to pay it, waving off Barry’s protest. “The least you can do is let me buy you breakfast.”

He smirked at Barry’s pout, but was pleased the other didn’t protest. Then they were leaving the diner, stepping out into the morning air. It was crisper than it had been recently, looking like rain and
Len was relieved. A break from hot weather. He turned his attention to Barry when the other stopped walking.

Barry was biting his lip then looked down. “You know, the problem with going for food is that we haven’t actually touched yet.”

“Is that an invitation?”

The kid glowered at his blithe response but nodded. “Maybe we should step into the alley at least?” He extended his hand and Len took it, lacing his fingers into Barry’s, feeling a sense of contented comfort as soon as they touched. They walked around the corner and Len was very tempted to simply pull Barry into him, wrap him up in his arms and hold him tight. Instead, he asked “how about hugging? Quality over quantity?”

He felt nervous, partway his own emotion and partway a bleed sensation, but then Barry was stepping closer and Len let his worry dissipate in favor of reaching forward. One arm wrapped around Barry’s waist and the other went instinctually up to the back of his neck, thumb smoothing up and down, gentle against the short strands of hair there. After a moment, Barry relaxed against him, melting into the touch, arms coming around Len. It was like magic, the way Barry just let go off all tension, forehead dropping onto Len’s shoulder and he held Barry tighter. His chest ached but in a way that felt almost good, and he would ache forever if it meant he got to hold Barry like this.

“You know, I…” Barry talked into his shoulder, lifting his head to hook his chin over the shoulder instead but not leaning away. “I don’t want you to think I hate you, Len. I don’t. It’s not like that.”

Len felt himself sigh, hands fisted in Barry’s sweater now slowly unfurling, smoothing out instead. “You just hate this?”

He felt Barry shake his head, felt something quick like embarrassment and nerves, resolve. “No,” he whispered, “I don’t hate this either.”

Len swallowed, wanting to card a hand through Barry’s hair, unsure if he could, then told himself to stop being a chicken shit and did it. The warmth that spread through the bleed was like a little reward and he caught himself smiling. He almost wanted to pull away, see Barry’s face, but that would mean losing this feeling and he wasn’t willing to let go just yet. But he felt something sad well up inside Barry, blending into the warmth and he needed to know—

“Sorry, I know you can feel that,” Barry started to pull away, shaking his head.

“You don’t have to apologize for how you feel, Barry.”

He hadn’t stepped out of Len’s arms, just pulled back enough to reposition, arms sliding onto Len’s chest, head further back now and gaze flicking between Len’s face and his chest.

“What is it?”

“I’ve hurt you. I know it—leaving like I did, the first day, not accepting anything, the way I keep pushing you away.” He stepped back further and looked away but all Len wanted to do was hold him tighter. He settled for holding on to Barry’s waist, all muscle beneath his fingers.

“I can’t really blame you for that—it was a big shock and I came on strong. I get that you need time—”

“But time for what? This is a mess, Len, and I—” Barry stepped away fully, suddenly voice too loud, eyes too bright and red. Len could feel him ache, his sadness, his guilt and confusion but
Barry’s body language was defensive, clear in not wanting to be touched. He let out a ragged breath and kept talking. “I don’t know where this is going. I don’t know how to keep it platonic when we’re so goddamn intimate each morning and then each time we see each other you touch me and I just—” What he ‘just’ was never answered because he broke off and stepped away, running both hands over his face.

“Barry, just… tell me what I can do. Tell me how to make you happy and I will.”

There was some feeling coming off Barry then, visceral and deep but Len didn’t have a word for it. It was the type of thing that would never transfer through a normal bleed, too many things at once, but this close to Barry, having just let him go, it was like he could feel all of them at once and had no way of sifting through them.

“I don’t know! I know I don’t want gifts and I know I don’t want you taunting me about how I need your comfort or whatever, but I also know I don’t want to hurt you, Len. But I don’t know how to do that either. I can’t just be with you, you know it’s not that simple.”

But to him it was. Sure, they would have to hide it from Barry’s job, might have to approach his friends delicately, work out an agreement for their costumed lives, then also hide this all from the Rogues, and… he closed his eyes and let out a slow breath in frustration. Okay, so it wasn’t that simple. But it should be.

“Our history, our dynamic, I won’t pretend it’s not a mess like you say, Barry. The only things I can’t change are who I am and what I’ve done. Even as Cold and Flash, though, we’ve challenged each other, upped our game, had some fun with it. Why does it have to be complicated?” He felt it might be good to bring up that dynamic, considering their upcoming fight.

Barry was shrugging, looking heavenward like the sky might have the answer. “It’s weird, isn’t it? Flip a switch and we go from enemies to… this. Absolute security. Just because it’s... we can feel it. I can feel it.” He dropped his gaze back down to Len, then down to the ground as he spoke. ”The Bond means either of us would go insane if we killed one another, we feel each other’s pain so even hurting one another would hurt. It’s insane, and too intense sometimes, and even now I just want to feel close to you but it… it doesn’t make love sprout out of thin air. It doesn’t just… we barely know each other still. I still need time to sort this out.”

Len wrapped his arms around the brunet's lean waist, drawing them closer again. “It’s possible that we’ve known each other for centuries.”

Barry pulled back, and Len felt both of them ache because of it. “Whoever you were in those lives, I need to know you in this one.”

“Who I am is your Soulmate, Barry.”

“I know.”

“I can’t change who I—”

“I know. Hell, I know Len. And I… I can’t change who I am either. This is who we are, this is who I need to be.”

“Okay. For now, I won’t push. And we can sort out the rest as it comes. How does that sound, hm?” Len knew he wasn’t good at this. He was used to taking what he wanted, making plans to get it, stealing it. He wasn’t good at waiting for it to come to him. But he could be patient when something was worth it.
Relief washed through Barry but Len didn’t even need the bleed to place it, the kid telegraphed his emotions so clearly. “That sounds good. And thank you.”

He nodded, slowly, appraising the other—stubborn set to his jaw, hint of a smile, long features and constantly-windswept hair. God he wanted to kiss Barry again. He hadn't since Initial Communion, and the kid bringing that up earlier just reminded him, made him long for something he had just agreed not to ask for. He knew Barry could feel it too, suddenly biting his lip, feelings complex like white noise, apprehension and tension, dread and desire, things rolled up into one. But Len didn’t press, just met Barry's gaze and waited for him to do... whatever it was he was going to do.

Before the tension could boil over, Barry stepped forward, into his space again, eyes not leaving Len’s until he couldn't help but drop his gaze down to Barry's lips and back up again. Then Barry spoke, soft but above a whisper, eyebrows drawn together, "soon. Not yet but... soon." And Len inhaled, nodded. He could do soon. After a second of hesitation Barry was wrapping his arms around Len again and he reached around to pull the leaner man in again, the tightness in his chest melting away. It was strange, maybe—Len hadn’t hugged anyone quite this much in, well he couldn’t remember how long. But it was nice, too. They stayed like that until Barry realized he was late for work (again).

Driving home after, Len realized that the next time he was likely to see Barry would be in his Flash uniform the next night at the Annual Police Gala.

Chapter End Notes

After the AWFULNESS that was Hartley/James last chapter, I felt like we could all use a reprieve, some of Barry passing out in broad daylight on Len's shoulder and some teasing about Lady Gaga.

So now you can expect approximately 6 chapters of fighting, betrayal, and crying to make up for that moment of joy (ﾉ◕ヮ◕)ﾉ*:･ﾟ✧

Ps – I’m sorry I just have to comment that it’s so backwards: Barry is apologizing for hurting Len. Like… guys. That is backwards, let’s be real.
Soul Signs

Chapter Summary

Trade Mistakes by Panic! At the Disco and Cold as Ice (yes, I went there)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Barry was about fourteen, Iris had gotten really into Soul Signs. Soul Signs were these stupid things like astrology, based on the size and shape and placement of a person’s Mark. They were zero percent scientific, but based around finding historical figures who had Marks with similar characteristics and setting up a (highly unofficial) typography of Marks, and then deciding the course of one’s partnership based on the Mark itself. It held as much acclaim as phrenology in the scientific community, but it held the fascination of Marked teenagers everywhere. As such, he and Iris had bought a book and looked up their Marks when they were young.

Iris’s Mark was very simple, and she had always been kind of shy about it because of that but apparently it was a good thing. Her three wavy lines on her collarbone were “apparently” indicative of flowing water and thus emotional flow in the Bond, the placement near the heart was indicative of deep love, and the simplicity of the design represented a smooth course to romance. She was ecstatic, he remembered.

Barry’s Soul Sign had been a lot more depressing, though he’d laughed it off because as much as he believed in the impossible, he didn’t really believe in Soul Signs. So the book telling him that the placement over his vital organs was indicative of strife, the largish size indicative of a deep and intense NAB, and the complexity and sharp points in the design were predictive of a passionate but quarrelsome love. According to the book, it resembled the Marks of the infamous Bonnie and Clyde. Just perfect.

Back then, it had seemed like hokum. Now, dropping back on bed and thinking of breakfast with Len that morning, he wasn’t so sure. Nothing seemed easy between them, and Bonnie and Clyde were starting to make a helluva lot more sense to him.

And then he swallowed, thinking about Len from that morning, thinking about how he’d felt with Len’s arms around him, safe and secure. And his arms, it was ridiculous. Hiding underneath those jackets and sweaters, Barry could feel so much strength in those arms, they were bigger than they appeared. He’d skipped his usual morning orgasm thanks to his nerves about meeting Len again, but now...

He let his thoughts drift to the other man, to his arms, the feel of his chest under Barry’s hands. His own hands drifted under the thin cotton of his pajama shirt, sliding over his skin. Part of him wanted Len to join in, the other part was worried he would. Because Barry hadn’t really let himself picture Len up until now, just kept himself focused on the sensations and not the fantasy before. But now he was picturing Len, his face and his laugh and his hands.

Barry felt his face flush when a phantom hand skimmed down his front along with his own. It was so weird to feel that still. He wasn’t sure if their bleed was relaxing yet or if any evidence of that was just wishful thinking on his part, but he did know that when they did this, it was so easy to tune in, to
feel things he couldn’t at any other time of day. According to some not-as-sly-as-he-would-like questioning of Caitlin, sensations might be felt stronger under conditions relating to fight, flight, food, and, well, fucking, thanks to the part of the brain the bleed could (in total hypothetical theory of course) spread to. Which he basically understood as meaning that whenever he was turned on, the bleed would pick up more.

Such as right now, picking up Len lazily stroking his cock in a way far too patient for Barry’s liking. He bit back a groan, reminding himself to be quiet, in his bedroom at Joe’s house. Then he finally touched himself, matching Len’s lazy pace. He imagined—and it wasn’t difficult to, right now—Len’s hand on him, Len above him, dark eyes, leaning over him, leaning in for a kiss. He shivered, a frisson of electricity going through him at the thought.

And then Barry let his mind wander while Len’s hand set the pace, something slow to drive him mad, the occasional quicker pulses to keep it interesting. He let himself think of what else Len’s hands might do, and a hot jolt of arousal spread through him. God, Len’s hands. Len’s fingers.

Barry paused his stroking and leaned off the bed, routing through his side table for a bottle he knew was in there. He felt Len’s momentary flash of confusion that he’d stopped but Len himself kept going and, shit, he’d know pretty soon what Barry was doing. He was going to feel it. Barry almost chickened out right then, but, well, he’d come this far. He popped the cap off the lube and tried not to worry about what Len would think.

Then he positioned himself on his knees, one hand returning to his cock and the other, fingers slick, went behind him, teasing in slow circles at his entrance. And fuck, Len could definitely feel that. He felt heat pool in his stomach, more intense, the phantom hand’s grip tighten and Barry’s own throat went dry with desire. Len was clearly into what was happening. He eased back any guilt he might feel about it then and pressed in a second finger to help complete the fantasy. His own hand on his cock was practically still, so focused on the thrusting of his fingers inside him, focused on the phantom of Len’s hands, one on his cock and the other—god—it was pressing against his perineum. Barry pressed his face into pillow and groaned, fingers pressing deeper, thrusting faster. His hands—both, shit fuck damn—started to vibrate and he imagined Len’s voice, whispering ‘fuck, Scarlet’, and fuck maybe it wasn’t a fantasy at all, maybe it was just the intensity of the bleed, bordering on feeling real. His vision went white, gasping Len’s name, muffled by the pillow, coming hard.

Somehow he doubted Bonnie and Clyde had ever had an experience like that.

**********

Barry woke up late the next day, not enough time to do more than grab a bagel on his way out the door, even with his speed, scraping in to work a minute late. It was the beginning of a hellish day.

Work was busy and strained. Joe cornered him on his lunch break to ask how he was doing, since apparently he’d been ‘off’ recently. Lying to Joe was hard as hell and Barry knew he didn’t succeed in convincing his foster father that something wasn’t up, but at least he let it go, leaving early to get ready for the gala that evening, where he’d be accepting a pin for 30 years of service with the force. Barry would be there too, which he was looking forward to, at least.
Later that afternoon, Eddie had come to him to ask advice on Iris, who was apparently acting odd recently and not really herself. Barry had barely seen her in the past while, busy as they both were with work, but he promised Eddie to talk to her. Ever since watching Eddie die and going back in time through the singularity, coming out through the wormhole in time to save him, Barry hadn’t really been able to deny Eddie anything. The image of his corpse floating up into a black hole was just one of those things that would never go away.

He tried to shake off any of those negative thoughts though, texted Iris to hang out soon, and then grabbed an early supper before finishing his work for the day. Barry was tempted to text Len as well, debating with himself about it over supper. The last two times they had seen each other had been… nice. Falling asleep on the other man’s shoulder that one day had definitely not been the plan, but he meant what he said about feeling oddly secure around Len. And right now, even though it had only been a day since their breakfast together, Barry felt he could use a bit more of that comfort.

Thinking about Len, Barry also noticed some odd feelings through the bleed for most of the day, ones that were escalating. They were hard to place and new, something akin to maybe excitement? Maybe anxiety, but different, or at least different than whatever nerves Len sometimes felt when Barry was near him? Some… he couldn’t figure it out, and didn’t have time to dwell on or text Len to ask about after all, because just after work, Caitlin called him and asked him to come into STAR Labs to talk about something. He was already cutting tight with making it to the police gala, but he knew Joe would save him a seat, at least, and he could be there in a blink.

But Caitlin and Cisco carried more bad news.

“The board is doing… what?”

Cisco bit his licorice with force. “They want to sell STAR Labs.”

“Why?!”

Caitlin winced. “You can’t really blame them, Barry—with Dr. Wells gone, missing as far as they know, and only Cisco and I producing any research here, it’s a billion dollar sinkhole. It can cover it’s own costs of electricity and security and the janitorial staff—and it’s been paying Cisco and my own salaries—but it’s not producing anything.”

“But it’s a level four hazard zone! With a faulty particle accelerator! What are they gonna’ do, convince the public to let them turn it back on? Sell it to—wait are they selling it to Palmer?”

Cisco and Caitlin exchanged a glance. Caitlin replied. “Right now, the government is looking at purchasing.”

“The government—”

“The military, more specifically.”

His eyes widened. Cisco picked up the thread for him, “Eiling.”

Barry was already shaking his head. “No, there’s no way we can let Eiling—”

“What can we do to stop him, Barry?” Caitlin stood up, angry. “We’re a defunct research lab that should be advancing human knowledge! The equipment and technology here, even without the accelerator, can and should be doing so much to make gains in science, to change our understanding of the world.”

“But what about us?!” he threw his arms wide, shaking just a bit, and realized he was yelling,
coming off as angry. He wasn’t angry, not with them, he was upset. Why this? Why now?

Cisco stepped forward, “Barr, come on, you don’t think we’re gonna’ give up on Team Flash just because the government wants the lab?”

“I—”

“Don’t be silly, Barry,” Caitlin looked concerned and put a hand out on his arm, “we’re in this together. The deal won’t go through for a while if it even does. The board and the investors are considering their options and might still sell to a private party if anyone steps forward. And in either case, if we have to pick up and move, we will. There’s lots of places we could find, I’m sure, and there’s a lot we can do out of Dr. Stein’s lab at the university if we don’t have access to certain tools here or at your lab.”

Barry was nodding, relaxing by degrees.

“It’ll be fine, Barry.”

“Guys, I think this calls for a Team Flash group hug.” Cisco was grinning again and Barry relaxed enough to laugh, holding out his arms.

A minute later, the computers went off. Barry was already walking to his suit when Cisco made it to the screen to start listing off information—“Englewood West subway stop, security’s going off, seems like…” he started tapping buttons and it showed up on the larger monitor.

“Grodd?” Barry asked, returning in his suit.

“Don’t think so—” Cisco tapped a few buttons, and the security feed opened on the screen. “It doesn’t show anything like that, just people acting crazy.”

Caitlin glanced at it, “they’re fighting and yelling, it’s like a riot.”

He felt his stomach clench. “Bivolo.”

**********

Barry’s night devolved from there, any hope of making it to the gala dashed. He brought the light board to combat Rainbow Raider’s influence, but as soon as he helped all the people at Englewood West, Caitlin informed him that the same thing was happening at the Van Geld Opera station, then the City Center Mall, then Lawrence North. It was moving along one of the train lines quite obviously, so as soon as he helped all the people at Lawrence North he sped along the tracks, checked each person in the southbound train for Bivolo. No sign of him.

“Barry—Windsor South station! Bivolo is on camera!”

He sped off. It was on a different train line, meaning he must have transferred at Lawrence, and he was at the southern most tip of the subway system. Barry found him there, standing calmly amidst the chaos.

“What are you up to, Bivolo?!” he shouted, putting on the goggles Cisco had sent him off with to deflect an attack.
“Me, oh I’m just having a bit of fun. You might have a harder time with this bunch,” he motioned at
the chaos around him. “I used a different recipe this time.”

Barry whipped off, using the light board on the closest victims in the riot of subway passengers at the
station. It was a petite woman fighting with a man, but what she was saying wasn’t rage but
something else, screaming to give her his wallet, his keys, everything. He realized, with a start, that
the man wasn’t even affect, eyes normal but yelling—

“Get’er off me! Help!”

“I’m trying!” Barry hollered back. The light board did nothing to help and the man managed to
wrench back from the small woman’s grasp.

Barry felt his heartrate kick up. He looked around, whipping from one person to the next. Half of
them were trying to steal things form the other while innocent people attempted to defend
themselves; some people were ransacking an ATM, breaking into a small coffee shop at the station
and—greed. Bivolo had used a different color, the light board needed to be recalibrated to work on
them.

“What color did you use on them, Raider?” he shouted and Bivolo laughed. He came up right next to
him, lifting the man off his feet by his jacket.

“Un-do it.”

People were screaming and yelling around him, but the Rainbow Raider was all smiles. “Now
what’s in that for me, Flash?”

“What’s in this for you?” he snarled. As far as he could tell, it was all just chaos.

Over his comms, he distinctly heard Caitlin’s high and reedy voice—“Barry, we have a problem?”

He glared at Bivolo but dropped him, lifting one hand to his ear, “What?”

“Brighton Tower, near the Opera House—it’s under attack by Weather Wizard.”

Barry growled, “Mardon.” He’d robbed a bank a month ago and hit Barry with lightning again,
making it away with enough money to lay low for at least a few months, or so Barry had thought.
Either way, he’d make sure that didn’t happen this time.

“Oh, so it’s started,” Bivolo smiled and it clicked. This rioting along the train line, it was—

“A diversion!” Cisco called it in his ear, no doubt just for the film reference because Barry could hear
him chase it with a laugh before he continued, “Barry you’ve gotta’ get out there, whatever’s going
on at Brighton—”

“The police gala,” he breathed, and Bivolo smiled and shrugged, almost affecting an innocent
expression.

“Mardon—the police—no.” He felt his stomach drop. Joe was in trouble. But these people—

“Bivolo, let these people go, right now.”

“Oh don’t worry, they’ll calm down in a few minutes, Flash. I play by the rules, no innocent people
will die.”

He blinked—the rules? He didn’t have time to ask though. “Next time you won’t be so lucky,
Then Barry was gone, racing across the city. Brighton Tower wasn’t in the Brighton neighborhood but on the north edge of downtown. It wasn’t hard to spot though—as soon as Barry was close it stood out. A massive storm was overtrop, swirling, dark black and green clouds illuminated with cracks of lightning. He felt dread pool in his stomach, remembering similar clouds forming in the sky of Central City. He couldn’t think about that right now though. His family was in trouble.

“He’ll see.”

“Barry,” Cisco’s voice was in his ear, “go in up the East staircase. They’re on the twenty eighth floor. But be careful—the power is out in the building thanks to the lightning and it’s on a backup generator so we don’t have any visuals of what’s going on.”

He nodded and was off, seconds later bursting onto the right floor, down the hall to the conference room there, the one with a beautiful view of the entire city, only to see—

_That BASTARD!_

Len was there.

Barry cased the room in two seconds. It was total chaos. The first thing he noticed was that it was freezing, tables frozen, windows broken open, shards of glass everywhere. The storm overtrop to was raging just outside, hail flying sideways into the room, turning into ice and snow as it did, contributing to what looked like an indoor blizzard. Len was in his parka and Mardon was in a jacket and scarf, clearly planning for the freeze. People were running for the exits, some security and cops ushering them. Tables were overturned, cops dressed in formal suits for the gala behind them, some with guns pointed at Len and Mardon. Mardon had a man—oh shit it was the _mayor_—by one arm, a grin on his face and lightning in his other hand. Barry forgot the mayor was supposed to be at this thing.

Then he saw Joe and Eddie, hunched behind a frozen table, Joe with a gun and Eddie without one. Barry whirled on the spot and saw Iris at one of the exits—thank god—then ran to Joe and Eddie, slowing to a stop beside them.

He felt a jolt through the bleed—Len had seen him. Barry seethed but ignored it.

“What’s going on?” he asked them and they both whirled in shock at his sudden appearance. Joe recovered first.

“Snart and Mardon just appeared when the power went out. They got the ceremonial sword to the city and grabbed the mayor.”

“The sword—isn’t that just symbolic?” Why the hell would Len care about _that_?

“It was being presented to the new police commissioner to hold his upcoming tenure,” Eddie answered, “it’s jewel encrusted and worth over a million.”

“For real?” Who the hell thought it was a good idea to just have that out in the open?

He didn’t have time to stall though, Mardon and Len were making toward the door with the mayor hostage, clearly their getaway insurance, and Barry whipped out from behind the table, barely staving off shivering in the chill room.

“Captain Cold, this ends now!” he kept the vibrations to his voice, disguising himself in a room of
his peers.

“Flash,” Len had his Cold voice on, grinning. His goggles were up but Barry didn’t need to see his eyes to know how he was feeling. Excited. Nervous. Powerful. That’s what he was feeling earlier. “So nice of you to join us, at last. Get distracted on your way here?”

Barry zoomed closer, trying to get to Mardon, narrowly avoiding a cold blast as he did and—shit, didn’t Len know he would feel that if he hit Barry?! Lightning cracked in Weather Wizard’s hand near the mayor and Barry slowed to a halt. The door was behind the two Rogues and they were inching toward it.

“Didn’t figure you’d bringing lightning to a snowball fight, Mardon,” he jeered, angry.

“Didn’t you know? Ice causes lightning, Flash.”

Did it? The thought tugged at something inside him—ice and lightning, Cold and Flash. He pushed the thought aside, ground his teeth.

“Let the mayor go, Mardon!”

“No can do, kid,” Len answered for him, gun trained on Barry. Would he really take the shot? “He’s our escape plan, or didn’t you notice?”

He did. Barry sped up, about to try a new tactic, run at Len and get him down and out of the way, taking care of Mardon after. His perception sped up, body moving into a running position, everything around him slowing to an almost halt and he saw it—flying toward Len, straight at him, a few feet to his Barry’s own side and in front of him, away from him, moving faster than anything else in the room.

A bullet.

There was no sound, the bullet faster than the speed of it, and everything slowed even more as his heart rate increased to a new level, chasing after the bullet, trying to catch, a sick sense of déjà vu but this time it mattered so much more, it slipped through his fingers and he screamed NO, frequency too high and fast to be heard by anyone but himself, watching the bullet just behind him as he sped after it, trying and it—

It stopped.

Barry crashed into the immobile bullet, into a wall. No, not a wall, just cold.

The world resumed its normal speed.

“What the hell’ve you done, Cold?” He struggled to move, trapped in cold so thick his toes and fingers started to hurt, teeth a fraction from chattering, suit frosting over. Barry felt like ice.

“Like it, kid? Welcome to my cold field,” Len was grinning, using that goddamn voice and Barry felt excitement and pride, power—that was power—in the bleed. Len had to feel his anger, his gnashing teeth, the way he wanted to snarl and punch that smug look off his face.

“Goddammit Len—when I get out of this—” he couldn’t even vibrate his voice, snarled and moved, fast as he could but so slowly. Len narrowed his eyes and looked ready for a fight, all excitement to match Barry’s anger. Mardon was tugging the mayor back toward the door, Len a step behind them, but Barry was almost through, gaining some momentum when the mayor acted like an idiot and made a dash for it, away from the distracted Mardon.
There was a shout that caught both his and Len’s attention, snapping their heads to the side as Weather Wizard shot lightning after the man. *Fuck.* Barry burst forward, pushing, shouting his way out of the wall of cold using maximum speed, feeling slow like a normal person despite his abilities. In an instant he was back to his full speed, too fast and he slammed straight into Mardon.

Four cops rushed forward, shooting at Len and shielding the mayor. The man seemed alive and had narrowly avoided the lightning, and Len’s little wall of cold was ruined by the heat of Barry’s friction. He felt a tight, hot and angry twist in the bleed, a jolt of adrenaline, his only warning before Len blasted cold toward the cops shooting at him but Barry couldn’t help.

He was grappling with Mardon, on top still, pretty sure he’d broken some of Mardon’s ribs by slamming him back with his speed. But the man’s pain didn’t slow him long, and before Barry could cuff him, Mardon’s electric hands latched to Barry and he cried out.

*Fuck fuck FUCK—* this was *agony* each time in happened. Electricity coursing through his system—too much, too fast, white hot in his bones like knives, behind his eyelids like fury. His fingers convulsed as he gripped Mardon’s arms, trying to pry them off, teeth clenched in pain. He heard Len swear somewhere behind him.

He managed to surge back after Mardon ran out of juice, falling to the ground and groaning. For a second, he felt a wave of concern strong enough to cut through the pain but then it was gone and he heard Len speak to Mardon, “let’s move out—*now.*”

It took Barry a full few minutes to recover, Eddie rushing to his side to help him stand as cops swarmed forward, some chasing in the direction of Len and Mardon. They were stopped short by a new cold field though, obviously left by Len as part of their mayor-less retreat. Some of the police were turning toward him now and he mustered up the energy to blur out his face, ask in his vibrating voice—“is there anyone who needs to go to the hospital?”

He saw some of them—Ramirez, Thompson, some guy from another precinct he hadn’t met—exchange glances, but then Eddie was responding.

> “Some of our men got hit by Cold’s last gun blast. Nothing fatal but they could use medical attention. One of them is a personal friend of mine—Detective Joe West.”

Barry’s heart ratcheted up into his throat. He couldn't even spare a second to appreciate Eddie’s ability to help obscure his identity in front of the other officers. Instead, he moved in shock, pulled his arm off Eddie’s shoulder and whipped to the victims of the cold blast, finding Joe immediately, grasping his leg and hissing, sweating. His pant leg was half destroyed and there was frostbitten skin under it, his brow was lined with sweat and pain and Iris was at his side.

> “Help the others—I’ll be fine,” Joe ground out through his teeth, pain evident on every feature of his face and there was zero chance that Barry was leaving him there.

> “Dad, you need to go, *now.*” Iris looked at Barry and he nodded. He cast a quite glance around and saw no injuries any worse than Joe’s, nothing that couldn’t wait and he picked up his foster father and took him first, straight into the ER. Joe was still protesting when Barry put him down and looked faintly nauseated but Barry just shook his head.

> “You’re here now and I won’t worry. I’m gonna’ get them for this, Joe, I promise.”

> “I’da got ‘im myself if it wasn’t for that damn cold gun. Twice I almost had him—you saw.”

Barry’s throat closed off. Joe had fired that shot. He couldn’t respond. Instead he just zipped back to Brighton Tower, back for each of the other injured officers in turn as well, though an ambulance had finally arrived to pick up the last two frostbite victims.
Then he went to find Eddie, who was sitting with Iris alongside Captain Singh and his husband. Singh was coordinating and giving orders but sitting down and Barry noticed that he was injured too, likely from the initial chaos. He simmered with a low-burning rage. Mardon had done enough damage to Singh once before, and even if Barry had gone back in time to correct it, it still smarted. Both him and Joe injured again—the timeline really did like to correct itself with a vengeance, didn’t it?

“Is there any word on Cold and Weather Wizard?” he asked with blurred face and voice. Eddie was shaking his head and Singh was moving to stand. His husband, Rob, was looking at the Flash with wide, awed eyes and Barry briefly remembered that he’d once saved Rob from a fire.

“Flash—thank you. The mayor thanks you.”

“Just trying to help, Captain.”

It was tense ground, he knew—a police Captain and a vigilante shouldn’t really be talking so openly, surrounded by other cops.

“Snart and Mark Mardon—you’ve got experience with both them? A team followed them South but they changed cars and we lost them.”

He nodded. “Thank you, Captain. I’ll see what I can find.”

Barry whipped off again after a last nod to Eddie and Iris.

He found a nearby roof to act as a vantage point. “Cisco, Caitlin, any sign of them?”

Cisco responded, “security cameras show them entering a parking garage ten minutes ago in their getaway car. Five different vehicles have exited since then. Unless Cold is driving a minivan or he suddenly grew long blond hair, I’m guessing he’s switched to the white 4-door Ford Taurus.”

“Which way, Cisco?”

“The parking garage is by City Center Mall on the east side—”

Barry was off. When he got the garage he started canvassing the roads around there, finding nothing. Cisco informed him that they’d switched vehicles again if his guess was correct—how paranoid was Len?—somewhere more south already, closer to the cheaper side of the city, to the dive bars and the warehouse district. Where would Len go? With his paranoia, he might even switch cars again and Cisco still didn’t have a model for the newer one, tons of people leaving the mall when Len and Mark arrived because a movie was letting out. They were gone.

And then it occurred to him to stop and try something crazy.

“Guys, I’m turning off the comms for a minute.”

“Wha—”

“Why—”

Barry hit the switch on his chest and closed his eyes. Then he sought out the bleed. It almost made his stomach turn to do so. Len had hurt Joe, his family, had caused him to be hurt, had nearly kidnapped the mayor and was working with Mark Mardon of all people, someone who wanted nothing more than to kill Joe and Iris. But now he could feel him, tense—he felt it in his shoulders—still full of adrenaline—it mimicked his own, a buzz in the blood that was hard to describe—Len was
still pumped up but also other things now. Barry could feel more more anxiety that he could recognize—that tightness in his chest—and a definite amount of anger—the one emotion he knew best from Len, but it was steadier now, hotter. Barry swallowed and tried to focus. There was frustration, the tense jaw, clenched fists. Worry, that tight and acrid feeling at the base of his throat.

There was even a dull pain in his ribs, something Barry had noticed before but weeks ago, right after they were Bonded. Had Len strained himself? And then there was some jarring sense of shock, something indecipherable and Barry opened his eyes, feeling sick.

This wasn’t helping. He could feel Len, but that didn’t mean he could find him. And he needed to find him. He needed to give that asshole a piece of his mind and tell him that this, whatever they hell they were before, it was over. And if the bleed wouldn’t help him, he’d have to do this the old fashioned way. Barry set out at a run to explore every inch of the warehouse district.

Chapter End Notes

So… Len done fucked up. Again.

But okay before you go on to the next chapter, here's the thing: Len is Mr. Darcy. Anyone here read or watch Pride and Prejudice? First half of that story, you're like "helllll no, Elizabeth you do *not* want him, you tell him, girl. Do NOT marry Mr. Darcy." and then, like... damn. Mr. Darcy. Marry the shit out of Mr. Darcy, amirite?

So in the next chapter, when you absolutely HATE Len for what he does, remember that, okay? Because I know he's awful and a dick, but that's only because I have a tendency to want to look at a situation and go "how far can things bend before they break? and when they break, how do you fix them? can you?" so.... well, it gets better, okay?
Len dragged Mark out of the car. He was in worse shape now that the adrenaline was wearing off. Barry had done no small amount of damage—he’d live, but he was groaning as Len maneuvered him toward Shawna’s little makeshift medical room in the back of the workshop. They’d called her on their way to be ready for them.

“You boys can’t go one month without trouble?” she called, coming out of the back with a purpose in her stride before disappearing midstep, reappearing next to them in a blink. It was disorientating as hell.

“Baez, you know Mardon?”

“Mhmm,” she pursed her lips and Len saw Mark flash her an appropriately roguish smile.

“Long time no see, Peek-a-Boo.”

“Can it, Mardon.” She turned to Len. “How is he?”

“Maybe some busted ribs, dislocated shoulder, some bruising.”

She looked ready to roll her eyes but nodded, “need help dragging him over?”

“I’m fine—”

“We got it. Lead the way.”

She transported to the door of her med room and it was Len’s turn to refrain from rolling his eyes. Damn meta-human show-offs. He helped Mark over and dropped him on her exam table, helping him slide his dislocated shoulder out of his jacket before stepping back to let him deal with his shirt.

Shawna had a stethoscope and was readying some bandages, complimenting the x-ray machine Len had bought the place after the fight with the gorilla, apparently excited she would get to use it.
“You sure you know how to work that thing?” Mardon asked and she scoffed at him but Len ignored them. He could feel Barry suddenly, strong and clear, sharp and in focus. His anger was hot like lava, burning away in his stomach, adrenaline and more energy than Len had left, fists tight and Len clenched his own, tense and nervous.

A clatter of falling objects erupted into the room, sharp and loud, jarring his focus. Len blinked, not realizing he’d even closed his eyes and saw the tray of bandages and medical supplies on the ground. Shawna had a hand on Mark’s bare arm and they were staring at each other, eyes wide, neither even drawing a breath and—

It couldn’t be.

Shawna broke the silence first with a peel of laughter, joyous and full of melody, almost shrill with excitement. She had tears in her eyes. Len’s limbs felt like lead. Mark reached up with his good arm and pulled her in for a hug, she threw arms around his head, hugging the easiest to reach uninjured part of him, crying now through her laughter, through Mark’s laughter into her chest.

They were Soulmates. He’d never seen either of their SoulMarks but he’d witnessed an Initial Communion more than once—plenty of movies showed it, not to mention the rare occurrences it would just happen somewhere, coffee shops and Malls and once at his high school before he left. Everyone knew how to recognize that expression, that joy.

Len didn’t bother to say goodbye. He just left the room. They wouldn’t even notice him leaving, caught up in the formation of their new Bond. Their excited words followed him—

“All that time—”

“The pipeline and we never touched—”

“I can’t believe it’s you—”

“You’re so beautiful—”

“Mark—”

Len ground his teeth and stormed into the alleyway. He dropped his telltale parka and gun on the way out, not needing to be quite so conspicuous as he prowled around Central. Then the night air hit him and he was glad he’d left the jacket, still air warm with midsummer heat, regardless of how the sun was long since down. He forged on.

Pretty quick, Len realized he was still in pain. Lightning ripping through Barry’s system was a shock to his own—maybe not totally undeserved, he acknowledged. The nature of the bleed meant things like that wouldn’t typically be shared, or if felt it would be just a tingle at the edge of perception. This was more than just a fucking tingle. His whole body had clenched, every muscle tight, ribs smarting where they were still in the final stages of healing. After the initial aftershocks, he could tell Barry had shaken it off like it was nothing. Len could still taste blood.

He walked faster to dislodge the remembered sensation, trying not to think too much about how angry Barry felt. For once, Len almost wished he still smoked but he’d never enjoyed it. A drink would be nice right about now though. He was turning toward one of his usual haunts, when it struck him. When he struck Len.

Red lightning had streaked into the alley faster than he could blink, slamming Len up against a wall hard enough that his ribs smarted again. He growled, disoriented even as Barry stepped back and pushed his cowl down, face a mask of rage, shouting as soon as he slowed enough to speak.
“HOW COULD YOU?!”

“What is wrong with you, Len?”

“I thought we had an understanding about this!” Len stepped away from the wall, his own anger flaring to the surface.

“You could have got me killed, my family killed! You almost got killed!”

He knew, he fucking knew. Joe West was not supposed to get hurt, least of all by him.

“The cold field—”

“That’s another thing! What did you do to your gun?”

Len took a breath, willing himself to stay calm and cool. “Fun surprise, huh? I had it modd’ed specially for you, Barry. Puts us on a more even footing.”

“Is that what you’re calling it? That thing stopped me from getting to Mardon!”

That was kind of the point. “Don’t worry about Mardon, he’s a Rogue now, he won’t be killing any innocent people so long as he’s with us.”

“Not killing? Is that the ‘rule’ that Bivolo was talking about? You made rules for the Rogues to follow and you think I’ll suddenly be okay with the fact that you steal things and hurt people? That you team up with someone who wants nothing more than to kill and hurt my family? You really think I’ll be okay with that, Len?”

“Barry—”

“Joe is hurt Len. He’s hurt because of your gun. Eddie and Iris could’ve gotten hurt and for what?! A stupid sword? This isn’t a game—it’s my life!”

It wasn’t about the sword. It was about proving the strength of the Rogues, taking a trophy from a room of cops, humiliating their precious and poisonous institution. For Mardon, as far he could tell, it was about stuffing it in Joe West’s face, since he was supposed to receive some service award that night.

“Why do you think I needed to be there?” he snapped. “I talked Mardon down from killing West, talked him down from kidnapping the man’s daughter, focused him on the mayor—” he hadn’t planned to tell any of that to Barry, but the plan had long since gone off.

“THAT DOESN’T MAKE IT OKAY!”

His anger wasn’t like Len’s—not like a pot always on the burner, waiting to boil over then simmer down. It was like a volcano, erupting without warning, explosive and hot.

“I tried, kid! I set the situation so that Mardon wouldn’t get a shot at West. And I'm sorry,” he ground it out, almost surprised it was true, “that he got hurt. That wasn’t supposed to happen—”

“It better not have been—”

“It wasn’t,” he snapped.
“But that still doesn’t make it okay, Len.” He was more calm now at least, face relaxing from harsh lines to something more open, if angry and pained. “What about all the other innocent people who got caught up in your plan? About the people, the damage, the security and—d’you know how many messes around the city I had to clean up thanks to Bivolo?”

Was Barry ever going to get it?

“No one died, no fatal wounds, low collateral damage all around. I played according to your rules —” he punctuated the statement by pointing at Barry, “and I made everyone else do the same if they want in on this game. I didn’t plan for anyone you cared about to be hurt but I also made sure my blast wouldn’t kill him when he was about to shoot Mardon. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Barry was shaking his head, expression incredulous, disgusted.

“This isn’t about hurting me, Len. It’s about hurting innocent people.”

“I just said—”

“No one got hurt this time—but what about next time? I thought you were a master thief, in and out before anyone even noticed. This Rogue business—teaming up with people like Mardon, pissing off the cops, I mean first that painting just to piss of the cops and then the fight with me in the streets, then the casino, and now this?”

Len noticed he didn’t mention the one time Barry had tried working with him. Probably for the best he didn’t bring it up either.

“I’ve upped my game—you changed the rules and now I—”

“It’s not a game! Why do you not get that? You talk about Central like you love it and then you go and—”

“If you’re asking me to change who I am—”

“I’m asking you to CARE!” Barry sped forward, fist slammed so hard into the wall it crumbled in, concave under his fist, right next to Len’s head. Adrenaline—that quick surge of instinctual fear went through him, pressed between the Flash and a brick wall, caged by Barry’s anger. There was literal lightning flashing in his eyes, mesmerizing and terrifying at once. But then Barry dropped his fist, and his next words were filled with more bitterness than even the bleed could transfer.

“You know, Len, when I was a kid I was afraid of the dark. Before my mom died, she told me that I wasn’t afraid of the dark, I was afraid of being alone in the dark. After she died, it came back—that fear—but whenever I was scared I used to skim my fingers over my Mark and think that even if I hadn’t met my Soulmate yet, they were out there, and I wasn’t alone. But I was wrong.”

It was like a knife to the gut, hot and piercing. Len knew what came next.

“Now I know you, Cold, and I know for sure. You told me before you were a criminal and a liar, that you hurt people. When we were Bonded I thought maybe you could change, maybe you’d care—not just about me but about being a good person. But I see now that’s just not part of who you are. I’m not afraid of the dark anymore, and I’m not afraid of being alone either. I’m done with this, with us.”

“Barry,” he reached forward, wanting to console, wanting to touch him and fix this, wanting to hold him because goddammit, Barry was his Soulmate and he was in pain.
Len didn’t see it coming. Barry slammed him back against the wall with a hand on his neck—“ackh”—the sound was choked off, out of him. He could hardly breath and Barry’s eyes were fury and fire. The kid was strong, too strong, Len’s feet were barely brushing ground and his body flooded with visceral and instinctive panic, hands snapping to Barry’s gloved forearm.

The bleed was loud, roaring with emotions, their rage, disbelief, fear and horror washing up against one another’s. Barry’s face screwed up and he snapped his hand back but Len could still feel its imprint. He heaved in a breath.

“Barry—”

“Don’t, Cold. You want to fight then I’ll fight. You hurt my family, design a special weapon to slow me, hurt me, and think I won’t retaliate? I will. You don’t get to have it both ways—don’t get to hurt me then hold me.”

“I didn’t do it to hurt—” he coughed, throat rough.

“Save it,” Barry snarled.

“Goddammit, kid, listen to yourself. You’re the one who said we have to work on this thing—the one who said ‘soon’ like we were getting somewhere! This was bound to happen eventually, just calm down and listen to me.”

He was all anger and hard edges, emotions invading Len’s perception. “Soon? Soon?! A month of this, Len—gifts and hand holding and your goddamn longing. Your hands on me each morning when I touch myself.” His face was twisting up and he pressed fully into Len’s space, eyes not leaving his gaze. “You were right—I hate this.”

Len’s throat tightened, almost indescribable the choked feeling welling up and then—

Barry snapped.

In the space of a blink he pressed his whole body against Len’s, slamming him hard against the wall, pinning him there and not waiting for him to recover. Barry’s mouth was on his—hard and angry, bruising intensity. It wasn’t passion but desperation—punishing and powerful, helpless. God, this close, touching like this, Barry’s emotions screaming at him inside his own head—Barry felt so fucking helpless. His kiss didn’t forgive, took without offering, sharp. Their tongues met and pressed against one another, deep in one other’s mouths, bodies too close, faces pressed together, like a fraction of space between them was too much. It was intoxicating—sudden, too fast, hot, wild and intense.

Barry wrenched his mouth away, back and Len could feel his wrath through the bleed. “Is this what you want, Len? Is it?” his voice was rough and raw but fuck it sounded good. There was no right answer to that question, no level of honesty that would work so he pulled Barry in for another kiss, putting feeling into words unsaid. He tried to make it gentler, softer, everything he did want but Barry had no patience for it, made it harder in an instant, demanding and Len followed suit.

It was hot in a way that matched his out of control heartbeat. Barry’s hands pushed up his sweater and Len stripped out of it, pulling it overhead. He was still in a tee, shivering against the sudden chill but uncaring, hands finding the other’s jaw and neck then the zipper there, pulling on it, peeling away the fabric, stripping it away from Barry’s skin so he could feel. The leaner man shimmied out of it and was bare under it, under Len’s fingers.

Then Barry’s hands were on Len again, around his waist, pulling their bodies together. Len reached
for the other’s hair and pulled, deepening the kiss, tongue deep in Barry’s mouth. Heat spread through the bleed, heady and intense, and he twisted his hand in the hair, Barry moaning into the kiss, hard and pressing his hips up into Len’s, into his equally stiff length, constrained by his tight pants. His other hand was on Barry’s neck and shoulder, pulling him close, holding onto the soft skin there.

Barry bit his lip and Len peeled back to gasp before he dived back in, grip in Barry’s hair pulling his head back to kiss his neck, bite it, suck a bruise to it. It felt like pain and it felt like heaven in the bleed. Barry grabbed Len’s shoulders and slammed them back again against the wall harder, returned to devouring his mouth with kisses, body trembling with fury and passion, starting to shake, to vibrate, in Len’s arms. Barry pulled his hands down, one latching to Len’s waist while the other slid it up his shirt and pressed to his Mark.

_Fuck._ It was electrifying. He matched the movement, skimming his free hand down from Barry’s neck to his torso, sliding over the Mark and—_holy hell._

He could feel Barry’s hands on his own waist, his own Mark – could feel Len’s hands on his bare skin – could feel their hard lengths pressed together – could feel how hard he was pressing his hips into Len’s – could feel where Barry bit his lip – could feel where he bit Len’s lip – could feel the hickey he left and the cool breeze over it – could feel his hickey through Len’s perception, could feel him focus on it – could feel his hand in Barry’s hair and how that felt against his scalp – could feel himself gasp against his lips – could feel himself shudder under his fingers – could feel his _everything_ – it was too much – too much – he craved it – he hated how good it felt – he ached so deep – he made him whole and breathless and it _hurt_ – he _wanted_ –

They both broke at the same time, hands snapping away.

Barry stepped back, breathing hard. “That—that was…” He inhaled, exhaled.

“Yeah—it was.” Putting words to it seemed pointless.

They took a moment, breathing, ragged and fazed. Barry leaned against the wall next to Len to catch his breath, maybe to just hold himself up. Len was having trouble standing without the support after that.

“I shouldn’t’ve done that,” Barry managed, after a minute.

“Not gonna’ complain.” Quite the opposite. His breath was still uneven.

“This isn’t what I—”

“I know.” He did. He fucking knew. A few minutes ago they were fighting. An hour ago Mardon was shooting Barry with lightning and Len was icing him, blasting West. This isn’t what Barry came here for. He could feel that much, a minute ago.

“I should go.”

“Or you could stay.” Regret was already taking over. He tasted his own and Barry’s through the bleed. And Barry pushed himself off the wall, shaking his head.

“I can’t.”

Len followed him, a foot behind, and grabbed his arm to stop him. “Why not?” He had to try. “We can make this work—Soulmates and nemesis, we—”
“It’s over!” Barry turned back to him with a snarl. “I’m done, Len—Cold. I’m done trying to make it work. I don’t care if I have to feel every moment of every one of your days, I am not letting you ruin my happiness, hurt my friends or my family. I don’t know what you think love is, but I can promise you, you’re wrong about it.”

Len’s throat unstuck long enough to say, “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“Yeah well you should have thought of that you planned a heist that made you do exactly that.”

He dropped his arms and said nothing. Barry just cast him a last angry and upset look before he sped away with lightning, uninterrupted this time.

Later, home and laying in his bed, Len’s blood was still boiling, aching with arousal from kissing Barry. He felt it through the bleed too, unsure what to do about it, focusing on the incoming sensations and trying to figure out what Barry was feeling, how he could fix this. The tightness in the kid’s gut didn’t last long; it was chased by a pain in his finger, the taste of blood in his mouth. Barry was biting his finger, hard enough to bleed, to help him cool down. Fuck. Len did the same.

**********

You can’t run forever, Barry. Meet me at Chubbuck and we’ll *talk*

Leave me alone

Grow up and come meet me

No response. Fucking child. Len had spent the better part of two weeks trying to be patient before he contacted Barry. He reigned in his desire to text, call, to beat a path to his door. He forced himself to be patient, and then more patient, waited five more days after those two weeks, after he felt like he might go insane, and only then texted Barry. He received that pointed response in return.

Len waited an hour on the park bench anyway, not actually hopeful but out of options. Then he went to the gym and tried to work out some of his slowly-increasing tension. It didn’t help. Nothing helped—not the gym, not working on the Rogues den, not even goddamn meditating, which just led him to accidentally focus in on the bleed.

That was another mess altogether. Since the fight with Mardon, Len hadn’t felt Barry once while touching himself, no phantom hands on him. He hadn’t realized how much he would miss it. And Len wasn’t a monster, when Barry was touching himself he let it be, despite wanting to join in just to share something. But it was obvious Barry didn’t want him to, even if his radio silence hadn’t been enough of a hint. At first Barry had only touched himself at odd hours when Len was in the middle of something anyway, and it hadn’t been hard to figure out he was hoping to get that time alone. So Len didn’t jump in on that, wouldn’t unless he was invited, but it just added to his tension.

Then, of course, there was the frustration that was Mark and Shawna. Len was happy for them, he really was. He just wished they would take their happiness out of his face and far away. As their Matemaker, they both felt like he was somehow their friend now, talking to him about the other at the rare instances they weren’t joined at the hip. They were in the bar each day for lunch, throwing fries at one another, and in the workshop most days too, Mark promising and teasing Shawna about all the cute things he was going to steal for her—diamonds, pearls, a golden telescope, whatever. They were absolutely adorable. He hated it.
He and Hartley would exchange a long-suffering roll of the eyes whenever Mark and Shawna’s incessant flirting would erupt in a distracting peel of laughter or a we-don’t-care-who-sees make out session, as often as not ending in them heading back to one of their respective apartments. If only everyone could be so lucky in their Bonds.

In the past few days, Len had even taken to avoiding his own Rogues den, getting work done around the house, having lunches with Lisa. She was dating Roscoe again, something that annoyed Len to no end, but he wasn’t about to dictate her choices. If she wanted to date married men, far be it from him to tell her otherwise. At the very least, it was a distraction from her being concerned about him and Barry, which she was. He didn’t let on that Barry wasn’t talking to him though, as much as he knew she could tell he was hiding something. It wouldn’t help matters if she strolled into STAR Labs to rip him a new one.

To keep her distracted though, and because he typically worked with a crew, he let her help out with what was certainly a bad idea and a desperate gamble. He resorted to pulling a heist just to get Barry alone, something public enough and easy enough to get his attention and not require much planning. It was a piece of tech from Mercury Labs that sounded interesting, on transport to their annual open house night to raise donations. Between him and Lisa, they made away too easily with the goods—no sign of the Flash. It was late by the time they were done and Lisa went off to meet up with Roscoe while Len brought it back to their Rogues den.

Hartley was beating himself at chess when Len returned.

“Piper,” Len acknowledged, walking past him to drop his gear—parka and gun, holster.

“How was your date with the Flash?” Hartley asked and Len let out a frustrated sound. If only he knew.

“That good, huh—and here I thought the Flash loved to dance.”

“What do you know about the Flash?” He kept his voice frosty, still annoyed at Hartley, at Barry, at the situation.

“I know he looks good in leather.”

Len managed not to laugh, but felt himself relax. He almost felt that Hartley and Barry would get along—both of them with a cocky sense of humor and matching grins. Then he lifted up the piece of equipment and walked over to Hartley, watching him take out a white rook with a black bishop.

“You have any use for something like this?”

Hart blinked up owlishly at him behind his glasses. “With—is that the neural decoupling prototype? From Mercury? How did you—you stole this?”

Len felt a second of hesitation, which was unlike him but Barry’s expression from their first time on the bench flashed before his eyes, refusing a gift. Hartley wasn’t refusing though, he was reverent, slowly lifting it out of Len’s grasp and a grin spreading on his face.

“You have any use for something like this?”

Hart blinked up owlishly at him behind his glasses. “With—is that the neural decoupling prototype? From Mercury? How did you—you stole this?”

Len felt a second of hesitation, which was unlike him but Barry’s expression from their first time on the bench flashed before his eyes, refusing a gift. Hartley wasn’t refusing though, he was reverent, slowly lifting it out of Len’s grasp and a grin spreading on his face.

“Do you realize what we could do with this? I might need some equipment but I can only imagine it’s capacity.” Then he looked up, away from the object and at Len, “can I really work on this?”

Len nodded and agreed, just glad someone appreciated his gifts. Hartley seemed genuinely happy, tumbling out a “thank you!” before he—

He kissed Len.
For a moment, he was too shocked to kiss back. Then Hartley was retreating, apologizing, clearly afraid. That wouldn’t do. Len stepped forward, Hartley’s words cutting off, and he plucked the odd metal device from Hart’s nimble hands. Then he set it on the chess board, leaning around the younger man to do it, feeling the kid’s nervous breathing on the side of his neck as he did.

“If you’re going to punch me, I’d prefer—”

“I’m not.” Len stood, inches between them, and reached up with both hands to cup Hartley’s face. “I was going to kiss you without anything in the way.”

“Oh.”

Len arched an eyebrow, trying not to be too amused.

“I mean, yes.”

Len kissed him, dragging his hands back, into Hartley’s hair to pull his head forward and the kid wasted no time in licking into his mouth. Impatient but hot, Len wouldn't complain. They were all hands in an a matter of minutes, kissing, licking, sucking on Hartley’s neck to hear him gasp, squeezing his cute ass. Hartley gave as good and he got, running his hands under Len’s shirt, pushing it up over his head and gasping at his tattoos, mouth trailing kisses over his chest while his hands found somewhere lower to be.

It was a bad idea. It was such a bad idea and he knew it. Len knew he needed something in his life that wasn’t a one night stand, knew he was just gonna’ think about Barry’s face the whole time, knew he was just lonely and bitter and using Hartley. But it was hard to care right then, because Barry didn’t want him, had broken off any semblance of contact and Hartley did. And fuck, Hart was using him too, they were in this together and might as well commiserate.

So commiserate he did, letting the kid push him back against one of the tables, all passion in his eyes, hands on Len’s belt buckle. He started to ask and couldn't even finish the question before Len told him that the condoms were in the med room, bottom drawer of the desk. Hartley winked and whirled to grab them while Len dropped his phone and wallet on the table, taking out his cock to stroke it, eager to feel something that wasn’t just his own hand.

Hartley returned fast and wasted no time. He dropped to his knees and rolled the condom on, deft hands knowing exactly what he was doing. It sent a thrill up Len’s spine to see him there, confident and charming even on his knees, glasses on the table now, not obstructing his pretty face, his eager eyes.

Then he started in, liking and sucking, wrapping his lips around the tip then moving down from there, taking more and more of Len, hand sliding along the rest in time with his mouth. He was fucking good at it, in tune with every sharp exhale of Len’s, figuring out exactly how much pressure to give him, what he liked. Len was enjoying the hell out of it, distracted by the feel, ignoring any other sensations until a sharp and sudden jolt through the bleed slammed into his perception.

On the table beside him, Len’s cellphone started to vibrate. He blinked open his eyes and glanced at—Barry’s number. He had to be kidding. Hartley paused for a second, pulled back but kept stroking.

“You wanna’ get that?”

“No.” He reached over and hit ‘ignore.’ Hartley smirked and resumed and Len sighed and carded a hand into his hair. It was soft like Barry’s, long enough for him to imagine—

The phone started buzzing again. On the third time, insistent, he growled and snapped it up to his
“You had bet—”

“What the HELL is wrong with you?” Barry’s voice was loud and livid.

Hart looked up and Len nodded for him to keep going. He smirked, cheeky, and sucked on the tip.

“What’s wrong is you’re not interested—you don’t get to decide who I—ah—sleep with, kid. I’m fucking tired of this cold shoulder game and I’m horny—” Hartley swirled his tongue and he heard Barry choke out a strangled sound on the other end of the line. Oh shit.

“You can feel that?”

“Stop,” the voice pleaded in his ear, thick and full with emotion, it sounded half like a sob and fuck—Len gripped the hair on Hartley’s head too tight. He glanced up at Len even he relaxed his grip, soothing through the strands. Then he started to take Len deeper. Cheeky fucker. He gasped and heard Barry do the same. Fuck, Hartley was good at this.

“He looks like you, you know,” he managed, in between breaths.

“Why are you doing this, Len?” Barry sounded like he’d been crying. Len tried to suppress whatever that was doing to his gut.

“Whad’you want me to do, kid—be celibate? Or are you volunteering?”

There was an intake of breath then silence on the other end of the line.

“I didn’t think so.”

He dropped the phone back on the table and slid his fingers over the soft skin of Hartley’s face, feeling the swell of his cock against a hollowed out cheek. There were no more interruptions and he wished he could enjoy being relieved about that. Instead, he just felt hollow—empty and angry, full of anguish that didn’t belong to him, burning in his throat.

Len’s eyes almost rolled back at what Hart did with his tongue then, focusing on that instead of on the continued churning of angst in the bleed.

“Sorry about the—ah—interruption, Hart.” He felt he should apologize at least, it being rude on a new level to take a call while getting his cock sucked. Hartley pulled back and Len thought he was going to reply, but instead he swirled his tongue there, flicked the slit at the tip, and then was swallowing him down again, further until Len’s cock hit the back of his throat and further than that, deeper and—oh fuck, Hartley was deep-throating him. God, how long had it been since someone had done this for him, swallowed him to the base, eagerly, skilled and steady, taking the whole not-inconsiderable length of Len. He groaned felt Hart’s throat constrict around him, so so tight, hot, slick, fuck.

It didn’t take long after that, the kid pulling back for air then going deep again, and almost too soon he was coming, hard and fast. He wanted to picture Barry’s moss green eyes and his soft hair under his fingers, wanted for just one second to pretend. But he couldn’t, not knowing Barry didn’t want him.

He shuddered out his aftershocks and Hartley pulled back. The kid was polite enough to deal with the condom and Len was tucking himself back in when he felt it—his stomach clenching sharp and hard, in pain. Barry’s stomach. He could taste it a second later, the phantom of bile and vomit. Barry
had just thrown up.

Len swallowed. *Fuck*.

In for a penny, in for a—“I think it’s time to get you off, Hart.”

AWESOME fanart from the lovely [Veganpunkers](http) / [Bealeciphers](http):
Welp. I suppose I should ready myself for things to be thrown violently in my direction (50% of the blame goes to ColdFlashCW!).

In all seriousness though, obviously this has some very fucked up implications thanks to the nature of Barry and Len’s bleed. There’s going to be more on that later, Barry’s perspective of what happened here, etc., but it won’t be in the next chapter. SO, in the meantime, if you’re distraught by this, feel free to ask in the comments or on my tumblr
ColdToMyFlash and I can give you some spoilers/perspective on that.

Other than that, I’m gonna’ you guys to take a leap of faith and try to trust me (I know, right now, probably not feeling like it?). For all this is looking like Len/Hartley fic right now, he and Barry will sort things out eventually, and I will do my very best to make it emotionally satisfying as it unfolds. Next up is Hartley’s POV …
“How is he?” Barry had gone straight to the hospital after leaving Len in that alleyway, sparing time only to drop off his suit at STAR Labs. Caitlin and Cisco had had a minor freak out about the comms being off for so long, but he told them he’d explain later and was off to visit Joe. He’d have to come up with some excuse about that, still.

“M’fine,” Joe answered, laying on the bed in a hospital gown. Iris was sitting on the side of his bed, Eddie in a chair by the door.

“He’s not fine,” Iris intoned instead, casting her father a look and it was enough to make Barry almost smile. Iris would always have that effect on him, he was sure. “He’s on antibiotics and painkillers, and it’s still gonna’ take a few weeks for his leg to be back at 100%.”

“If it ever is,” Eddie stood up from his chair, coming over to stand next to Barry. “Cold’s gun packs a punch. The doctor said he has third degree frostbite. They’ve been rewarming the skin,” he motioned to the blankets overtop some device on Joe’s legs, “but tissue damage isn’t uncommon with this sort of thing.”

Barry’s throat felt stuck but Joe was waving his hand and shaking his head. “It’s fine. Barry got me here in plenty of time, before the tissue started to die. The doctor said I should make a full recovery.”

Oh thank god.

“The doctor also said you need rest, Dad,” Iris had a smile in her voice though, so Barry trusted that things really weren’t the grim for Joe’s leg after all.

“I’m just glad you’re okay, Joe.” Barry stepped closer, smile wan but still there. He’d made the right choice leaving Cold behind—this was his family, and he didn’t side with people who hurt his family.

“Thanks to you, Barr. Did you get ‘em?”

He swallowed. “I tried. They switched cars a few times and Cisco lost them in the security footage at the mall. I think they’re holed up in the warehouse district somewhere—I canvassed as much of it as I could before coming here.”

Joe nodded, tired smile. “I know how slippery that snake can be. Next time.”

A nurse came in then, reminding them all that Joe needed rest, and Joe shooed Iris away when she announced she was going to stay the night. “Nuh uh. You go home and get your own rest. It’s just a leg ‘n I’ve got more pain killers than I know what’t do with.”

After saying their goodbyes to Joe, Eddie offered Barry a ride home, which he casually declined. He
felt a lot more like running. Before they parted, Iris told him they had to have lunch soon, having
seen his text, and they made a plan for the following week. He’d almost forgotten about it, but Eddie
raised his eyebrows and gave Barry a significant look and he remembered that there was something
apparently off about Iris too, and he’d agreed to ask about it. He nodded to both of them before
leaving, feeling like with or without Len in his life, the house of cards around him was starting to get
shaky.

**********

Seeing Caitlin and Cisco was hard the next time he was at STAR Labs. His only excuse for turning
off the comms was that he’d been so angry about Joe getting hurt that he didn’t want a voice of
reason in his ear in case he caught up with Cold. Even a thin lie, it was better than telling them he’d
given a cheap attempt at Bond-based remote sensing—which was a real thing, but so rare it probably
wasn’t worth bothering to try. Still, with his bleed it was hard to guess what would and wouldn’t
work.

And his bleed was another thing. Since leaving the other standing in the alleyway, Barry had
alternated between suppressing it and ignoring it, focusing his attention elsewhere. Len—Cold,
dammit, his name was Cold—was on edge, angry, sad, and hurt, but Barry couldn’t let himself feel
guilty. Cold didn’t feel guilt about it, not that Barry could sense, so why should he? It only made him
wonder if he was the only one in this Bond with a conscience, if Cold really was a psychopath
incapable of remorse.

It would almost be easier to believe it was true, to write him off entirely, but as soon as he came
close, part of him would remember the concern he felt in the bleed when he almost fainted outside
STAR labs, the way Len wrapped an arm around him and held his hand when the bleed was too
much on that bench, the way he smiled over breakfast at the diner, the way he’d held back afterward,
the way he laughed on the phone, the way he tried.

Part of Barry hated that most of him missed the other man. Most of him wished that the Len he saw
in those brief snippets was the real thing, and that Cold was just some bad dream, so that he could
have the man who made him feel nervous and safe at the same time without the man who hurt his
family and led around a gang of criminals. Most of him wished Len would make up for this, that Len
would swoop in with some gesture that would change everything, that he’d save a bus full of kids or
some other heriocis, that he’d admit to his crimes and turn himself in, that he’d do anything that
wasn’t selfish, anything that Barry could take as a gesture he cared.

Mostly, he tried not to think about ‘most of him.’

“All done for the night, Barr?”

Barry sped back into the lab, dropping off his suit after the rounds. He dropped into a chair to reply
to Cisco.

“Looks like it. I’m gonna’ drop in and see Joe before I head home tonight.”

“Awesome. Give him my regards, yeah? Cold really did a number on his leg?”

Barry’s face twisted into a scowl.

“Awww man, sorry to remind you. We’ll get Cold—or not, you know, since the identity thing, but hey,
no worries. One day. And hey—my brother’s hand healed just fine. Joe’s gonna’ be great!”

“The doctor said he’ll make a full recovery.” Barry wished he could feel happier about it right now; he knew he was coming off as a miserable ass, thinking about Len.

“Hey Barry?” Caitlin chimed in. “Before you go, d’you think I could get a blood sample from you? I was hoping to run some tests on your healing factor, see if I can isolate anything that might help in the biomedical research world? I’m considering new avenues for research.”

“Oh, uh, sure?”

Cisco bade them farewell as he followed Caitlin to her office where she kept all manner of medical supplies. He sat down and rolled up his sleeve while she extracted a few vials, the process being one that they were both used to by now. It was only after she set the vials down on her desk that she spoke again, turning to face him as he stood.

“Are you okay, Barry? I know you’ve been off, ever since the night of the police gala.”

“Yeah I’m… it’s fine.”

“You know, I know that Captain Cold crashing that event was pretty awful, but at least nobody got hurt?”

He blinked, suddenly tense. “I… small favors, I guess?”

She nodded and looked up at him, earnest. “Or your influence?”

He felt his chest tighten. Did she know? But then she continued, “I mean, you did get him to agree not to kill people. Who knows where he might go, next, with a little help from the right people.”

Barry knew he was too tense, grimacing, something in his chest palpitating painfully. “He also agreed not to hurt my family. Not exactly the man of his word he claimed to be.”

She looked down and reached for his hand, gave it a quick squeeze. “I’m sorry. I know you… I know you were starting to trust him.”

“What makes you say that?”

He was being too abrupt and he knew it—had stepped back, dropped her hand, all suspicion. Caitlin was just trying to be nice and he was acting like an asshole. But he couldn’t stop. Something defensive, protective and primordial was lurching around inside him.

“I just mean—aft the museum, him helping fight Grodd, get everyone to safety, coming here.”

He exhaled, trying to regain his cool, running a hand through his hair. “Right. Of course. But helping me with Grodd, saving the museum curator, that doesn’t mean he has any excuse for what he did at the police gala.”

“I… he shot to defend himself. That much was evident from the reports.”

“That doesn’t matter! He shouldn’t have been there in the first place—not with Mardon! He almost got Joe killed!”

“But he didn’t. And maybe… if Weather Wizard was going to go after Joe anyway, at least now maybe he’s got it out of his system?”
“Why are you defending Cold?”

“I’m not defending Cold, Barry.”

He splayed his arms and hitched his shoulders in inquisition.

“I—” She opened her mouth and closed it, expression pinched. Then she turned and walked to her table, fingers skimming over the blood samples as she carefully selected her words. “I’m not defending his actions. I just know that you trusted him, that you’re upset because you want to believe the best in people, right? I’m just trying to have a little faith. After everything that happened with Ronnie, I try to see more in people.”

“Ronnie was affected by the particle accelerator and not in control of his own body. L—Cold is a violent criminal.”

“I… when he kidnapped me, with Mick Rory, he wouldn’t let Rory hurt me. Not even a little. Cold was very… congenial, about it all. Apologized for the ‘necessity of this measure, but I play to what works, doc.’” She turned to him and mimicked Len’s voice, maybe trying to coax a smile from him, but his laugh sounded jagged even to his own ears.

“Right, kidnapping. Perfect. How could I have ever trusted him even for a second? After everything he’s done—not just to Joe but to you and Cisco too.”

She sighed. “I don’t know what to tell you, Barry… you deserve to be happy.”

He swallowed. Why was this about him? “He deserves to be in prison.”

“No one expects you to put your—to put him behind bars, Barry.”

He felt his heart stop for a moment, staring at Caitlin as she leaned against the table behind her. She winced, “Barry—”

“Cait—”

She bit her lip and he couldn’t, for just one second he couldn’t hide it.

“I just wish he was a good person, Caitlin. That he actually cared—that he wouldn’t treat this like some game and me like some prize! Is that so much to ask?” His eyes were stinging, his voice was loud raw and shit shit shit. He pressed his palms into his eyes and inhaled, and when he dropped them again, opened his eyes, Caitlin was there in front of him, expression open with concern, one hand on his arm.

“I… there are things in life we don’t get to pick, Barry. Cap—Leonard Snart—he’s one of them. But sometimes things aren’t what they seem. I know that he can’t be all bad if he’s your—if you trust him. If he means something to you.”

He sniffed and then hugged her, briefly, pulling back with a shaky breath. “I can’t believe you’re the one being optimistic.”

She smiled, a little thinly but enough to make him feel better. “Not in my nature, I know. But it helps when you have friends that you can talk to. I won’t press, I really won’t, but you know that Cisco and me are always here for you? You can talk to us about this, or anything. Iris and Felicity too. She called the other day and even she knows you’re off, all the way from Starling City.”

He was way too transparent and he knew it. He smiled anyway though, and then almost laughed at
imagining what Oliver would say about all this. It would be one for the ages. At least he could laugh now though, thanks to Caitlin. “I’ll give her a call… I’ve got to go see Joe, I’ll catch you later?”

She hugged him once more before he left.

***********

Lunch with Iris turned into meeting her after work on Tuesday instead, because she didn’t want to worry about heading back to work after. Although he really hadn’t seen her in a while, that did set off the alarm bells in his mind when he’d seen her text. Whatever was going on wasn’t just in Eddie’s mind if she was making plans to talk for a while.

He met her at Jitters with a sense of looming trepidation. Part of him had debated, on more than one occasion, of telling her about Len. He’d been gearing up to do it before the gala night, before Joe was hurt. Now it seemed crazy—he’d sworn off Len and that was that, no reason to get his family involved. But he also knew that she would want to know, regardless of everything else. They were best friends and he’d sworn not to lie to her again, not about anything that mattered.

But when she suggested getting their coffees to go and taking a walk, any residual thoughts about telling her dissipated. Iris never took her coffee to go if she had time to sit and enjoy it instead. Then she got decaf and he was pretty sure the sky was falling.

After a few minutes, when she didn’t open up, he couldn't hold it in any longer.

“So are you gonna’ tell me what’s going on? Because the Iris West I know doesn’t leave Jitters without at least an extra shot of espresso and two extra pumps of caramel syrup.”

She laughed but looked down and looped her arm in his, hair hiding her face from him as they strolled along the walking paths that lead vaguely in the direction of the museum. “A girl can’t have decaf without an indictment?”

“Is this about Joe? I just saw him this morning and the doctor said he’s good to go home by tomorrow. He’ll be on light duty at the precinct until his physio is—”

“It’s not about dad.” Her voice was small and he stopped walking, forcing her to stop too and look at him. His heart hurt hearing her like that.

“Iris, what—”

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes and he stopped talking, confused, hand clenching around his coffee cup.

“Barry I need your advice,” she whispered.

“Anything.”

“I need…” she sniffed, and looked down, tears falling and he was about to step forward, about to hug her and then, with a sob she spoke, like the words were being ripped out of her, “I’m pregnant.”

His heart stopped. And then sped up. And then he was even more confused—and elated and worried and excited and—wow. Iris had always wanted to be a mother, she was with her Soulmate, they
were happy and employed and—“Iris, that’s… why are you so—are you okay?”

She lurched forward and squeezed him so tight he almost couldn't breath, crying into his shoulder as he stroked her hair. He hated this. He hated when people he loved were in pain, hated when he couldn't do anything about it, and hated when he had no idea why. Why would Iris having a child be a—oh. Oh. Right. …

After the singularity, after he’d gone back in time and corrected it—after Eddie had shot Eobard and not himself this time, and Eobard had stumbled back into the wormhole, into some other time—Eddie had decided to get a vasectomy. Cisco had tried to explain that it would create a time paradox if he didn’t have children, but Eddie wasn’t really interested in what his actions would do to create time/space anomalies, he just didn’t want to be responsible for having an ancestor that would cause so much pain. “I can always adopt,” he’d said.

So either the vasectomy didn’t take, or the kid wasn’t Eddie’s. Given how much Iris loved Eddie, that they were Soulmates, Barry was fairly confident it was the former explanation. He knew the statistics on that weren’t perfect, but it was still a crazy small chance of this happening. And to Iris…

Barry hugged her close and kept repeating that it was going to be okay. One hand still held his coffee and he wished he could throw it aside but that would mean detangling one arm from her and that wasn’t going to happen. So he held her and let her let it out. After a few minutes she subsided, stepped back and he offered her a weak smile that she couldn’t return.

“Iris—I know this isn’t what you and Eddie planned, but I know that you will be an amazing mother.”

She had dropped her coffee in a trash bin at the start of the path and now had both arms free to hug herself. “Barry I… I don’t know what to do.”

“Do?”

She wouldn’t look at him, down and away and… “You’re thinking about not keeping it?”

Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks and she nodded. It hurt so much to see. Iris had always wanted a family, children, and now this—now she was afraid to have one because of Eobard. Even when he was gone, that bastard just kept ruining their lives.

“Can we sit?” she asked in a small voice, nodding toward a bench further down the path. They walked to it in silence, him with one arm around her shoulder, trying to confer support. He had no idea what to say. They sat and she curled into him, looking out at the path.

“I made an appointment,” she finally said. He felt his chest tighten.

“How far along are you?”

“Almost eight weeks, according to my doctor.”

He was surprised she had had time to go to her doctor by now. “How long have you known?”

“A few weeks. It didn’t seem possible at first, thanks to his vasectomy but I read that it can happen, especially shortly after getting it done.”

He nodded. “Does Eddie know?” He already knew the answer. Eddie said Iris was acting off, but that was it. Of course she was acting off—she hiding a massive fear from her loved ones and terrified of what to do about it. God, he wished her pregnancy didn’t remind him of his situation with Len,
right now of all times. It felt too selfish.

“You’re the only one I’ve told,” she sniffed and he hugged her closer.

“Okay.”

“Barry, what do I do?”

How the hell should he know? How could anyone know, except for her?

“D’you remember a few months ago, when I was debating saving my mom—do you remember what you told me? You said I needed to think of myself, and decide what I wanted to do, not what anyone else wanted me to. What do you to do, Iris?”

“I want—I want to have a family,” she choked it out and he felt a shudder run through her. “I want to have my child and raise them and be happy.”

His relief was immediate, almost winding him. It wasn’t his place to have any opinion, but he knew she wanted to be a mother, to have children, and the thought of her throwing that away because of Eobard was almost too much to bear.

“Then do that, Iris. Have this kid with Eddie.”

“I can’t!”

“Why not? Because one day, a hundred years in the future, some descendent of yours will have a bad attitude and come back in time? That’s crazy—you know that right? The timeline…” he thought about the singularity, and then about the police gala. “It corrects itself. With a vengeance. Eobard changed the timeline by coming back, but it corrected and forced him to help make me the Flash. If you don’t have this child, the universe will probably just make some other way to make it so that he’s one day born, so things don’t end up in a paradox. But Iris,” he turned so that he was looking her in the eye, “that’s not your responsibility. The only thing you have to do is decide what you want. This is your body, and your child if you want to have it.”

And then, like a storm breaking and giving way to sunlight, she smiled. “Barry—thank you.” She hugged him and it was both tighter and lighter than before. “I’ve been so scared, Barr. Afraid to tell Eddie, or dad, or you—afraid everyone would tell me I had to—that I shouldn’t...”

Barry let her disentangle from his arms and shook his head. “I don’t think there’s a universe in which Eddie would ever ask you to give up your child—his child—Iris.”

“He was so adamant about the vasectomy, Barr—he hates Eobard more than any of us, I think, what if he...”

She couldn’t finish her thought, looking down. Barry knew there was no way Eddie would ever ask that of Iris, but he also knew how hard it could be to see and think that way when you were the one in the middle of a situation like that. So he tried to back up a step.

“Iris… tell me again about how you found out Eddie was your Soulmate.”

She laughed, a sad sound. “I’ve told you this all before, Barr.”

“I know but… tell me again.”

She sighed and leaned back, almost rolling her eyes. “We ran outside to chase that mugger after the
opening speech for the particle accelearter. Eddie stopped him with a cheesy line, and we all went back to the precinct together to fill out reports.”

“And then…”

“And then I went home and got ready for bed then you went up to your lab and got struck by lightning.” He remembered that part at least, but not the rest. “I got a call and I rushed to the ER but they wouldn’t let me see you, you had so many doctors around you, and Eddie was there. He rode with your body in the ambulance because dad was out with Chyre trying to stop the Mardon brothers. And then he saw me, offered to grab me a coffee because it was gonna’ be a long night, and that’s when he saw my Mark on my collarbone.”

Her hand went to it, almost unconsciously.

“But you didn’t have Initial Communion that night?”

“No—I, we didn’t touch. He was excited and flustered, but also realized the situation, the gravity of it. Dad showed up and Eddie gave us space, time to just be a family. He took all dad’s shifts that week that dad couldn’t get covered so that he could be at the hospital with you. I took him out for coffee to say thanks and…”

She smiled, more calm now, a little wistful in the memory. “I was confused at first, he seemed so nervous. But then he told me and I—there’s this moment of disbelief when it happens, like it seems too strange to be true. Finding your Soulmate. Sitting in Jitters and having him just blurt it out.” She laughed at the memory, “I asked him for proof! Like a cop, oh my God—but I wanted evidence! And he showed me his Mark, just pulled back his shirt and there it was.”

Barry smiled too; he’d heard all this before but never in so much detail. “What happened next?”

“We didn’t want to Commune in public so we left the café. Dad was at the hospital with you so I invited Eddie back home. We were so careful on the drive, smiling but not touching, little glances—it was so romantic, now that I remember. We sat on the couch and then finally held hands and it was like—I can’t even describe, Barry. Initial Communion is unlike anything else.”

He tried not to wince but she caught it anyway. “Sorry. I know you’re Waiting, it’s—”

“It’s fine, Iris. This is about you and Eddie.”

“Why are we even talking about this?”

“Because, that man you met, who stopped that mugger, who rode with me in the ambulance, who waited for a good time to tell you what he knew so you didn’t have to be guilty or confused, so you could have a good Initial Communion and not one at the hospital that night—do you honestly think that man wants anything other than for you to be happy? Eddie loves you, Iris, and I’m sure he has from the moment he saw you. He’d do anything for you and I don’t think he’d ever ask you to give up your child, no matter how much he’s scared of what that’ll mean for the future.”

There was an intake of breath and then she smiled, wide, and threw her arms around him again. “Thank you, Barry. This is why you’re my best friend. Thank you thank you thank you.”

She sighed and he felt the tension drain out of her, and she sighed again, louder, like the woes of her month would leave out her vocal chords. It made him smile, heart swelling with too many things, warm and bright. And finally she pulled back again, leaned to sit back against the bench.

“I’ve been such a mess. I think Eddie thinks I’m crazy.”
Barry tried to hide his laugh. “I’m sure he’s just worried.”

“Thanks for listening, Barr.” She placed a hand over his. “I really needed… I needed to talk it out.”

He nodded. “Anytime, Iris.”

“What about you? I know I’ve barely seen you, but Dad told me you’ve been off recently? What bees are in your bonnet?”

He snorted. “Bees in my bonnet, really? Okay um…” he didn’t want to tell her about what was really bothering him, not when she was smiling. She was pregnant for chrissakes, she had bigger things to worry about. “The government might be buying STAR Labs.”

“What?!”

They stood and walked again while he told her about what Caitlin and Cisco had said and updated her on the search for Grodd, and how derailed that had been thanks to the Rogues and even the regular events of his daily life, not to mention being the Flash—mafia and petty crimes to deal with. Before long she was turning toward home, ready to go tell Eddie the good news finally while Barry decided to get some running in.

She left with a spring in her step, and he smiled until she was out of sight. Then the rest of his life started to weigh in again. All that talk about Initial Communion had made him think about Len, about how different their situations were, and he started to wonder if he was making the right choice. Sure Len wasn’t like Eddie, wasn’t kind and gentle or even actually trustworthy but he… Barry sighed, getting ready to run. Len was Len.

**********

The remainder of Barry’s month passed like a blur. Iris was pregnant. Pregnant! Whenever he stopped to think about it, he was so excited for both of them. Eddie had come up to his office the next morning and wrapped him in a bear-like hug, happier than he’d ever seen the man. It made Barry grin just by being in Eddie’s glowing presence.

“I’m gonna’ be a father, Barr. A father!”

His smile could power whole cities.

They hadn’t told Joe yet, waiting until he was little less grumpy about his leg. He’d be back to work by the end of the week on desk duty, something that always made him grumpy, but they had a family dinner plan in the works and Barry was genuinely excited. Joe may not have come around immediately about Eddie and Iris, but he was becoming increasingly supportive and Barry knew that the prospect of a grandchild would warm his heart (even though it would probably also make him worry to no end).

Barry’s good mood was allayed slightly the day he got a text from Cold, asking to meet him. As if. Barry was actually feeling close to normal again, and not even the faint sadness in the bleed could drag him down. That didn’t stop him from running through Chubbuck park on his rounds that night as the Flash, derailing a would-be mugger and making more than one pass by the bench, by the river, over and back along the bridge before slipping into Keystone to stop an armed robbery in progress. He did one more round of the park before he turned toward home.
He managed to suppress thinking about Len for a few more days after the text, ignoring his own daydreams about Len swooping in with more than just a few words over a cellphone screen, about Len telling him he wanted to team up with the Flash, fight crime, help him save STAR Labs from the military’s purchasing power. It was all idiotic and he tried not to indulge.

Then Captain Cold and Golden Glider robbed a Mercury Labs transport and his little daydream bubble popped anyway. Len wasn’t going to be anything but a thief, likely ever. Barry didn’t show up to stop them. Cisco was confused by Barry’s insistence on staying out of it.

“No one’s getting hurt. Other than that, Cold and I agreed to stay out of each other’s way.”

Caitlin cast him a look but said nothing about it, though Cisco was pissed for the rest of the evening and left early. Barry couldn’t blame him—letting the Rogues go without a fight left a sour taste in his mouth too.

Later that night when he started to wind down for sleep, Barry finally stopped trying to avoid the thoughts. He laid in bed, not sleeping—barely sleeping all month, really—and wondered about the weeks since he’d seen Len, and about what Caitlin had said, thinking about Iris and Eddie. He might have overreacted about the police gala—not that he wasn’t really justified when it was his family getting hurt, but he remembered cutting off Len’s explanation, slamming him against a brick wall more than once, the pain in his ribs bad enough to come through the bleed, and then choking him at one point. That… that probably wasn’t okay. They weren’t fighting as Flash and Cold when he did that, not really, that was personal.

And kissing Len—that had been a mistake. He’d done it out of anger, spite, but it was only once he felt Len kiss back, felt himself almost lose control, lose any semblance of rational thought did he realize that part of him wasn’t doing it to be cruel, part of him was doing it because he really, really wanted to kiss Len. It had almost gone too far, almost gone to a place Barry wasn’t sure he could have walked away from. And now he’d had to spend his whole month the ghost of those lips on his, knowing that Len smelled like pine and mint and the crisp cold smell of Winter. Knowing what those hands felt like on his body for real.

Barry shivered underneath the covers, determined not to touch himself while thinking of Len. But he could feel the other man, thoughts on him dragging his attention to their bleed. After the heist when the Flash didn’t show, Len was all frustration and something like sadness without the edge—soft misery?—pain with jagged edges. But now there was something like humor—was he laughing, somewhere?—something like curiosity. Was he planning something? Something like arousal, and Barry was glad he’d decided not to touch himself, glad he wouldn’t accidentally be sharing that with Len.

But he didn’t feel the phantom feeling of Len’s hand on his cock, the familiar grip he’d gotten very good at ignoring. The arousal intensified but it seemed to just… go on.

Barry was about to get out of bed and grab some water, distract himself with a run maybe, but without warning, a sensation cut through his thoughts—a rather pleasant one. For a second he thought Len might finally be masturbating but then it came again, just a ghost sensation and it wasn’t quite the same as what Barry knew.

And then, as he focused in on it—fuck! Even the phantom sensation felt hot and warm and slick around his cock, which was getting harder by the second just from the echo of a feeling of—

Len was getting a blowjob.

Barry panicked. Sweat broke out on his body, heart pumping too fast, almost painful. He phoned
Len at super speed, three times until the bastard picked up, yelling into the phone at him. But Len’s voice—god, it was breathy, raspy—was cold and hard, unforgiving. And the mouth—the *feeling*—it kept going even as Len taunted him, told him some guy on his knees looked like him—*fuck*—and reminded that Barry had tossed him aside, that he wasn’t exactly volunteering.

Len hung up and Barry might throw up. He felt a tongue along the underside of his cock and sharp and sudden he severed the bleed, snapping the connection like breaking a bone. It threw off all sensation, white noise and nothing else, no feelings, like the bleed was this pocket, this bubble in his brain that he could skim his fingers along and poke, touch, but didn’t have to feel unless he did decide to hold onto it. He sat in his bed, still and trying not to shake, trying to resist the basic human urge of curiosity that pushed him to reopen the bleed, trying to resist the way his throat stuck with sobs he wouldn’t let escape. He couldn’t focus on anything but controlling his own emotions until he felt something familiar skimming along the surface of the bleed and let it come through enough to realize—Len was coming.

Barry darted out of bed, too ill to use his speed and too sick not to run, stumbled into the bathroom and his stomach contracted, painful. Acid and bile burned their way up his throat as he threw up, acrid taste on his tongue.

He was glad it was late, glad Joe was long since asleep, glad he was alone on the bathroom floor in his misery.

Len didn’t belong to him. He’d told Len he didn’t even *want* him. For the first time since Bonding, Barry regretted that.

Chapter End Notes

“write a transition chapter” I said to myself. “make it just a quick interlude for what Barry’s been doing this month” I said. ”Add in the awesome female characters, just short scenes, and maybe this is the right place to bring up Iris’ pregnancy,” i decided.

5500 words later.... ffs.

For real though, originally this chapter wasn't even going to exist, but I realized if I didn't put it here, we wouldn't get Barry's PoV for 5 whole chapters and that would be too much. And I'm happy because this fic was sorely missing Iris and I wanted more of Caitlin too.

And this is a double-update because I was eager to get through both Barry's PoV and Hartley's, so enjoy! :)


God, Leonard Snart lived up to the title of being _Cold_. Hanging up on on what could only be his Soulmate, who was all but begging for Leonard to stop in a voice that Hart almost recognized, all the while with one hand in Hartley’s hair? He wasn’t sure if he himself would have had the brass. That being said, he also wasn’t going to complain, because despite the name, Leonard was also _hot_.

Leonard stalked over to where Hartley was uncertainly standing, all predatory and smooth, and captured Hart’s mouth for another kiss. He couldn’t help but moan into Leonard’s mouth, sliding his body against the larger man’s. He knew his own mouth tasted like latex still but the other didn’t seem to care, licking and manhandling him with strength and grace. It was just what he needed.

Leonard broke off, kissed his neck, the shell of his ear—the one without the Mark—and whispered, “how do you want it?” in a voice that sent shivers up his spine.

“What are my—ah—options?” Leonard put one hand over the bulge in his pants, gripping gently and Hartley was in heaven. Leonard just chuckled.

“My hand, my mouth? My fingers up your ass?”

He groaned at the thought—“that, your fingers—yes.”

Leonard pulled him in by the waist, kissing him until he was breathless. Hartley could still hardly believe this was happening but he planned to make the most of it. Never in his life had someone chosen him _over_ their Soulmate—it was insane and unheard of. And yet here he was, being kissed and touched, walked slowly back until he felt a table behind him, being stripped out of his shirt.

He stopped thinking, then, when Leonard wedged a leg between his thighs and ground his hip against Hartley. “Ah!” He was noisy. He knew he was noisy. He couldn’t help it—he loved sound, and sex was like a symphony. Not to mention how starved he was for this—grinding back against Leonard’s thigh. It had been so long since he’d been with anyone, pent up and frustrated as hell, ineloquent in his desire.

Leonard backed off for a moment. “Pants off.” Hartley rushed to comply as the larger man turned to grab the lube of the table behind him. Leonard was his type—a bit older, broad shouldered, handsome and masculine, confident. Hart’s cock was harder just looking at him—and those _tattoos_. He was shirtless and the array was impressive, especially the white snowflakes in varying shapes and sizes.

“How do you want me?” he asked, ready to turn and bend as needed. Leonard just smiled. “You’re good like that.” His eyes roamed Hart’s naked body and he found himself flushing slightly, a natural physiological response to being on display.
It didn’t last long though, because Len was there again seconds later, close and kissing his neck and clavicles, deltoids, pectorals, one hand reaching down to stroke his cock, the other palming his ass cheeks. Hart gasped again and spread his legs, heard Len pop the cap off the lube and then return his hand to his ass, more targeted now, slick fingers up against his entrance.

God, it had been so long. Hartley writhed at the intrusion to his body, gasping, “Merde!”

Leonard chuckled against his neck, “was that French?”

Hartley nodded then whined when the finger pressed against his prostate. “I—ah—it just happens.”

Leonard hmm’d against his neck then kissed it before pressing in a second finger. It came with a slight burn and a stretch, pleasant and he groaned, releasing a Spanish expletive next, something his formers lovers had loved and now it happened whenever his brain-to-mouth filter clicked offline.

Then those fingers were thrusting, setting a rhythm and Hartley rolled his hips, stretching his neck back to enjoy the attentions of Leonard’s mouth. He kept mumbling words in Spanish, Italian, French—languages of romance. Len kissed his ear, sucked on the lobe and he swore, arching into the steady grip on his cock, “give it to me, oui, yes, por fa-vor.”

“Fuck, kid, you’re not shy,” Leonard growled near his ear and he spread his legs further, moaning. “Mia culpa.” He gasped, feeling close. And like a sharp twist, he could feel his NAB, his bleed, suddenly there and sharp. Fuck. He ignored it most of the time and suppressed it when he was around others, as much as he could but suddenly it was there, strong at the edge of his perception. It was almost as though it was getting stronger—disgust and horror suddenly filtering in alongside alarm, like James knew what Hartley was doing. Hell, if Leonard’s Soulmate could tell, maybe James had figured it out too? There was more in the NAB, something hot Hart wanted to interpret as jealously, as arousal, but didn’t dare. So he ground himself down on Leonard’s fingers harder, begging, trying to focus on English,

“Please! Ah, Fuck, so, so—ah—yes, Daddy, give it to me, fuck!”

Those fingers slammed into his prostate hard and he gasped and swore again. Either Leonard loved or hated being called that and he didn’t really care which one it was because the reaction was divine. The hand on his cock sped up, no longer lazy strokes and he clutched the other’s shoulders, head falling back, moans turning into sharp and breathless gasps for air. He could feel the bleed, feeding it, sending as much as he could back at James even as he fucked himself back onto another man’s fingers, a man strong and tall like James, gruff and angry like him, broad like him, confident and smart and powerful like—fuck he wanted James so badly. Missed him so much, wanted him, ached for his Soulmate, for—

“James,” he choked it out unbidden, gasped it a second time when the hand on his cock swirled, fingers inside him scissoring and then he repeated the name, more than once, wishing he could stop.

“Yeah, come on,” the other man urged him on, and god he was letting Hartley take this, use him, knowing he was thinking of someone else and he let himself, let himself picture James touching him, mouthing his neck, kissing his jaw, sucking his sensitive earlobe. “Come for me, Hartley.”

“James, please, per favore, James—” he cried out in abandon, body clenching, spilling out into that confident and cool hand, shuddering.

Leonard gave him a minute to collect himself, gathered some tissues from one of the workbenches for his hands and handed some to Hartley. He cleaned himself up but had a hard time looking at the
other man after calling him someone else. He could still feel the real James’ disgust through the bleed, still feel his arousal, which he knew for sure wasn’t his own now that he was post-orgasm. He pulled on his pants before trying to speak.

“I…” Hartley was awful at apologies. “That was rude of me.”

Leonard shrugged, pulling his sweater back on. “I took a phone call halfway through your blowjob. Consider us even, Piper.”

Piper. Was it affection or a distancing tactic? The odds were close to even by his mental calculations as he pulled on his own shirt.

“This was a probably a bad idea though, kid. A fun, hot, bad idea, but probably one we shouldn’t repeat.”

Distancing then. Hartley grimaced. “I don’t exactly see why, Leonard.” The other man arched a cool eyebrow and he continued, unfazed. “We both understand one another’s position, we’ve both been rejected by our Soulmates, and we both have the same proclivities. Burning the midnight oil with you is just common sense.”

Leonard looked the side, tilted his head. “Maybe so. But I can still feel my—him—in the bleed, upset and I’m not looking to hurt him.”

“It’s like you said—does he expect you to be celibate? You haven’t spoken with him in a month—you told me so yourself, just the other day.” What kind of guy would dump Leonard and then think he has the right to call him and tell him not to be with another guy? He didn’t own his Soulmate.

“All the more reason—”

“To what? Be fuck buddies?”

He marched over to where Len was to re-seize his glasses off the table beside him. He put them on before answering, eyes narrowed. “To be something.”

“Not interested.”

Hartley tried to hold in his scoff. “He can’t have it both ways. You told me it was basic survival that I got away from James. Right now he’s out there somewhere, pissed off and turned on, and I’m not about to deny myself sex just because he doesn’t want to have it with me.”

“You also begged for him when you came, Hart.” He ground it out and Hartley looked down.

“All the more reason—”

“To what? Be fuck buddies?”

Leonard drew up to his full height. By now, Hart was reasonably sure the other man wouldn’t punch him, but also not entirely certain. “What goes on between me and my Soulmate isn’t any of your business, Piper.”

He laughed, bitter in the taller man’s face. “Well I can see you still think there’s a chance he’ll be your guy. You’ll be happier when you give it up, Leonard. Even if you had a chance—you just hung up on him to let me suck your cock.”
Oooh, that had an effect. Leonard actually flinched before his face dropped back into tight controlled anger. “At least I can admit I want a chance with him.”

Hart felt his own face screw up, twitching and tight. “Neither of us are getting what we want, it seems. So again—it still feels like a better idea to take solace in each other than—”

“It was a one-time thing, Hartley. Let it go.”

He let out an angry breath. “Right. Got it. Goodnight.” He turned and left without looking back at Cold.

**********

Most nights night, Hartley dreamt of James. He used to dream of the night he showed up at James’ trailer, suddenly homeless and needing a place to go. It was a week after they’d met and James would only be right to turn him away but he didn’t. “You can stay, blue eyes, but don’t even think about tryin’ anything,” was what James said when he asked to stay. Hartley just nodded. He wasn’t really in a position to complain.

James lived in a small trailer, something that could be hitched to the back of a truck. It had a single bed and a dresser that doubled as a nightstand, a trunk, some cupboards and a small sink and mini fridge, counter with a hotpot and kettle, a small table with two chairs, and a minuscule bathroom. It was cramped and awful and Hartley wondered how anyone could live there, let alone how both of them would fit.

They slept on the same bed because James’ trailer didn’t have a couch. Hartley was one for silk pajama bottoms and sleeping shirtless, but James made him wear at least a t-shirt when they shared a bed, and James himself spent most nights in pajamas, even when it was too hot to sleep, perturbed by bare flesh in the same bed and yet still allowing Hartley to share it.

Some nights, Hartley dreamt about the good moments, the ones he didn’t let himself revisit in waking. He dreamt about James’ jokes, over the top and silly, the way he threw his whole body into his humor, landing on his ass as often as not. How he was an acrobat was a mystery. He dreamt about the stupid yo-yo James would play with while they debated whatever topic came to mind—the time they argued for three hours about the purpose of the devil as Satan and as Adversary in Catholic mythology, James talking him in circles and laughing all the while.

He dreamt about cooking with James, speaking in Italian over dinners. He dreamt about the days he spent listening to James as he practiced his routine while Hartley worked at the table tinkering with whatever mechanical equipment he could get his hands on, James’ circus friends bringing him things to fix, welcoming him into their flock when it seemed like he would be a constant fixture in James’ life from then on.

He often dreamt about James’ performances, about his booming voice in the ring, especially when he was practicing and it was just the two of them, Hartley watching, laughing, getting a show just for one. James would cajole him into watching the new acts, fine tuning the details for the routines, never minding Hartley’s comments, always open to his suggestions despite how little Hartley knew of showmanship.

He dreamt too about the way James would complain about the music at the circus, how he longed to
listen to anything else, a complaint that turned into a discussion of music and then opera, until James discovered Hartley could sing Turiddu’s role from *Cavalleria Rusticana*. After that, it was all downhill—James coaxed him to sing despite himself, despite being out of practice and self-conscious. He was only three lines in when James started smiling in an awestruck way that made Hartley’s heart swell to almost bursting. “Hart, blue eyes, you never said you had *pipes*.”

Sometimes he felt sex was the only part of their bond that didn’t work, that maybe he should give up wanting it at all. He dreamt about that too, sometimes, about the first time James asked for sex, about the first time he let himself think there might be something more there than friendship.

It had been in the summer, after one of James’ shows. He’d given a rousing performance, something for the ages, apparently. He came back smelling like perfume and alcohol in the middle of the night, after the after-party. Hartley was still up, laying awake and staring at the ceiling when James stumbled in, laughing and drunk. He rolled his eyes and got out of bed, going to pour James a glass of water out of the tap that *still* didn’t have a water filter on it because water filters were apparently too gay. The arbitrariness of what was and wasn’t masculine enough for James was a minefield.

“Drink this. You’ll thank yourself for it in the morning.” Hartley wasn’t in a shirt yet because it was too damn hot and James wasn’t around. But he knew that no shirt meant no bed so he turned toward his trunk to grab one.

“Y’know, blue eyes,” James slurred, dropping the water back in the sink and coming close behind Hartley, “I’ve been thinkin’. ‘s not gay if you give me a blowjob. You’re always offerin’ and I figure’… ‘s jus’ a mouth, s’not gay, not when you’re so pretty.”

Hartley’s heart clenched tight. He would be loath pass up this opportunity, but every single time he’d ever come close to James, hinted or suggested, and then even looked at him the wrong way, the other had shot cruel words and sometimes more, physically pushing Hartley away. The first morning he’d felt arousal through the bleed, James lying next to him, he’d offered to help him with it. Hart didn’t make that mistake twice.

“You sure you want that, James?”

Warm hands settled on his hips and the body pressed closer behind him. James spoke in his ear now, less slurred, “yeah, want y’r pretty lips ‘round my cock, babe.”

James had never called him that before, or anything close to it. A surge of warmth spread through him and down and he caught himself nodding, scared to ruin this with words. James stepped back and then again, moving sluggishly until he was tumbling back onto the bed, legs splayed. Hartley went to his knees, half uncertain if he was going to get pushed away still, half afraid he was taking advantage of James’ state. Most of him was too desperate to worry, craving the heat in James’ eyes, the way he spread his legs for Hartley to shuffle between them. He should probably grab a condom but was also pretty sure there were none to be found in the trailer and he was always safe and careful until this—safe and careful so that one day he would be allowed to not worry about that with his Soulmate.

It really didn’t take long. He was out of practice but James was pent up and pulling on his hair sooner than he would have liked—he wanted to *savor* this, the feel of James on his tongue, in his mouth. But the other man was bucking up, gasping and Hartley sucked and swallowed to the sound of his groans, of “yeah baby” and “swallow it, yeah” which were unoriginal but hot enough for him.

He didn’t let himself feel disappointed that James didn’t offer to reciprocate. Sated, the other man promptly rolled over and set about sleeping, careless for once of his nudity. Hartley almost rolled his eyes but figured he was at least allowed to get off and sat on the edge of the bed to do it, coming
with a gasp a few minutes later. He sighed and then heard—

“Don’ spill on th’ bed.”

It almost made him smile. “I’m the tidy one around here, James.”

Hartley tried not to dream about the nights James would press up behind him in their narrow bed, whisper or growl hot and low in his ear, fuck him into the mattress as he swore in Italian, calling Hartley his doll, his baby, his blue eyes. He tried not to dream about wanting it, giving in each time, eager and then empty after when James would turn away, no smiles at midnight, no infectious laughter. The bleed always tasted of longing and regret, faint feelings but constant enough he had learned to place them.

But that night, Hartley dreamt about none of those things. Instead, he dreamt about the night he left. He dreamt about James, one drink too many, grabbing a condom and passing Hartley the lube, telling him to get himself ready, still never putting his fingers inside him. Hartley just wished that for once they could do this face to face instead of with him on his hands and knees—it got boring to be in the same position every time but more than that, he wanted to look in James’ eyes, to see his face when he was inside Hartley. But he knew that would mean James would have to deal with the sight of his cock, hard and stiff against his stomach, would have to see it as Hartley stroked himself to completion with James inside him. So they didn’t change positions and Hartley was on his stomach again, James groaning above him, and he was almost bored and frustrated by the end of it, unsated.

James rolled off him with a sigh, went to deal with the condom and take a piss. Hartley rolled onto his back and stared at the low ceiling, feeling trapped by it. James came back to bed, having to climb over Hartley, who always slept on the outside, easier to be pushed unceremoniously onto the floor on those off nights. He didn’t even look at Hartley as he slid under the sheets and turned his back.

“Would you treat me this way if I was your girl?” he asked to the ceiling.

He felt something in the bleed—tumultuous and twisting, something new that had never transferred before. Hartley couldn’t place it but knew it didn’t feel good. James didn’t answer. Neither of them slept well that night. Hartley laid stock still—still as always, still as he had to be—staring at a ceiling that had become familiar, wondering if anything would ever change.

Before dawn, when he knew the other was finally asleep, he stole out of bed and around the trailer, grabbing up his meager possessions. He picked up the gloves he’d been tinkering with—sonic frequencies, an idea from one of the other performers at the circus but clearly with more merits than showmanship—but left his supplies, the boots he’d been playing with as a prototype, other devices, and anything he couldn’t carry. He cast a final glance around the place that had been his living space for nine months, eyes catching the glint from James’ watch on the side table, sliding it into his pocket as a gold memento. He said a mental goodbye to the bright and garish décor, the small toys strewn about, the flimsy dishes with chips in them—everything that was so foreign to him about this life with James, so different from a life of private jets and million dollar art, caviar and weekends in Venice. Here was everything that had come to be his home.

He needed to explain. He needed to say goodbye. He found a scrap of paper, trying to find words to write, to make sense of this, to put his broken heart onto the page. None came to him. He hesitated over it, mind blank for what felt like the first time in his life, static. The only words that he had were ‘Dear James, fuck you’ and he scrawled them down, untidy through his tears. He left the note there, on the bed beside his Soulmate, and left without looking back.

He would feel sorrow in the bleed later, strong and visceral. But that was in his memories, in real life, and he knew how this dream ended. How this dream always ended. It ended with James, there in
front of him, reaching out to hold him.

“I’m sorry, Hartley, come home.”

“You don’t mean it, James.”

“I do. I miss you.”

“You only miss me in my dreams.”

Hartley woke up with tears on his face again.

***********

Hartley chanced returning to the Rogues Den the next morning. He still wanted to work on the neural decoupler and see if it could really do what it was purported to. He also wanted to distract himself from the churning in his stomach that always came from a night of dreaming of James, distract himself from the bleed, from knowing that James was melancholy as he himself was today.

He’d been at the warehouse for an hour when Leonard showed up from the outside door, looking as unrested and worn out as Hartley felt. Immediately upon seeing him, the other man turned to go and Hartley rushed to stand.

“No, wait.”

Leonard stopped in the doorway, and Hartley didn’t miss that Shawna poked her head outside the med room door to see what was going on. He ignored her.

“Can we talk?”

“Alleyway, Piper.”

Hartley followed him outside, ignoring Shawna’s questioning glance. Ever since her and Mardon had Bonded—alas, another beautiful man lost to heterosexuality—she’d been spending more and more time around the Rogues den on her days off, mostly hanging out with Weather Wizard and cajoling him out on dates. Hartley didn’t particularly mind her company, as it was turning out each of the Rogues was more intelligent than an immediate perusal of their criminal lifestyles might indicate.

The alley was littered with broken glass and Leonard was glaring at him, tight. Hartley could tell he was gearing up for another argument, doubtlessly convinced of Hartley’s mawkish sentiments of youth or something equally juvenile, and he nipped that idea in the bud.

“I’m not going to try and win you back, Leonard. I’m here to apologize for my behavior last night. Contrary to popular belief, I do know when I’ve been an obstinate ass.”

Leonard blinked, shoulders relaxing and he tilted his head to the side. “Guess that makes two of us. Sorry, Piper.”

He smiled and took it for what it was worth. “You made things clear and… you were right. I miss James. But you also helped me realize I need to let go.” He pulled an item out of his pocket, “And I want to give this to you.”
Leonard held out his hand, looking confused, and Hartley dropped the watch into it.

“It belonged to James and I’ve been carrying it around all this time. I’d rather you take it.”

“Kid, this—”

“Really. It’s not even a gift so much as way for me to let go. It’s dragging me down.” He smiled in a way he was sure was just sad. “This way it’s like a last ‘fuck you’ to him, giving it to a guy I slept with, and it’s a way to let you both go and remind myself why I need to. I don’t expect anything from you, Leonard, really. I enjoy being in this establishment and the way you run things. That’s all.”

He looked dubious, examining the item in his hand for a long minute before nodding and putting it in the pocket of his leather jacket. It really was a shame that he cut such an impressive figure, Hartley was already starting to miss those arms around him.

“Okay, Hartley. This mean you’re still sticking around?”

“If that's okay with you?”

Leonard nodded and he let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. He was still—or only just? —one of the Rogues. They went back inside, Leonard heading toward the bar side and Hartley returning to the worktable he’d long since decided was ‘his.’

“Spill, Piper.”

He startled and shouted, dropped what he was working on. “Je—sus.” Shawna was beside him in a poof. He still wanted to know how that meta-ability functioned, how she blinked and out of existence. Not for the first time, he envied Cisco Ramon’s access to all the meta-human DNA samples. It seemed in poor taste to ask for blood sample, and he hadn’t the equipment to analyze it anyway.

“Shawna?”

“You and Cold—what’s going on there?”

“Nothing.”

“Not nothing. What’re you doing giving the boss a fancy watch?”

He cringed. “Were you spying on us?”

“Did I hear you say you slept with him?”

“Slept with who?” a high voice rang, interrupting them. Oh Shit. Lisa.

Shawna was smirking and Hartley was sweating. How much did Lisa know? “Shawna was spying and she’s confused.”

“Admit it, Rathaway,” she was grinning, not realizing what a mess she was… messing with. “You and Cold are doing the horizontal tango! We’ve all seen you two flirting.”

Lisa looked between him and Shawna, surprise on her lovely features.

“There’s no way that’s happening.”
“Sorry, Glider, I know you don’t wanna’ hear about your big bro’s sex life,” Shawna giggled and winked at Hartley. She was going to get him killed.

“You’ve got it all wrong!” he interjected and Lisa rounded on him with narrowed eyes. She stepped right up into his space, leaned down since he was seated so they could be eye to eye. Hartley preferred to work with backup plans, to be a step ahead of everyone else in the room—the only way to truly win. But he didn’t know the parameters, what information Lisa was operating with, what exactly set off her temper and how far she would take it.

“Hartley, darling, there’s no need to lie. Tell me, sweetie, darling—are you, or are you not sleeping with Len?” She brought out her more saccharine voice and he knew he was fucked.

“Once.” He choked it out. She was definitely scarier than Leonard.

“Once,” she repeated, straightening. The sickly sweet had dropped from her voice.

“Just once. He ended it. No big deal. Broke on good terms, still fri—ahh.” He covered his face when she pulled out her gun, ready for a golden goodbye but she just stalked right past him, toward the bar.

“I’m gonna’ kill that idiot.”

The growl in her voice was impressive, all things considered. Shawna was looking at Hartley with wide eyes when he peeked out from behind his arms.

“What did I just miss here?”

He groaned. Somehow, life around a group of hardened superhuman criminals was getting more ridiculous than life at the circus ever was.

Chapter End Notes

We are finally done with the overlapping perspectives of that scene! And now we get to actually start to dig out of this mess. <3

And... yeah. Hartley and James. I'm sorry.
Amygdalectomic Lesions

Chapter Summary

*Children's Work by Dessa* and *Everybody by Stabilo*

Chapter Notes

**Extra trigger warnings:** discussion of abuse (child abuse, physical abuse, and emotional abuse, both past and present); minor panic attack

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Len was in pain. He’d fucked up, he knew he had fucked up. But god *fucking* dammit, he just wanted to try and move *on*—he just wanted to let go, to do what Barry had asked and drop this thing between them. To stop hoping for a Soulmate who wouldn’t flinch at his touch, even on his arm or leg, who wouldn’t rather them be in pain than be beside Len. He just wanted someone who might actually want to be *around* him. He wouldn’t even ask for love at this point, just tolerating his presence and enjoying his company would be a relief.

His words on the phone had been cruel, born from the more broken parts of him, designed to hurt and they’d been too much. He’d wanted to hurt Barry, to make him feel something of the pain he was going through himself, lashing out. He instantly regretted them, remembering his promise never to hurt his Soulmate, remembering that pain was the only gift Barry seemed capable of receiving from him. He hated it, but he’d done it and he’d have to live with it.

He expected his own anguish, though, knew hanging up would feel like cutting out his heart and been ready for it. What he didn’t realize was that it would hurt Barry as bad as it did. Len wasn’t expecting anything beyond momentary anger, frustration, the type that would make him throw or break something and then calm down. So holy hell he was not expecting this.

Len hadn’t slept, and was pretty sure Barry hadn’t either. The kid was a wash of sorrow all night, sharp with too many edges, cutting into his perception, not even angry but *hurt*. Len was marginally certain Barry couldn’t feel what he’d done for Hartley, that the bleed wouldn’t transfer that, but an imagination was a dangerous tool and he had no doubt Barry was laying up wondering.

Fuck everything. Len had given up by the time he made it home from the warehouse; he’d tried to call Barry. Five times. No answer. He was tempted to show up at STAR Labs first thing that morning but was unsure if he’d leave unscathed and without a fresh broken rib or three, and wondered how much worse that would make things with Barry. His mind had started conjecturing how he might sneak into Barry’s lab at the CCPD—through the skylights, maybe?—but that was idiotic and he knew it. He was at a total loss though, and wanted nothing more than to just stop Barry’s pain, to make him feel better, to make him feel anything but the anguish he was. Because if Len was getting a phantom of it, no matter how strong their bleed was, he knew Barry was feeling it worse.

He hated it. But hate wasn’t helping, so in the morning he tried to get a change of scenery, only to
run into Hartley. After their awkward-but-at-least-honest conversation, he went straight into the bar for a drink—a white Russian. Drinking at ten in the morning was maybe not his proudest moment, but it was five o’clock somewhere.

He hadn’t eve had a sip when Lisa burst through the back doors from the warehouse.

“Len!”

He dropped his drink. *Fuck.* It shattered on the floor with a splash of cream colored liquid.

“Lis—”

“What the *hell* possessed you to sleep with Hartley? What is going on?!”

His heart clenched. Lisa had her gun out and she was probably about to start shooting. She looked livid, pretty face pinched and red with anger. She was too pissed to even play it sweet.

“Cool it, Sis, this doesn’t concern y—”

Shawna and Hartley appeared behind her with a *poof* by the door. Hart’s face was disoriented and Len scowled. He didn’t blame the kid for spilling, Lisa was ruthless.

“You’re damn right it concerns me! It concerns my family and I swear to *god* if you don’t start talking I will turn this city inside out looking for—”

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” his voice was almost never loud enough to boom, to silence a room. It almost never needed to be. But Lisa was about to say Barry’s name where anyone could hear and that was not acceptable. “Outside, now. You two—” he glanced at a terrified looking Shawna and Hartley, “stay put for once.”

She followed him outside into the alley, half a step behind and he felt his heart rate increasing. He did *not* want to tell Lisa what had been going on. Seemed there was nothing for it though.

“I slept with Hartley. I ended it right after—one time thing.” His mask of composure was back, slipping into it like a glove, turned to face her in the shade of the alley.

“You’re an idiot.” She wasn’t shouting, her face wasn’t red. That was a good sign.

“I know. I’ll deal with it.”

“Obviously not, if you’re doing something that stupid. I told you weeks ago not to do what you always do and push your Soulmate away. Now I *know* that you’ve been lying to me about this from the start and I’m not leaving here until I get the whole damn truth from you, Lenny. Then I can decide how truly stupid you’ve been.”

He hesitated. The whole truth? “What’d you want to know?”

“When was the last time you actually *saw* Barry Allen?”

He exhaled. “A month ago.”

Her face contorted, rage flitting with concern before she schooled her features. “Tell me what happened.”

She knew about the police gala, the plan with Bivolo and Mardon, what had happened. He skimmed the details, reminded her of what had happened, that Barry was pissed about the cold field,
electrocuted by Mardon, that the mayor had got away and he’d had to use his cold gun to stop the
cops, icing Joe West’s leg. She nodded patiently through it and he pushed forward. She knew about
Mardon and Baez too, so he picked up after that, in the alley, when Barry slammed him to a wall and
yelled at him, ignored his attempt to apologize and explain, punched a wall so hard it crumbled under
his fist. He tried to explain Barry’s hurt and anger, that he broke up with Len right then.

“So you tried to set up rules just to make so that you could both live your previous lives and still be
together and he spat in that?”

“I didn’t do it well enough. He said he’d rather be alone than be with me. I tried to reach out, I
wanted to fix it but he freaked out, slammed me against the wall and lifted me up by my neck to stop
me from—”

“HE DID WHAT?!”

Oh. Fuck, maybe he shouldn’t have mentioned that. “I’m fine, Lise—” he didn’t mention the bruises
on his neck the next morning—“I screwed things up pretty bad for him to be so angry—”

“You are not EVER responsible for another person’s emotions, Len. Not ever. If you want to
apologize for screwing up you should do it because it was wrong, not because he’s mad. And his
anger does not give him the right to hurt you—to choke you!”

“It was—I’m fine. He kissed me after and—”

“He threw you around and then kissed you?! Len that’s—”

“He didn’t even realize he hurt me, or scared me—”

“Isn’t that the whole point of having a goddamn bleed with your Soulmate?! So they don’t hurt
you?!”

“It’s not what you’re thinking, Lise, he was in Flash mode—”

“Oh my god! Are you making excuses for him?!”

“I’m explaining the situation! He was upset and he was in costume. It was Flash and Cold stuff, not
—it wasn’t like that, Lise. He slammed me against the wall a few times, but he punched the wall, not
me.” But shit, he knew how this sounded, was getting tense and clammy just hearing the words
spoken out loud now that he was thinking about them instead of locking them down in some deep
dark corner of his brain. He knew how this sounded and he knew this wasn’t the first time Barry had
been angry and up in his space, had slammed him to a wall. He’d done it the day of Initial
Communion, lightning fast.

“He choked you.”

“He was protecting himself. I reached out to him, he probably took it like a threat.” He enunciated
clearly, voice hard, but even so it sounded flimsy to his own ears.

And Lisa looked so upset, shocked and horrified, recoiling visibly. “God, Len, you sound just like
my mother—”

His heartbeat went from too fast in his chest to pounding in his ears. “It’s not—”

“Lenny—he’s abusing you.”
He felt sick, shaky, his vision tunneling. They’d both been to the same therapy sessions, learned the same behaviors, what to look out for, what distorted cognitions to challenge. But he couldn’t think that way. He wasn’t a goddamn victim. He wasn’t making excuses. He was—

“Lisa I am **not** a—it’s **not** like that.” He tried to breath slow, forcing himself to stand still, knuckles white from balled fists, knees locked so he wouldn’t tip over. “He’s the Flash and I’m Captain Cold.” He focused on talking, on the present, inhaled. “I stormed the police gala, I hurt his father, **he** was hurt by Mardon—I felt him get electrocuted, now that fucking hurt, Lise.” Exhaled. “We were both fighting, we were both hurting.”

“Len… Jesus Christ. Are you okay?”

“I’m **fine**,” he ground out. “We were fighting, Lise. It wasn’t abuse.”

“How is it a fight if you didn’t lay a finger on him?”

“My gun—“

“You mean your gun that you modded just **so** that you wouldn’t hurt him? That you changed so that you could keep things even with that boy-god you call a Soulmate? Does he not realize that the only way you survived his encounters before was to stay one step ahead, to be smarter and crueler than him, exploit his weaknesses? And now you have **nothing**! You won’t hurt him, you can’t fight him —no normal human can—and you’re following him around like a puppy dog just wanting to love him while he’s throwing you around and leaving you out to dry!”

Her voice was loud and shrill by the end again, angry and righteous.

“Lisa—“

“**Do not** try to defend him, Len. It makes me sick. He gets mad and he throws you around and he uses you. What kind of Soulmate does that?”

Len’s vision was clear again, his breathing a forced kind of calm, even if his heart was still beating too fast.

“He broke up—broke it off, Lise. It’s done. He isn’t trying to control me or hurt me, he just wanted out.”

“And that’s why he kissed you after choking you?” She shook her head, disgusted. “And now what—you’re moving on, shacking up with Piper?”

“Not quite.” He sighed and felt a tremor in his jaw when he did, clenching his mouth to stop it. His sister’s eyes were narrowed and he knew he wouldn’t get out of here without telling her the truth. He sighed out his next breath and resisted the urge to put his hands in his pockets. He didn't need to display such an obvious tell. “Barry called.”

“Called when? Today?”

“Last night. While I was with Hartley.”

“Oh my—“

“You don’t want the details, Sis. But he could feel it in the bleed.”

Her jaw dropped. “The bleed, it can—? Lenny, that’s… that’s incredibly fucked up.”
“I'm aware.” He nodded just a fraction.

Her expression hardened. “So he felt it and called you while you were with Hartley. And then?”

Nothing for it but to say it. “And then I kept going.”

“Good.” Her voice was vicious.

“Good?” Len’s eyes flashed at her, half angry but he stomped down on it. No need to misdirect that emotion to Lisa.

“For a month he basically forces you to just do whatever he wants because you’re the only one actually trying and then he hurts you and tosses you aside for another month after fucking with your head by kissing you. I’m glad you kept going.”

“I’m not. He’s… hurting.”

“Again, good. It’s thanks to his own actions. If you’d stopped when he called, it would have been just another way for him to control you, manipulate your guilt to keep you doing what he wants you to do. He can’t control your actions and who you fuck. What an unfair demand—don’t be with me but don’t be with anyone else. It’s bullshit.”

“Lise, I just… I want to be with him.”

“And he wants to control you, by the sounds of it. Unless he accepts the real you and gets off his high fucking horse, you won’t ever be an equal to him. You love deep and you protect the people you love, you’d never lay a finger on him.”

“The police gala—”

“The police gala where you didn’t lay a finger on him. Where you went just so you could protect his family from a man with hand-held lightning bolts and only shot to defend yourself against bullets! Let me guess, Len, you’ve spent this last month and now all night and morning since he called, trying to figure out how to make this up to him, instead of caring that he hurt you too, ignoring your own pain?”

He couldn’t deny it, just pursed his lips and glared at the brick wall nearest him. Lisa let out a savage sound of frustration, half growl and half scoff and all scathing. “You have worth, Len! Your pain has worth! You matter! I know you spent your whole life taking blows from dad, standing up for me, being told you don’t matter but you do. You matter, your pain matters, your feelings matter. Okay?!?”

He scowled at the broken glass beneath his feet. “Okay.” His voice shouldn't sound so sullen.

“Say it.”

“Say what?”

“I want to hear you say you matter.”

“I’m not gonna—”

“Say it!”

She raised her eyebrows impatiently and waited. His eyes hardened. She wasn’t gonna’ let this go so he ground out the words in spite. “I matter.”
“All of it. You and your feelings and your pain all matter.”

“I—” His throat closed up, wouldn’t let the words out despite twisting his mouth to form them.

“All of it.”

“I don’t intend to sit here and play therapist with you.”

“Fine.”

He blinked and she was already walking past him and no—he grabbed her arm.

“You are not about to go to his lab.”

“You’re damn right I am.”

“Lisa, do not—”

She wrenched her arm free. “I will kick his lily white ass to and from kingdom come if I have to. No one, but no one, makes my brother feel like he isn’t worthy.”

Fuck. ‘Lisa, please. I’ll never be able to fix this if I—you, we—keep barging into his life when he doesn’t want me there.’

“If he doesn’t want you he doesn’t get the right to call you when you’re in the middle of—”

“Lisa!” He considered her stubborn anger, the gun at her side. “Sis. Just give me a few days. If I haven’t found a way to talk to him by the end of the week, then you can do... whatever it is you’re going to do.”

She gave him a long, slow, appraising glance. When she spoke, some of her sweeter charm was in her voice again, “Fine. Till the end of the week. Until then, I’ll be figuring out how to break into his work. Or maybe STAR Labs. His house? So many possibilities.”

Len frowned but knew he couldn’t stop her, and telling Lisa to exercise restraint was like telling a tornado to slow down. So he just stared when she flipped her hair and walked away.

**********

Len spent the better part of his day after that considering what Lisa had said and trying to suppress how it made him feel. He thought back to Initial Communion, to the terrified expression on Barry's face, the tears on his cheeks when Len had kissed him without thinking. He thought about the pain in his ribs when Barry slammed him against the wall at STAR Labs and the fear in the other's eyes when Len gripped his wrists, craving contact with him. He thought about the way Barry had gone from panic attacks to falling asleep on his shoulder, about the way his body lurched with he ran into the cold field chasing bullets, how seared with white hot pain when Mardon pumped him full of lightning. Len thought of the way Barry pressed him against a wall and claimed his mouth until he vibrated in Len's arms from the fever of their kissing, how angry Barry looked when he walked away, how broken his voice sounded on the phone when he asked Len to stop.

They'd both made mistakes. The problem was, he had no idea how to fix them.
By the next day, Len was neck-deep in plans with no progress. He was afraid to misstep worse than he already had, distracted constantly by the bleed, focusing on every little sensation he could feel through it. He was supposed to meet with Bivolo that morning to select art for the warehouse from Len’s priceless collections, all stolen pieces that the Rainbow Raider was apparently horrified weren’t on display. Len had recently put up Correggio’s *Venus with Mercury and Cupid* on his bedroom wall at home, but most of his pieces had been sold off to private collections or tucked away in his own personal storage where he only pulled them out to look at them on occasion. He’d cancelled on Bivolo though, ignoring the world and focusing on Barry until his phone vibrated around noon.

It wasn’t Barry. He tried not to be disappointed but then—

“Mick!”

Fuck he was so relieved. He hadn’t seen his best friend in almost two months, despite the other being just over the bridge in Keystone. He invited him to the Rogues bar and hideout, arriving just minutes before Mick got there, showing him around and basking in the way he whistled appreciatively at the mods to his gun, the warehouse’s medical setup, the designs and layout for the place.

“We’re gonna’ bring some of the art out of storage—Bivolo has some ideas. I’m thinking that Straub we stole a few years back—you burnt down the gallery?—it’d go nice on the west wall, over the door.”

Mick just grunted, zero appreciation for art. It actually made Len smile. “C’mon, the bar serves lunch. Let’s get some beers and catch up. Mrs. Karpenko—you remember her, the bakery?—just dropped off a fresh pie last night.”

They walked out front and grabbed a seat in one of the booths, waving over one of his staff for drinks and the pie, some food.

“So you gettin’ pies as payment now?”

Len screwed up his face in distaste. “I’ve told her five times to keep her damn money, and she couldn’t pay this month besides, hence the pie. I don’t care about taxes though and you know that. Half the block won’t listen.”

“Idiots.” Mick didn’t seem to have any compunctions about eating the pie though, taking a bite as soon as it came.

Len shook his head, staring at the slice on his plate. “We’re disrupting their way of life. This is our ‘territory’ now, whether we like it or not. The Santinis are on our border, there’s rumors that the Darbynians are rallying. The newspapers and the internet are full of meta-human activity with no one but a select few who have any idea what’s going on. People just want to know that when the shit goes down, someone will look out for them.”

“And that someone’ll be you?”

He shrugged and almost smirked. “Us. The Rogues.”

“Thought we were a band of criminals.”

“We are. So is the mafia and they protect their own. Look Mick—Central is my home, our home. Keystone’s no different. These people want me to look out for them if the Santinis or some asshole like Kyle Nimbus comes calling? I can do that.”
“For a price?”

He pursed his lips, titled his head a bit. He knew that nothing in life was free, but—“I don’t care about the money. People want to pay me, that’s their issue. I’ll reinvest in the community.” His smile was mordant. “Make myself into a philanthropist.”

Mick snorted but he dropped it. “Good pie at least.”

Len wanted a change of subject. “How’s Pam?”

Mick sipped his beer, picked up his coaster and tapped it against the table, “Oh, you know her.” He smiled but was looking down at the table.

“How’s Pam?”

He shook his head.

“That bad?”

“It’s the—what’d they call ‘em—neurofibrillary tangles. She’s going’ on 93, so ‘s no surprise, but it’s hard ‘cause ‘o what it does to the bleed. These tangles get all up near the part of the brain where the bleed cells are and make a mess of it—make cuts on her brain called lesions—so I don’t know when she’s happy or sad or anything most of the time now. Most of what comes through is confusion. ‘S why I had to visit for so long, needed to make sure she was doin’ okay.”

He didn’t really know what to say to that, taking a swig before replying. “She’s that old, huh? Time flies.”

“Sure does, Buddy.” Mick raised his glass and drank deeply from it.

“You goin’ back there then?”

“Not for a bit. Pammy’s strong and proud, kickin’ up a fuss that I’m spending all my time there ‘n I’m not out working, having fun, you know.”

“Her memory’s still okay then? She recognizes you?”

Mick shrugged. “Good ‘n bad days. She knows who I am, but mostly thinks I’m younger, back in my twenties ‘round when we first met.”

Len’s mind conjured up a picture of Mick in the 1980’s and it was hard not to smile. “Can’t blame her, you probably had hair back then.”

Mick laughed, “you’re one to talk.”

Len smiled and gave a little shoulder shrug. His hair was short because he liked it that way, though to be sure, Mick’s had been shorn as long as they’d known each other, probably to stop it from catching flame. More food—actual lunch, to sit alongside his untouched pie—came then and conversation devolved, Len hearing a little bit more about Pam. She was really a lovely old lady from the few times he’d met her—him being one of the only people in Mick’s life who had. She’d been in a care center in Keystone for almost ten years now, too proud to let Mick take care of her once her body and then slowly her mind had started to go; she refused to be a burden on him.

Before that though, she’d been a tour de force—born in the 1920’s in England into poverty, a
pickpocket for her childhood and into her teens, then signing up to be part of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, a female branch of the British army in the second World War. Len loved to hear her stories about those days. After that she’d moved to America, into Gotham where she’d met the love of her life, a woman named Angie. Angie passed almost twelve years ago. Her family was tied into the mafia around Gotham, something that had swept up both her and Pam in their younger years until they moved out to Central to make a clean break of it when the family wouldn’t accept the girls’ lifestyle. They also moved to run from reality, because in ’65 Mick was born, and Pam’s Manifest Mark appeared on her thigh—an intricate and teardrop shaped design that looked like a flame in the right light.

Thinking about it made Len almost smile. Pam was scared to death of her Mark, scared of having a baby as a Soulmate when she was over forty now, married. She was scared her Soulmate would be some man who wanted her, and wanted to take her away from her wife, regardless of her advancing age. Scared that Angie would leave her. So when she met Mick it was at first like all her fears were coming true—a young and single man, one with no connections who’d been travelling with a circus just a month prior, until the whole circus went up in flames.

Len knew all this because after telling Mick he had a Soulmate and confessing it was just a kid, Mick had laughed and slapped him on the back and told him not to worry. Then he’d taken him to meet Pam and learn their story. It had been both a comfort and a concern, because Pam had told him that she learned very soon that she needn’t have ever worried—not only did Mick have no interest in taking her from Angie, nor any sexual or romantic interest in her whatsoever, he made her life shine and shimmer in a way it hadn’t before.

For both her and Mick, it was like the family they’d never really had. They became best friends and she was a mentor to him, helping him channel his obsession with fire into outlets he could control, helping him sort through some of his lingering pain over his family’s death. He, on the other hand, was like a protector for her and Angie against their past in Gotham, was someone who could look out for them and love them unconditionally—both of them—and brought joy back into their lives. It really was touching to see them all laughing together when Len met them, totally carefree and at ease.

But Len didn’t want a familial Bond, even before he met Barry. He’d always wanted someone he could love, romantically and passionately. He already had a sibling to protect and—even against his own wishes at times—to mentor in his trade. He wanted someone just for him. Pam was of the opinion that if that’s what he wanted, if that’s what he needed, then that’s what fate had given him.

“What about you then, Len? Keepin’ busy while I’ve been gone? I see you’ve really cleaned up that old space in the back?”

Len was brought back to reality by Mick’s questions, pushing aside his food. “Busy is one way to put it. Mardon—the weather one?—he came around and we kicked up a nice mess, got a good score out of it and pissed off the pigs. He’s Bonded with Baez, just a head’s up.”

Mick whistled. “Been fun around here.”

“Something like that. There’s a new kid too, Pied Piper, he’s like our own resident Cisco Ramon.” He winced, recalling. “Things are a bit weird between me ‘n him right now, but don’t kick his ass for running his mouth, he’s got a… challenging personality.”

Mick was smirking in a knowing way. “You sleep with someone and he drop you again, Snart?”

Len almost rolled his eyes but leaned back instead, chagrin pulling at the corners of his mouth. “More the opposite—I dropped him.”
Mick almost choked on his beer. “Wha—” he coughed, “I’ve never seen you be choosy. How ugly is this kid?”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. He’s pretty but I wasn’t interested.”

“You? Not interested?”

Now he did roll his eyes. “How desperate do you think I am, Mick?”

The other raised his eyebrows but evaded the question. “So what’s so bad about this kid that you’re not interested, then?”

Len glared. “Why’s it so hard to believe I wasn’t in to him?”

Mick lowered his glass and his expression turned calculating. “What are you not telling me?”

Len hesitated then sighed. That hadn’t taken long. He leaned forward and clasped his hands. There was no reason not to tell Mick. Still, he felt his stomach churn. “There’s something else that’s happened since you’ve been gone. I found my Soulmate—and it’s a goddamn mess. Right now he won’t even talk to me.” He made sure to add that quickly, before Mick’s broadening grin could get wider or he could start spewing congratulations.

“This Piper kid, but you said—”

“No, not him. Someone else.”

“Who?”

His stomach clenched. Was it worth it, to tell him? Or should he instead say—“He’s a kid named Barry, a badge. He works at the CCPD as a forensic scientist.” There, now he could talk about Barry as Barry. It still felt crazy not to hide that information, to keep even Barry’s identity safe and hidden, but he needed to talk to someone that wasn’t Lisa about this. Lisa or Hartley.


If only he knew.

“Is he cute at least?”

“Gorgeous.”

“Gay?”

“Bisexual, I think. Gender isn’t an issue, he said.”

Mick took in his expression. “So just the issue of you being a wanted criminal?”

“Bingo. He’s worked a few of my cases, knows who I am, what I do. His adoptive father’s a detective, his sister’s fiancé is the cop who helped the Flash stop us that one time.” Len had done his research on Iris West and Edward Thawne.

Mick slapped the table with a rumbling laugh. “Damn, buddy, you’ve got it cut out for you, don’t you? This the universe telling you to go good?”

He frowned. “Better not be, because that isn’t happening.”
“Good. Hate to lose my best mate, ’specially when you’ve made us such a nice clubhouse.”

“Don’t worry, Mick, I’m not going anywhere. But things have been up and down with Barry, and right now he’s pissed thanks to—well there was the thing with Mardon, the police gala and all that. He and he foster father were there—the old man got hurt right in front of Barry, just his leg but Barry told me where to shove it after that. Then I…” he sighed, “then I slept with Piper.”

“You are an idiot.” He said it somehow as a monotone gravel-filled indictment of Len’s entire personality.

“I know.”

“And you wonder why you can’t hold down a relationship.”

“I know, Mick. But Barry was pretty adamant about not wanting me after the fight with Mardon. Wouldn’t talk to me for a whole month.”

“And now he definitely won’t.”

“Thanks.”

Mick grumbled and leaned forward. “You are an idiot, Snart, but you’re our idiot, okay? I’ll help you sort this out. Whenever I pissed off Pammy too bad, I used to get advice from Angie. Guess you can’t ask his friends and family for advice, considering you iced his old man.”

Len snorted. Asking Joe West for advice on Barry would get him arrested at best and shot at worst. Showing up at STAR Labs would only make Barry incensed, not that he expected Snow or Cisco to trust him for half a second with any advice on Barry. “No, I have history with most of them and the rest know my reputation. Captain Cold hasn’t exactly kept a low profile in this city.”

Mick nodded and carried on in his low grumble. “Shame. Angie always understood my side thanks to her family in Gotham—criminals, the lot of ’em. She helped make sense o’ why Pammy was pissed even when it made no sense at all. Your Barry just needs a criminal in the family to get you and make sense of him for you.”

Len sighed, then stopped, stock still. A criminal in the family. Barry’s father was in Iron Heights, for murder no less. And while normally that would be a mess since the man had killed Barry’s mother, he knew the kid visited his father as often as he could considering his schedule, not exactly a sign of animosity. It was a long shot, but at least Dr. Henry Allen would know about Barry, might be able to share some insight. But how… “Mick, I have a very bad idea.”

“That’s my favorite kind, buddy.”

Chapter End Notes

1) No, they aren’t breaking Henry out of prison. I know, crossed my mind too. But Len’s trying not to make Barry hate him.

2) To all the people who were excited to see Lisa mad at Len… nope. I imagine you might be disappointed. The Snart siblings are fiercely protective of one anther, and and
Lisa is actually the more ruthless of the two. She knows Len’s been waiting to meet this guy his whole life and he wouldn’t be so entirely stupid as to cheat on him. On top of that, Len is an abuse survivor whose never had a real (romantic) relationship, and barely even has friends, and Lisa knows that. She’s honestly scared for Len once she finds out what has been happening. Beyond that, in many ways, Lisa is meant to be a “translating” voice for the reader, since Len’s PoV doesn’t convey what he himself doesn’t acknowledge. Barry hurt Len, and scared him, then kissed him violently and did it to be cruel. I’m actually surprised I haven’t seen any readers condemning his actions with regards to the choking and wall-slamming yet...

I will say though that part of Barry's actions/reactions is that he's been considering Len not as his partner but as an adversary; he'd never hurt someone he considered a partner. Even so, their different perspectives mean that they have different reactions to those situations because Len did consider him a partner. There's a very real power balance going on that neither of them were all that conscious of.

3) I love Mick. So much. You guys don’t even understand. He’s my precious firestarter baby that I want to wrap blankets around (because he likes being warm) and cuddle. So precious. I didn’t plan to go into so much detail about Pam but a lot of people asked so I wrote it all out for y’all. But don’t feel too sad about Pam; they’ve had a really good run, and she’s had a very full and happy life up until now. Even with her dementia, she’s very proud and tough. She’s inspired by Peggy Carter in many ways, and Angie is inspired by Angie Martinelli from Agent Carter so… yeah 😊
Unmarked

Chapter Summary

Old Man by Neil Young and Cat's in the Cradle by Harry Chapin

(older songs because it's Henry's PoV, but also Avicii's The Nights came close)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a hot summer, and Iron Heights didn’t splurge too much on AC for the prisoners. Henry was used to it after all these years, but some of the new guys were really kicking up a fuss about it. He knew that the heat was always chased by storms around Central, always something to balance it out, and sure enough most nights there had been thunder and lightning to cool things down. The hotter the day, the better the storm.

The morning was hot one, set to be a scorcher. Henry could feel the humidity building in the atmosphere already, hearing some of the young bucks complaining from a table not too far down and it almost made him laugh. They’d complain about the heat and later they’d probably complain about the rain. When you were young, it was hard to be satisfied, to see the way the pendulum would swing one way and then the other. He was considering relaxing out in the yard and maybe finding one of his friends for a game of cards when he heard he had a visitor. He couldn’t help but be surprised, since it was first thing in the day still and Barry almost only ever visited in the evening.

“You making friends, Allen?” Rodriguez asked him. Most of the guards were fairly friendly with him after so many years, thanks mostly to his good behavior.

“It’s not Barry?” he asked, pausing at the door to the visiting center.

“Doesn’t look like your kid, said he was a reporter.”

A reporter? But a man, not Iris? Henry’s brow furrowed in confusion then he went to the to stall that was waiting for him, the phones with the line of bulletproof glass between him and whoever it was. He sat down and—

This was not good. The other man—Leonard Snart, Captain Cold, a man who had hurt his son and knew Barry was the Flash—was waiting for him on the other side of the glass. He was wearing a tan-ish cream colored suit, had a pair of glasses on with a notepad and a press badge, one that said ‘Lincoln Smith.’ Henry picked up the phone, slowly, carefully. Snart waited until he did before lifting his receiver.

“Dr. Allen. I’m guessing from your expression you know who I am?” He waited for Henry to nod and he did. It was hard not to recognize the man—between the news broadcast when he’d kidnapped Caitlin to what he’d done to hurt the Flash to the fact that you don’t forget the face of one of the only criminals to break out of Iron Heights. It had been the same summer Henry arrived to the prison, so it wasn’t like he’d forget. “That’s good, makes this a lot easier. Now you might be tempted to call attention to us, but don’t. I’m here to talk about Barry.”
Henry blinked. “You know I heard you were smart. This doesn’t seem too smart to me, Snart. What’re you going to do if I call the guards?”

Snart leaned back, eyes narrowed and he took off the glasses to drop them next to his notepad. “My friend Mick Rory is in the parking lot with more firepower than you can imagine, Doctor. Unless you want a few guards going up in flames, I wouldn’t make any rash decisions.”

So he brought back up. Not that Henry had really been planning on calling a guard anyway, but it was good to know. Hell, maybe it was a bluff, but Henry wasn’t going to risk the innocent lives around him.

“You and Rory, huh? And tell me, what’s the point of taking all this risk to come up here and talk to me? You really think I’ll tell you anything about my son, Cold? Or are you here to kidnap me like you did with his friend Caitlin? Because you’re barking up the wrong tree if you think I’ll come quietly, or let you hurt Barry.”

“So this is where he gets his stubbornness from. At least he comes by it honestly.”

“I mean it. You think I care about what happens to me? I don’t. But I know you know who he is and I won’t let you hurt my son.”

Snart nodded and shifted slightly forward. Maybe he’d been waiting for Henry to confirm he knew that Barry was the Flash, or maybe he was just getting ready to try and convince Henry of something that he was sure he was going to throw back at the man. “I’m not here to find another one of Barry’s weaknesses or to hurt him, Dr. Allen. Quite the opposite—I’m here to ask for your advice on how I might go about making amends.” He pointed a finger when he said it and Henry wouldn't have guessed he'd have a flair for dramatics outside that costume he wore.

“Amends? Why should I believe that you’re—what, extending an olive branch to him? Why would I believe for one second that you won’t take anything I give you and turn it around to hurt Barry?”

“Because I have a vested interested in his continued well-being.”

Henry appraised him for a long minute as Snart stared back, the picture of cool indifference. Barry had been seemed off the last two times he came by, so could this be connected? And then, looking at the forced relaxation of the posture, the keen eyes studying Henry himself, he wondered—“You and my son, there’s something going on. What have you been doing to him, Snart?”

“Doing? Nothing. Just hoping to find some level ground with the kid. Get on his good side, get closer. Not to hurt him, Doctor. Like I said, I’ve got a vested interest in Barry’s good health,” He leaned in as he said it, almost predatory and Henry glared.

“Vested interest, Snart? What the hell is going on? Either you tell me or you won’t get another word out of me.” Henry couldn't quite keep the concern out of his voice when he said it. This was his son.

“Then I guess it was a waste to come here.” He moved to stand and Henry growled into the receiver —

“You don’t need to bluff about leaving, Snart. You came all the way up here, risking your freedom—for what? What’s going on between you and Barry?”

He paused, standing, and for a second his confident veneer gave way to something that almost looked like it could be honest. “It’s not my place to tell.”

“If you believed that you’d never have come here in the first place. You’re underhanded, Snart, you
don’t play by any rules but your own.”

The man seemed to consider that, tilting his head to the side but eventually sitting back down. “You seem to know a bit about me, Allen.”

Between the news, his memories of a younger Leonard Snart in prison, one who beat his own father’s face in in the yard before breaking out shortly after with an arsonist—the same arsonist who came as back up for him today—yeah, he knew a little bit about Cold.

“I know enough. Now, are you gonna’ tell me the truth or keep pretending that you’re willing to walk away from this conversation?”

Snart breathed in through his nose and Henry had to wonder what the hell could be so important to have him here, to have him staring across the glass like if he tried hard enough he would be able to drill the answers out of Henry’s brain.

“Barry is my Soulmate.”

Henry forgot to breathe. The next second took too long, clock forgetting to tick. He felt like he’d been punched square in the gut, winded. He searched the man’s face for a lie, for a joke, but it was tight and serious, his voice had dropped that sardonic lilt when he said it. Henry’s clinical side flared to life, instantly recalling everything he knew about Soulmates, despite being Unmarked himself, recalling everything he knew about Barry’s Mark.

“Prove it.”

Snart nodded slowly, as if he’d been ready for the question. He spoke slow and clear, each word a nail in the coffin. “Barry was born at 5:32pm on a Tuesday twenty five years ago. I was seventeen. He was Born Bonded. His Mark is on his right side, right”—he tapped his side with two fingers—“here. It’s like a snowflake with uneven lines, jagged but symmetric. If that doesn’t convince you, I know a lot more about him than that. I know he used to be scared of the dark when he was a kid; that he has some issue with receiving gifts; I know his shoe size and his favorite musical artist and I know that he’s—”

He broke off. Henry felt like his chest was going to burst, so tense even his legs were getting stiff. “He’s what, Snart?”

The man—Barry’s Soulmate—cleared his throat, then huffed out a breath, looking to the side with a half-smile. “That right now he’s feeling accomplished, maybe at a crime scene because he always feels better at those than in his lab. He’s full and I think he just ate not too long ago. And later he’ll feel nervous and excited to see you, then guilty when he leaves. He has both times he’s visited since we Bonded.”

Henry closed his eyes for a minute and sighed. What the hell kind of NAB connection could transfer that much detail? Could Snart be lying? But there was no way, not really, that this made sense otherwise. Occam’s Razor said Snart was telling the truth. Years of being a Doctor had trained him to cope with stressful situations, not to mention the stress of prison life, but he wasn’t used to being thrown for quite this kind of loop. “I knew he was hiding something,” he said eventually. “I figured it was his Flash business. Not… this.”

Snart nodded.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s… it’s a work in progress.”
Henry didn’t doubt that for a second. And then he remembered what the man had come here for. “Let me guess—you’re only here because you screwed up already, and you can’t exactly go to Joe West for advice.”

The other gave a single nod, more to the side then ahead, eyebrows lifting for a second in acknowledgment.

“What did you do?”

“Aside from a long history of hurting him and kidnapping his friends?” He met Henry’s eyes. “I slept with someone else.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’m increasingly aware of that.”

“You might actually be every parent’s worst nightmare for their child—you’re too old, you’re too violent, and apparently you’re too promiscuous.”

He delivered it like a deadpan like and Snart seemed a weird mix of chagrined and amused and then totally unapologetic, arching an eyebrow. “Well this has been a helpful conversation.”

“You think I’m supposed to be happy about this? That you cheated on my son and now you’re here for my advice?”

“Barry and I aren’t in a relationship. He’s been adamant about that, actually. Things were starting to come around though, before I pulled off a heist with Weather Wizard.” Snart paused and Henry nodded. He’d heard about that, it was in the news and Barry had mentioned Joe was injured. “He wasn’t talking to me, told me to drop the whole idea of us being anything but what we were—‘stuck’ as Soulmates. So I found someone to let off some steam with.”

Henry just felt dumbfounded. “I mean, I knew you were an idiot, but are you an idiot? No, don’t give me that look, Snart, I’m serious. You think because Barry is mad at you that suddenly you’re not together? My son is a hopeless romantic—he wouldn’t just give up on his Soulmate so easily. Barry gives people the cold shoulder when he’s mad because that’s what he’s been trained to do growing up in Joe’s house, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care—in fact, I’d say its the opposite. He wouldn’t bother to ignore you if he didn’t want you to come around and fix it. He thinks that’s what you do with people you care about. And you sleeping around is just confirmation to him that you don’t care as deeply about this as he does.”

“That doesn’t even make sense. Trust me when I say he’s the one who doesn’t care about me—he made it clear he wanted nothing to do with me after the gig with Mardon until he decided to get mad at me for being with this other guy.”

Henry almost felt pity for the other guy—not because he was dejected, but because it must be hard to make it through life being that stupid. “Look, Snart, I know Barry can be stubborn, but you can’t expect that he’s gonna’ be okay with you bursting into an event where his family is going to be, getting them hurt? That’s his biggest fear. After Barry’s mother was murdered almost fifteen years ago, he had a need to protect the people in his life. So his Soulmate putting his family in harm’s way, the people he cares about most? Of course he’s not gonna’ want to see you—he’s hurt. Did you even try to apologize?”

“I did.”

Henry resisted from rolling his eyes. “How?”
“I told him I was sorry West got hurt, and I was. He’s made it clear he doesn’t want gifts from me, or contact at all since then, so I couldn’t give him anything to make up for it. If he’d just come and talk to me, maybe he’d get that I was there to make sure Mardon wouldn’t kill either of the Wests. It’s not like I want to see Barry in pain.”

“So you haven’t apologized. Saying ‘sorry’ doesn’t cut it, Snart. That’s not an apology. That’s not a way to make amends at all, not to him. Barry’s the type of guy who eats a ghost pepper in front of a room full of people just to apologize for a miscommunication. He does grand romantic gestures. He speaks with actions, not with words.”

Snart blinked, looking actually surprised. “I... see.”

“Didn’t figure you’d be so slow on the draw, Snart.”

The other man glared and Henry sighed. How was this his life—offering relationship advice to convicted felon sneaking in to a prison to talk about his son, while he, the innocent one, was behind bars? Some days, you just had to trudge forward through the oddity.

“Look, Barry would want you to show him you care before he’s ready to listen—to prove that you care about what he wants, show that his needs matter too. If you’re just selfishly doing whatever you want without caring how he’ll feel about it, he’ll feel like you don’t care about him as a person, and he’d be right.”

“Of course I care about him. He’s my Soulmate.”

“But do you care about him because he’s your Soulmate, or do you care about him because he’s Barry?”

He saw Snart’s eyes widen, the gears clicking into place, the light bulb going off. “I…”

“I figured as much.” Henry scrubbed a hand over his face and then leaned forward on his elbows. “I sometimes wonder if people without Soulmates have an easier time of it, to be honest. With us Unmarked folks, there’s no lingering doubt of whether we would have met and fallen in love if we weren’t pulled together by the Mark and Bonded. We get to choose the course of our own love. With Soulmates, with people like you and Barry, it’s impossible to say. Fate and your Mark says you’re destined for something, that you should love each other in some form, balance each other out, complete each other. But if you do all that, is it because you would have even if you hadn’t been Marked, or is it like a self-fulfilling prophecy if it happens?”

Snart’s expression was neutral and indecipherable, but he shifted back in his seat and it was enough to tell Henry he was uncomfortable. “I’ve never thought of it that way. But I can see how Barry may have had some similar line of reasoning. Influenced by you, no doubt.”

“Barry makes up his own mind about things. He’s the one who made me see it that way, not the other way around—back when he was a teenager, no less.”

“Oh?”

Henry wasn’t really sure if he should be telling this to Snart. On the one hand, he was Barry’s Soulmate and that was important. On the other, Barry and him obviously weren’t getting along. But he went with his gut, trying to do what was best for his son, so he nodded and pulled his seat in a bit.

“He used to worry that if he found his Soulmate, it would be someone who loved him only because they were supposed to. Barry was in love with someone else at the time, a girl, and he would wonder if people can love those who aren’t their Soulmate so strongly, how can he be sure his Soulmate is
the one he’s supposed to be with. At the time, I thought he was just crushing so hard that he didn’t want to find his Soulmate and distract his feelings from this girl, but he had some good points and they never wavered.”

“This girl…”

Henry waved his hand. “You’re the one sleeping around, not him. She has her own Soulmate and she’s happy.” Henry felt fondly toward Iris West and Eddie Thawne, wanted the absolutely best for both of them. That they’d met the night Barry fell into his coma was a tragedy, but he’d always been happy for both of them. Eddie was a good kid, after all.

“So what can I do to prove to Barry that I care about him, and not just his Mark?”

Henry sighed. “You can start by caring about him and not just his Mark.”

“I do.” The words were ground out and angry, but Snart leaned forward sharply to deliver them, real intensity in his expression. “You think I would come all the way up to this place if I didn’t care about him?”

He sighed. “Can I ask you, Snart—how old did you say you were when you were Marked?”

Henry nodded. “So at seventeen, after a whole childhood of growing up thinking you won’t have a Soulmate, almost ready to go forth into the world in your own way, you suddenly become Marked. I'm guessing you don’t feel too much obligation—your Soulmate is a newborn and you know you’re most likely gonna’ wait twenty years to meet him, and you get a picture in your head of what life will be like, because you’re older and you can make those plans. You’ve seen both sides, Marked and Unmarked.”

Snart nodded, eyes narrowed.

“Right—so now take Barry. He's a BM, Born Marked. Like other BM’s, he had no idea how old his Soulmate would be. We figured it would be someone a year or two older, like it is in most cases. Certainly not more than five. So he had this idea, and maybe it was a nebulous and changing one because he had less information, but one that was obviously all wrong and there's that risk to it, that insecurity. But even more than that—Barry grew up feeling, his entire life, literally, that he belonged to someone he’d never met. From the moment he was born, he was waiting to meet someone. He asked about the Mark as soon as he was old enough to understand the concept and we didn’t shy away from explaining it to him—neither me or Nora was Marked and we were so excited for him to be Born Marked.”

Snart was nodding, following along and Henry felt a bit like the old days when he was giving a lecture to new med students on protocols. Things that should be obvious just sometimes weren’t to people.

“So later, growing up, Barry always felt like he wasn’t free to love or belong to others, even when he was in love with that girl I mentioned, each of them were Marked for other people; it put a shaky distance between them because of it. You spent your life waiting for Barry to catch up, knowing the pitfalls, knowing your own lifestyle. Barry spent his whole life hoping every hand he shook would be yours, looking around every corner and under every stone, waiting to be yours.”

He sighed and paused for a second. Snart’s eyebrows were climbing, but there was more Henry wanted to say, needed to really. The important parts. “Especially when his mother died and I was put
here, Barry felt alone and wanted to meet you. He’s been alone most of his life after that day—very few friends in school, bullied because he was small and skinny and had a habit of picking fights, and then bullied later because of my imprisonment and his staunch refusal to give up on my innocence. He’s been afraid to open up to people since then because whenever he tried to tell people the truth about that night, they told him he was crazy or lying, even the people closest to him, even Joe. And then Barry grew up and took a job in law enforcement where he doesn’t fit in, where everyone still sees him with the stigma of his name. In all that, Barry has always wanted someone who would care about him, believe him, who would look past what he was to who he was. So he’s always been afraid that being Marked would mean someone would only care for him because he was their Soulmate and not because of who he was, because he's wanted a real connection, someone who would love him for who he was, all strangeness included, without wavering or doubting.”

Snart just looked floored. His forehead was wrinkled as his brain worked trying to process it. Henry’s heart hurt just saying it all, seeing the man work through the realizations. It was interesting, if nothing else, to see a man hailed as Central City’s most dangerous criminal reduced to no words. Finally, he managed to say, “I do. Barry is amazing, all strangeness included. I’ve been fascinated by him since the moment we met—it’s not just the Mark.”

“You met him as the Flash, that’s different.”

He shook his head. “I work with a guy who produces hand-held lightning and hail, and another who controls people’s emotions by looking in their eyes. It’s not the powers, it was never the powers, it’s always just been… Barry.”

Snart looked like he was only just realizing he was in love with Barry, that sort of confused reverence that made him look, for a moment, like a much younger man, and Henry found himself actually starting to smile. He still couldn’t help but feel a little sad. It was good, but it was also strange. Leonard Snart being the person who could love all of Barry, he’d never have come up with that in his wildest dreams.

“Good. Then you’ll understand. Barry doesn’t do half-measures, Snart. He has no concept of middle ground. Even if he’s been distant with you since he found out you were Bonded”—a question he was definitely going to be asking Barry about, because why was this the first he was hearing of it?—“he’s considering himself yours and yours alone. He might not admit it, but it’s who he is. So while you were soothing your ails with someone else, he was probably taking that as you rejecting him, saying you’d rather be with someone who isn’t him.”

“He knows I want to be with him. I’ve told him so, more than enough times.”

“And now he thinks you’ve changed your mind and decided he’s too much trouble. It’s not the first time he would have been rejected by someone. And remember, waiting his whole life to meet you, he wouldn’t give up on you so easily no matter what you did. And by the sounds of it, hurting West and his friends, you've done a lot.”

Snart looked down. “The hour’s almost up. Tell me, please… what can I do to make this up to him?”

Henry looked at Snart for real, taking him in. Barry’s Soulmate. His broad shoulders, big arms, hard face—his past and history. Of course he was more than Captain Cold, more than just a criminal. For him to be Bonded with Barry, Henry realized he had to be a good man, a man with a soul that might be trodden on but was still burning away inside, strong and fierce. He didn’t believe for a second that Barry would share a soul with anyone less than a truly worthy person. So he felt his own gaze soften looking at the man who would probably be his future son-in-law, Leonard Snart.

“Let me talk to him.”
“Hiya, slugger.”

Barry was across from him and shot him a small smile. “Hi, dad.”

Henry had spent the whole humid afternoon debating how to tell Barry about Leonard showing up at the prison. Some people might sit back and try to draw it out, wait for Barry to come forward with the whole Soulmates thing, but Henry knew Barry was stubborn and good at keeping secrets. He’d learned it for survival, hiding the truth about his background from his peers in college, hiding the truth about his beliefs of Henry’s innocence from his teachers and later his colleagues so that he didn’t have to do ‘pointless’ counseling and could fit in at the police station, and then hiding his identity. But Henry never wanted to try and trap Barry in a lie or his secrets—the kid had a right to them and Henry didn’t feel he could ever complain, not with how much Barry tried, not with how loyal he was.

“Had an interesting day here, today, kiddo.”

“Oh yeah?”

“A visitor, this morning. Helped me understand why you’ve been so down recently.”

“A visitor?” Barry leaned forward, suddenly tense and Henry didn’t drag it out.

“Leonard Snart.”

“He came here? He—I’m gonna’ kill him.”

Henry shook his head, “Barry—”

“How dare he? I can’t believe he would use you to get to me.”

“He’s not. He came here to ask for advice.”

“Advice?”

“On how to apologize to you.”

“I—” Barry’s mouth opened then snapped closed. He swallowed. “Dad…”

“It’s okay, Barry. He told me about you two, that he’s your Soulmate.”

Barry’s face screwed up, mouth tight, eyes going red and Henry’s chest ached. If he wasn’t sure before, he certainly was now. Again, always, he wished he could reach through the glass and hug his son, comfort him.

“Barry, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” He shook his head, sniffing. “Dad, you know who he is, what he’s done. And for a while I thought that things were gonna’ be okay, but now it’s—”

Henry nodded. “I know. He told me. First about things between you, he mentioned that police gala
night that was on the news, and then about… he slept with someone else?”

His son’s eyes widened and then he shook his head. “He—it was just a—they didn’t go all the way. I could feel—“ he cut off abruptly, blushing, and Henry winced on his behalf. Not the most fun conversation to have with one’s father. “How much did Len tell you? Did he mention our bleed?”

“Your bleed?”

Now Barry was frowning, calming down, wiping his eyes with the back of his wrist to dispel the extra moisture there. ‘I take that as a ‘no.’ It’s, ah, it’s extra strong. Caitlin explained that it’s because we were fighting it—mostly my fault, I kind of sprinted away during the first hour we were Bonded. I guess that made the bleed develop stronger, so now it’s… we can feel a lot, not just emotions but sensations. It’s been weird.”

That explained that, but, “You mean you felt when he was—”

“I could turn it off. I did. We can suppress it. We’re not supposed to because that just makes it worse in the long run but I… I didn’t want to feel that.”

“Barry…” Snart had definitely not mentioned that.

“It’s okay. Honest. I’m fine.”

It was such a lie. “It’s okay to be upset, you know. Your Soulmate hurt you.”

“We weren’t together. I told him so.”

Was Barry making excuses to protect his Soulmate or was he just being himself?

“That doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt, son.”

Barry nodded but didn’t answer, curling in on himself.

“Can I ask, Barr—what’d you want from this? From Snart?”

He pursed his lips, face tight. “I… I thought I wanted to try, to make it work. I thought I wanted him to apologize and to fix it. But now I don’t know anymore.” He looked down at Henry’s shirt as he spoke, shaking his head in frustration the same way he did whenever he was stuck on a puzzle he couldn’t crack.

“Look, Barr, I’m the last person who will tell you not to be pissed. Be angry. Give Snart a piece of your mind if that’s what you want, and make sure he doesn’t walk all over you. And I’m not gonna’ tell you what to do next. But if you do want to make things work out with this man, there’s something you should know.”

“I…” Barry hesitated. “I told him I hated him—or this, us. I shut him out when I just wanted him to fix it and instead I… he doesn’t want me anymore.”

“I need you to be honest with me, Barry—do you still want to fix it?”

Barry looked up, eyes shining but he nodded. Henry felt his chest release its tight grip even as a weight dropped into his stomach. He ached with hope that this would work out for his son. He ached with hope that what he was about to say was the right thing to say, was right at all.

“That man, Leonard, he’s an idiot but he cares about you, might even love you if he could figure out what that means, however bad he is at showing it. He came up here on risk of imprisonment so that
he could ask me how to best apologize to you. He didn’t want an easy answer, he just wanted to know how to make amends because he knew he hurt you. And when I explained exactly why and how he hurt you by cheating on—”

“Wait, you did what?!”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him anything you wouldn’t want me to, Barry. I promise.” His son settled down a bit again. “I just explained to him what it was like for you, growing up, and how you see the world. I get the impression that he wants to be good to you, Barry, but he sees things different, and he doesn’t know how. And I’m not saying that’s an excuse or a reason to hurt you and your friends because it is not. I’m saying that if you had any doubt about how he feels—how he still feels, even after being with someone else—you mean the world to him. It’s painted on his face when he talks about you—about Barry Allen, not just as a Soulmate or you as the Flash.”

Barry’s eyebrows were together, pained all over again, confused and hurt. “How can he care? He hurt Joe, even after we Bonded. He’s hurt Cisco and Caitlin both before—he’s betrayed us all. And I… he just does whatever he wants. He said he wouldn’t hurt my family and he did. He said he wouldn’t hurt me and he did.”

Henry sighed, “Well, he’s a bit of an idiot, I’ll give you that.”

“Idiot? He’s a psychopath,” Barry hung his head to hide his face. “I’m Bonded to a psychopath.”

Henry winced. “I don’t think he’s completely lacking a conscience, kiddo. Maybe repressing it, but I don’t think it doesn’t exist, not unless he’s also very good at pretending. I’ve seen enough psychopaths in here to recognize one from the other.”

“Then why can he just do these things—how can he steal and hurt and—he’s killed people. How can he kill people so easily if he has a conscience?”

Henry frowned, wanted to reach out, wanting to hug Barry. “I’m not excusing his past actions, son. I’m really not. I think Snart’s a dangerous man and he’s done some very bad things. If nothing else, got a lot of ground to cover just for that before he’s even close to making amends. But in here, you see all types of killers Barr. Some people kill for fun, but others can kill because they have to, or think they have to, they’ve learned to live with that. It doesn’t make it okay, but it doesn’t mean he doesn’t care at all.” He said the words more confidently than he felt. He wasn’t sure how Snart could ever really go about making it okay, reconciling what he’d done, but he hoped for Barry’s sake that the man found a way.

His son’s face twisted, “I… I know that not all killing is murder. Joe’s killed, the Arrow has killed. I don’t like it, but I get it. But even if Len wasn’t a killer, how could he sleep with someone else if he cares about me? Knowing I’d feel it?”

Henry was reminded that Barry was loyal to a fault. Almost a third of Unmarked couples had infidelity, but Barry was the type of person who’d loved Iris West half his life. Infidelity just didn't make sense to Barry, and whenever Henry thought about how Barry saw the world, it didn't make sense to him either. “I can’t say, Barr. I think it would help if you talked to him though, because from what he said, he honestly thought you were done with him until—well until he did what he did, I guess. And I was half convinced you were done with him, all things considered. So if you’re not, you need to let him know. I don’t mean let him off the hook, but let him know where you stand, and what you need from him now.”

Barry swallowed but nodded, face tight. “Thanks, Dad. I—you’re taking this so much better than I expected.”
He sat back with a sigh. “I don’t care who your Soulmate is, son, I just hate to see you so sad. Why, what’d you expect me to say?”

“I don’t know, I—he’s a criminal. I’ve been scared that… being Bonded to someone like him, I thought it might mean something—like maybe I’m not supposed to be a hero, like maybe I’m no better than him. I feel his anger and I… I’ve done some stupid things, I’ve lashed out when I didn’t mean to. And I know that’s not how the bleed works but I—it’s hard not to think about. That maybe we’re Bonded because I’m not a good person.” He swallowed and there was real fear on his face.

“That’s not at all how it works, Barr. We all lash out sometimes—it sounds like you’ve been under a lot of stress, it’s normal to boil over if you’ve been keeping it all in. Why, is that what your friends had to say about it, that being Soulmates with Snart means you’re somehow like him?” Henry’s eyebrows drew down, ready to make a call or two if he needed to, because no one had better be telling Barry he wasn’t a good person because of who his Soulmate was.

“I… I haven’t told them yet, about Len and me. I think Caitlin might have some idea but I haven’t told anyone.”

Henry’s jaw almost dropped. And here he thought it was just him and maybe Joe West in the dark. “That’s a hell of a burden to carry on your own, son.”

“I didn’t want anyone to worry.” Barry shifted in his seat and Henry didn’t call him on the lie. There was no point, it was probably a million reasons in one why he didn’t come forward with this.

“They’re your friends, they’ll worry about you no matter what. But it’s no one’s decision but yours who to tell and when to tell them. I gotta’ say though, Barr, I don’t think anyone will think there’s something wrong with you because of who your Soulmate is. Not anyone who knows you.”

Barry sighed and shifted his grip on his phone receiver, expression earnest as he gazed up at Henry. “I… I’ve been scared to get close to him, Dad, to let myself feel—fall—to open up. Because I don’t know how to make this work, to make it make sense and I know I can’t run from it, but now I’m scared because most of me doesn’t want to run from it. I’ve been waiting my whole life and I don’t know what to do—it’s not fair to my friends and family to make them spend time with Len, it’s not even fair to the people of Central, but I can’t stand the thought that Cisco and Caitlin, Iris and Joe, that my family will reject him.”

Henry’s heart ached for his son. “Your friends will come around, Barry. Or you’ll make it work.”

Barry looked disconsolate, and there wasn’t much Henry could do here to change that. “Thanks for listening. Thanks for understanding. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“It’s okay, you don’t owe me an explanation. I just want you to know that I love you and I want you to be happy. And I’ll do anything I can—which isn’t much in here, but I hope more than nothing—to make sure you’re okay. You can always talk to me about this, about him, and anything. I hope you know that.”

“I do. Thanks, Dad.”

Henry smiled, feeling some part of him relax. What Barry must be going through, it was too much for him to think about, but at least he could show him that he wasn’t alone.

“D’you honestly think… do you think he could be a better person?”

Henry dragged a hand over his head, considering how to answer that. “I don’t know about good and evil, heroes and villains. I know that most people do the best with what they’re given. Some people...
do awful things because they can, fueled by hate and malice, but from what I’ve seen, I don’t think that’s Snart. I don’t think that fate would Bond you to someone like that, Barry. You care too much and you’re too wonderful and amazing and bright to have a Soulmate who’s that cruel.”

Barry nodded, a little unsteady still but Henry could see he was coming around to feeling better. “I think I… I think we pushed each other into where we are now, at least recently. I guess I…” he scrubbed his hand through his hair. “I should’ve talked to him.”

“It’s hard to talk when you’re upset, Barry. But if you want things with you and Leonard to change, you’ll have to at least be honest with him about what you want and what you’re feeling. Taking time to cool down is important too, but letting other people know where your head is at can help. Communication is important for any relationship, son.”

He heaved a sigh, sat back and nodded. “Right, yeah, I know that. I should... yeah, I should talk to him. I should try to meet him halfway.” He seemed more calm now, more collected, and Henry smiled.

“Maybe not the worst idea to talk. Don’t hesitate to give him a little hell, though, slugger. He’s been an ass, holding him accountable won’t hurt.”

Barry smiled back, watery but with enough of his usual fire. “Oh don’t worry, I’ve definitely got a few choice words for Len next time I see him.”

Chapter End Notes

I love Henry. He doesn’t play games like “why didn’t you tell me you met your Soulmate” because he trusts his son and respects his right to privacy. He also checks to make sure Barry actually does want to make things work with Len before he starts in with anything else because if Barry is content to just leave things now, he knows it’s not his place to meddle. And he navigates the situation without excusing Len and trying to make sure Barry won’t either. At the same time, he reminds Barry that communication is important, not just for Len but for Barry—he won’t ever have a healthy relationship if he can’t be open and honest with himself and his partner. Basically, he told these idiots everything I wanted to tell them myself. Yay Henry!

I gotta’ say though, I angsted a lot about how to get the dialogue in this chapter right, particularly Barry’s lines. Trying to pinpoint which of Barry’s issues/struggles with Len to focus on here, what he would tell his father. I’ve been editing this chapter for over a month because it was written *ages* ago (I mean like, I wrote it before the friggen police gala) and I kept making changes.

Anyway, in the next chapter –THEY WILL FINALLY TALK. Remember to breath.
Marked and Waiting

Chapter Summary

Sic Transit Gloria (Glory Fades) by Brand New and Stay by Rihanna

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Where are you?

Len blinked. The text was from Barry. The kid had been running for the last few hours after his evening visit to his father and Len wasn’t really expecting a text or anything right away. By nature, he wasn’t one to give out his location, especially not too keen to give up his Rogues bar to the Flash, so he stepped outside before answering, heading toward his motorcycle. It was hot as hell outside earlier that day but the night was cooling off, a late August storm rolling in, making him glad for the sweater he’d changed into after leaving the prison that morning.

About to drive home.

Address?

Len swallowed. Was this for real? What the hell had Henry Allen said to get Barry to contact him that very night? And he was coming to Len’s home? He texted back his address, trying not to overthink it, not to worry that he was going to arrive home to the CCPD at his door. After the revelations provided by Dr. Allen, he was still working on to how to approach Barry, what to say to make sense of their divide. The bleed was still full of tumultuous emotions, storms and anger, but there were new feelings in it now that he focused, anxiety and things like static, hard to place and obviously complex. It beat the anguish, at least.

He pulled up outside his house to Barry leaning next to the door in his black sweater. In the dim light, sun tucked behind the horizon and shadowed by the rolling clouds, the first few drops of rain, Barry held some almost otherworldly grace, all cheekbones and smooth skin, tense jaw. He was beautiful. Len wished he had a better track record with beautiful things, but somehow they always ended up ruined in his hands.

Len stepped out of the garage where he parked his bike, wished he felt less nervous. He could keep it off his face but there was no hiding in the bleed.

“Barry.”

“We need to talk.”

A rain drop hit his forehead, another on his cheek then shoulder. Len hopped up the steps and Barry moved for him to unlock the door, putting over a foot of space between them. He tried to clamp down on his emotions, each and every one of them, and locked the door behind him on instinct, directing Barry to his living room. Barry didn’t waste time glancing around. Neither sat. They stood five feet apart, air charged, coiled like a loaded spring. Rain drops started to hit the window.

Barry drew in a breath and erupted.
“My dad, Len?! You went to talk to my dad?!”

“I—”

“NO! No excuses! Are you insane?! They could have caught you, and then what? Or what about what would happen if someone saw the security footage and wanted to figure out why Captain Cold was talking to Henry Allen?! Or what about not stalking down my dad at all, and how about not hanging up when I call you begging, how about not hurting my goddamn family, Len?!”

He pulled in heavy, angry breaths and then he blurred forward, into Len’s space and he took a half step back on the carpeted ground but Barry was just there, angry and low now.

“I was this close to trying to make things work even after what you did then you went out and decided I wasn’t worth the wait.”

He swallowed, throat tight, face inches from the tears in Barry’s eyes, unshed but wet and angry. Len couldn’t look away.

“You told me we were through and I believed you meant it. Popular opinion says I’m an idiot for taking you at your word on that one.”

Barry exhaled slowly before stepping back and dragging both hands through his hair, glancing away then back at Len.

“I get it, okay? I told you were we done but I just wanted you to prove you gave a damn about me.”

Not matter what Allen had said, that was never going to make sense to Len. He focused his gaze on Barry. “How is respecting what you asked me to do not giving a damn, kid? You told me to back off and I did.”

“I also told you not to hurt my family and it’s not like you listened then! Your selective attention—”

“West was an accident, one I tried to avoid—”

“Not hard enough, obviously.”

Len grit his teeth. Obviously. Barry stood straighter and glared, “And it’s not like you listened when I asked you to stop.”

Fuck. Len closed his eyes for a brief second as the world lurched under him. “Barry I’m—”

“Don’t.”

Len had reached out and Barry stepped back, eyes flashing briefly to meet his and then away again, reddening around the edges, lips pursing and tightening, face screwing up with the obvious effort of holding back. Barry wouldn’t look at him, jaw tight and tense, jutting a bit, but Len could feel it anyway, the nuances of his emotions, their proximity turning up the dial on the amount that was transferring. And fuck did the kid feel things so deeply. There were hot bursts of emotion hitting Len then scaling back. It all was raw and brittle, too quick and then slipping through his fingers for him to get a hold on all the different emotions, just a miasma of pain and confusion.

“You’re in pain, Barry. I just want to help you deal with it.”

“Deal with—you caused it! You caused it when you hurt Joe and you caused it when you hurt me—and did you think asking my dad for advice would erase that? I can’t believe you were crazy enough
to go to Iron Heights!” He snarled it, turning on Len again, always ready to meet a challenge.

Len forced his voice to remain cool, not to rise to the heat and yell like Barry was. “What did you expect me to do, Barry? You wouldn't talk to me. I couldn’t ask West or your pals from STAR Labs for advice. You were aching and I figured you couldn’t detest me more than you already did. It seemed worth it talk to the man.”

“Lots of things seem worth it to you, Len? Like stealing the sword to the city? How about sleeping with some tramp when I—” he choked off the words, face screwing up, tight and twisted.

Len focused on the easier part of that, the part that didn’t involve Joe West in the hospital for a few days, and he implored Barry to understand, “I thought any chance that existed between us was over, kid. You made it clear and I took it for what it was. So when the opportunity for sex arose and I took it. I’m used to letting off steam from time to time. That was it, Barry, and if I thought I had a chance with you I wouldn’t have done it. You have to understand that.”

Barry was shaking his head, slowly and glaring at everything and nothing, fixing his gaze on some point to the side, defensive tension in every line of his body. “So that’s it? You’ll sleep with anyone when the opportunity arises?”

Len pursed his lips, eyebrow arching despite himself. “I would sleep with only you, if you were halfway interested. But since you’re not, I really didn’t plan on spending the rest of my life celibate.”

“It was one night!”

“Barry, you told me were through and then you called a month later halfway through a blowjob. What did you expect me to do?”

“To stop!”

“So that you could hang up and never talk to me again? So I could go back to wanting things I couldn’t have?” He heard his own voice and it was too angry, too much of a growl but his hackles were up.

“Is it so much to ask for you to be patient?! To not go and find some warm body or to stop when I ask?!”

“Is it so much to ask to not want to be alone for one goddamn night?!” That was too loud, too honest. The words were torn out of him and he almost tried to swallow them back, clenching his jaw around them. His throat felt hot and he didn’t know where to go from here, what to say that wouldn’t be too raw, but Barry was sucking in a breath, shaky and then—

“Fine.”

“Fine what?” Len tried to pull back the urge to snap but didn’t succeed. Barry was more calm now though, taking another steadying breath, standing straight and looking less like he was about to blow his top at any second. It helped Len cool down, even as Barry answered his question.

“I won’t—I can’t—forgive you for hurting innocents, for hurting my family, but if that’s what you need then—fine. I can meet you halfway.”

“Halfway as in…?” Was he being given permission to go out and sleep with others? Somehow, after everything, he doubted that.

“As in I’ll sleep with you, okay?” The other ground out and Len felt his chest tighten. He couldn’t
possibly mean what Len thought he meant.

“You mean you’ll—what, have sex with me?”

Barry nodded, tight.

“That’s… I don’t want that, Barry.” He didn’t want a transaction, he wanted his Soulmate.

“Obviously you do. You say you care about me, say you’d sleep with me and just me, say you don’t want to be alone, so fine. If that’s what you need then just… take it.”

Len was shaking his head, confused and frustrated. “Take it? What? Right now?”

“I—” Barry straightened to standing tall with his arms at his sides, chin up. “Yes. Might as well get it over with.”

This was all wrong. Part of him, a bigger part than he wanted to admit, was tempted. He was used to taking what was wanted, and god did he want this—want Barry. Some angry and empty space inside of him had thought about what it would be like to claim Barry, to take all that beauty and dismantle it, see how he ticked, push him to the edge and ruin him. A side of him more in control had fantasized about making it gentler, soft and sweet for their first time together, envisioning how he could get the other to respond, to enjoy the hell out of it, enjoy each touch and caress. Len was good at sex, rough or gentle, and he could make Barry feel amazing, spoil him, love him.

But right now, Barry looked like he was heading to war not sex—rigid, shoulders back and straight, body all determined hard lines, too still and tight. This wasn’t a seduction, it was a minefield.

“No.”

“Wha—” Barry relaxed by a faction, face more angry than confused, “Why not?”

“You don’t want it.”

“I said I’ll do it.”

“You don’t want it.”

“Not the problem. You don’t want it.”

Barry dragged and hand through his hair and looked away from Len, hand still on his forehead. “Look—just, I’ll do whatever I have to do make sure you don’t do that again.”

“You don’t have to do anything, Barry. I won’t do that again.”

“I don’t believe you, Len—I’m done taking your word for it. You said you want sex to take away your loneliness so fine—I can give that much to my—to you.”

Len let out an aggravated sigh. He still couldn’t say it? “You’re missing the point, kid.”

“I’m not, look I—”

Len could feel his frustration and he watched, halfway incredulous as Barry dragged off his sweater and shirt and threw them to the ground. Bare skin and bare Mark, half naked in his living room. And Len got it: this was a challenge, Barry who didn’t back down, who was pushing because he was still hurt, still angry, still too many things but even so, Len couldn’t help but stare. He’d hadn’t seen the Mark since Initial Communion, hadn’t seen so much of Barry and he wanted to savor the sight but the other was already snapping, brittle all over again, “you need to let off steam so bad then fine—take what you need.”
Len met Barry’s gaze. He was at the end of his rope, needing to put an end to this. How could he explain how awful this was going to be for both of them if he did touch the kid?

“Please, Len—you want this, right? So let me do this for you.”

What the hell was he supposed to say?

Before he could find an answer, Barry blurred forward, into his space, grabbed Len’s hands and pressed them to his body, on his chest and—shit. The touch was electric and he shuddered with it. They hadn’t touched in a month, done more suppressing than they should and he could feel so much through Barry’s skin—the tense lines of his posture, the way his jaw hurt from clenching it, the way his stomach was coiled with dread. Barry’s skin was soft and rich under his fingers, Len’s hands held to Barry’s torso by Barry’s own, and something in Len’s chest ached so much at the contact he was almost swallowed by it.

His eyes locked with Barry’s moss green orbs and he could see—could feel, choking up the bleed with the intensity of the contact—desperation and fear. Len knew they were mirrored in his own expression.

This wasn’t what it was supposed to be like.

He dragged in a breath and leaned in, drawing his fingers along Barry’s skin, around the lean waist and he stepped closer. Len hated this. He wanted it so badly he could taste it, like bitter citrus in the back of his throat. He knew he could make Barry feel amazing, if only he would relax, would let himself want this too. But he didn’t and he was literally asking for it and Len was at a loss. Barry breathed in a tight breath, too shallow when Len skimmed his hands up his lean sides, warm skin, almost too smooth. Then he slid a hand over the Mark and the other man flinched.

“You’ll need to relax if you want us to get each other off,” he whispered. It was a feint, hoping that he could get Barry to back down. But the kid just pursed his lips, stubborn, and let his hands come to rest on Len’s shoulders, still far too tense. A parry. Len felt like they were playing the most dangerous game of gay chicken he could possibly dream up, all sharp angles and awful consequences with a bleed attached. He was afraid to wonder what Barry was feeling of his own emotions.

At a loss, he kissed Barry’s right shoulder, then clavicle, then the base of his neck. His hand drifted lower, over Barry’s hip, thumb feathering over the inside of his hipbone. Len knew he could be gentle, could check his urge to bite and claim and press. Maybe if Barry relaxed he’d let this end before it got out of hand. He kissed the side of Barry’s neck, longer and slower, feeling Barry’s fluttering pulse, too quick.

The room was silent except for Barry’s stuttered inhale, the sound of raining pouring down outside, beating against the pavement, the window. Time seemed to stretch.

Then he moved, brought one hand under Barry’s jaw and used his fingers to tilt Barry’s head up for a kiss but the other turned away sharp and sudden.

“Are you kidding me, Scarlet?” Len stepped back, out of reach, hands dropping, shoulders tensing. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t play this game. He knew when to admit defeat.

“I—”

“You tell me to sleep with you but I can’t kiss you, Barry? You’re my Soulmate.”

“I just—”
“Just what?!” The air was suffused with electricity, his shout echoed in a boom of thunder outside. Len knew he was frustrated and confused and a goddamn mess but he wasn’t mad at Barry. He forced himself to relax a bit, to figure out what the hell was even happening here. “You don’t have to push yourself and I am not going to force you.” He enunciated each word clearly and Barry flinched. “For fuck’s sake, I don’t want you to just bend over and take it, Barry! I want you to want me.”

“That’s—dammit, Len, you hurt my family and then you slept with someone else! How the hell do you expect me to respond?!”

“Not like this!”

“You wanted sex so bad you just seized the first opportunity and I don’t want to go through that again!” His arms were out but he stopped, eyes red again, fists clenching and unclenching. Without any warning, as soon as the words were out, the fight just seemed to leave Barry. He dropped his arms heavy at his sides, head forward and his voice faded into an almost-whisper, “I don’t want to go through that again, okay? So if this is it, if we’re stuck with each other forever—” that cut, that fucking cut—“then I need to start making an effort to give you something if I’m going to expect things in return. I might as well get used to the idea that this is what sex is gonna’ be like.”


“That’s better than letting you… look you don’t want to abstain, so I’ll deal with it.”

“God, Barry, how is it better for me to sexually assault you?” Because that’s what Barry was asking, for Len to just take while he hated every second of it. Barry didn’t even try to deny it, just wrapped his arms around himself and Len continued. “You don’t want me to sleep with other men and I can respect that. You’re not the type of person who has casual sex, but I can separate sex and love, kid. I can wait if I’m with you, I just don’t want to abstain the rest of my life. It’s not like you’ve been abstaining your whole life up until now either.”

Outside, lightning flashed. Something in Barry’s posture shifted—he became too still. Frozen, gaze fixed and then it was there, coming through the bleed. Len’s brain affected the sound of tires screeching to a halt; his heart almost stopped; his stomach dropped.

Oh. No. Thunder rolled over the house.

“Barry,” his own voice was smoother and steadier than he felt at the moment, “You have had sex, right?”

It couldn’t be. That was insane, right? But Barry hung his head, looked at the floor in the space between them and—oh fuck. The kid swallowed, dragged in a choppy breath and shook his head, just once.

“You mean you’ve never—” Len’s voice shook because what?!

“I mean I just—I never wanted—god dammit!” Barry stepped further back and dragged his hands through his hair. His emotions were running rampant, shame and horror and fear and it was supposed to be a peripheral sensation but after a month of not seeing him, those feelings felt so real to Len. He could feel how close Barry was to tears now, and he continued talking in a way that was almost pleading, “I dated, I kissed people, I tried to push myself but I’ve just never… I didn’t want to—I grew my whole life with this Mark on my skin and I wanted to wait. I mean, not forever, but—and look, no one wants to get serious with a MaW anyway and I didn’t want just casual, I wanted...”
Barry was pacing and wiping a hand over his face and he looked so distressed and—how in the hell was this possible? “Barry you’re twenty five—”

“I know! I know, okay? It’s not like I planned to get this old and not try it—it just happened! I was in a coma for almost a year and after that I became the Flash it definitely didn’t seem as important, and before all that I was in love with Iris and it’s not like she was interested. And I just didn’t want to do if I wasn’t serious about someone! I dated a bit in college and after but nothing… I never let it get to sex, or mouths, or… hands.” His voice became soft, almost inaudible, “And part of me always wanted to… save myself, save that for, for whoever I—”

Barry broke off, abruptly and finally, staring at the floor, arms snaking back around himself, half naked still. For a minute, the only sound was rainfall.

Len had no idea how to process this. Barry had had feelings for Iris West? Barry wasn’t just a virgin, but he’d never even had a handjob? A blowjob? And then it occurred to him—

Len’s stomach clenched tight and he—he might be sick. “Have you… through the bleed, when you called, that was the first time you’ve ever felt—it was your first blowjob?”

Barry looked up at him then down again. Len saw tears on his face and his gut twisted. He nodded but didn’t speak and Len felt his own throat tighten, his own eyes sting. Oh god. What had he done?

“I’m sorry,” were the first words that came out. It wasn’t enough. Nothing was enough because he’d hung on the phone and fucked his way into Hartley’s mouth to dull his own rejected pain while Barry was saving his virginity for him. Fuck. “I’m so sorry, Barry. I didn’t know that you were” — his voice almost choked on the words— “saving yourself.”

Barry shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. He wrapped his arms tighter around himself and seemed to shiver and Len wanted to hold him but he didn’t have the right. He didn’t have the fucking right, not now. Probably not ever.

“I cut off the bleed, after you hung up. I didn’t have to feel it, after.” That didn’t make it okay. Nothing made this okay. It wasn’t okay before, knowing Barry could feel it, but at least some experience would’ve helped the kid navigate the sensation. And Barry continued, the knife in Len’s gut wrenching. “At least until you came. I felt that.”

Len closed his eyes and counted to ten, exhaling all the while. He would have thrown up if he hadn’t. When he opened them again, he didn’t feel any better, but Barry had wiped away the tears on his face and was looking at him now. “I don’t know if I can ever make this right, Barry. I don’t know if you can understand how sorry I am and I’m not good at this, but I want to fix it. Whatever you want, anything, just say it and it’s yours.”

“I can’t—I don’t want anything.”

He was shaking his head, holding back more tears and it struck Len, what Barry was offering when he told Len to ‘take it.’ His stomach churned again and swallowed back bile. “Barry, why would you —your first time… you don’t save yourself for so many years just to throw it away like this.”

He glanced up at Len and down, his shame suffocating them both. “I thought for just one second if I gave you what you wanted, maybe things would be better, you’d listen to me and… you’d be loyal to me.” His voice sounded small and defeated, cracked and worn too thin.

“What I want—you don’t have any idea. I don’t want to force you, don’t want you to force yourself, I—” Barry had saved himself for Len. No one had ever touched him; Barry had never and would
never be with anyone else, only with him. Grand romantic gestures, indeed. And it wasn’t about the experience, the so-called purity or even Len’s own possessiveness. It was the idea that Barry would wait at all, would sacrifice and be patient so that there was something special between only him and his Soulmate. It was proof that he cared, that he’d worked, that he would try—that Len wasn’t in this alone. Hadn’t ever been it in alone.

Len needed to touch Barry, right then, to hold him, to hide him away from the world and keep him in his arms forever. He held himself in check though, because he didn’t have the goddamn right.

“Please, Barry, I—”

Barry stepped forward, almost too fast, a spark of lightning, suddenly there, wrapping his arms around Len, clinging to him and Len couldn’t describe his sense of relief at that. He still felt tight in all the wrong places, still fucking broke, but Barry was clutching him and he was wrapping Barry into his arms, hands on smooth skin, pulling him close. He heard the storm outside, pelting the windows, sharp cracks of lightning with thunder rolling over the house, no end in sight, but the world could end and Len wouldn’t notice, wouldn’t care about anything but the feeling of Barry in his arms.

The next words just rolled and tumbled out of Len’s mouth unbidden, jumbled and murmured, “I’ll be loyal to you. Goddammit, kid, I’ll be loyal. No one else, ever. Just you. And we’ll take it at your pace, Barry. Not like this. I’ll make it perfect. Whatever you want. However you dreamed it, I’ll make it better than that.” Len felt his cheek pressed to Barry’s, felt tears there. He moved to hold Barry’s face in his hands, kissed his hairline, brushed fingers through his soft hair then pulled him close again.

“I’m sorry, I’m so goddamn sorry,” he murmured in Barry’s ear, and Barry clenched his hands into Len’s sweater, drawing in and letting out a shudder as he relaxed into the embrace.

“I just don’t—how can you do that and then turn around and say these things?” his voice was thick with emotion, guard dropped enough in the safety of pressing his forehead to the crook of Len’s neck and shoulder. Len smoothed circles over Barry’s back, closing his own eyes and breathing deep. He had to at least try and explain…

“I acted like a jackass. I was angry and hurt and scared.” He had to be honest. It was hard but Barry at least deserved that much. Barry deserved anything Len could give him. “I thought you’d never talk to me again. We went almost a month without speaking, and I was trying to move on, to respect what I thought you wanted. I didn’t even clue in that you’d feel it until you called. Then you did and my head wasn’t really working right at that moment. And I was pissed, Barry—you called at the exact moment I’d finally managed to stop thinking about you and it just made me think of nothing but you. And then I—” how was he supposed to say he was cruel enough to want Barry to feel it, in that moment? “I wanted you to be angry. I wanted you to be jealous,” he whispered. His face was hot, throat tight. This time the shame was his own. “I wanted you to be as jealous and hurt as I was.”

Barry started at that, an electric jolt in his arms, and he moved to pull back enough to search Len’s face. The kid was too open. Didn’t he know how horrifying it was to have this kind of conversation when someone could see your face, see your naked pain?

“What were you jealous of, Len? I wasn’t with anyone.”

He shook his head and looked away. It was too hard to look at Barry right now. “Jealous of other people with happy Bonds. Of all the people who knew how to make you smile. Of all the people I thought had been with you before.”

Barry let out a broken little laugh and his eyebrows drew together with a little shake of his head. His
hands moved, one coming around to clutch at Len’s side and the over sliding over his shirt where Len’s Mark was hidden.

“I kept promising I didn’t want to hurt you, and then right when it counted, that’s exactly what I did, just because I could.” Len closed his eyes when he spoke because it was too much to handle even admitting that. He deliberately hurt his Soulmate. Len knew what kind of monster that made him.

But Barry wasn’t pulling away. He wasn’t feeling disgusted. All Len could feel was sadness, and he opened his eyes again to stare into the red-rimmed ones of his Soulmate, looking determined again, full of the strength Len had long-since learned to associate with Barry.

“Len I… I’m not saying it’s okay, but I did the same thing. When I said I hated this, in that alleyway, I just said it to hurt you. I hated the way I felt, how helpless I was, but I don’t hate all of this… I don’t hate how it feels when you hold me. I kind of hate myself for liking it, some days but I—” he stopped and inhaled, maybe because he could feel what hearing that did to Len, “When I kissed you after saying it, that was supposed to hurt too—I was scared and mad and in pain and I—I didn’t expect to want it, for it to feel so good, to start drowning in it. And I’m sorry I did.”

Len nodded. They’d both lashed out, and one was maybe not worse than the other. Cruelty was cruelty. “I’m still sorry.”

“I want to believe you. I do. But being sorry isn’t the same as you saying you won’t do it again. I want to trust you but I…” Barry was stepping away finally, fully, out of Len’s arms but he caught Barry’s hand and the other stilled. Then, slowly, half certain Barry would pull back but not about to hesitate, he took Barry’s hand and pressed it up, under the hem of his shirt. Slowly, as Len breathed in deep and held Barry’s gaze, neither looking down, the hand pressed up, hot even against his warm stomach, smoothing over the skin and up until it landed on its target—his Mark.

“Barry…” he didn’t dare touch Barry’s in return. “I’m sorry. Maybe it would help if you understood: I lost my virginity a year before you were born, a year before I was even Marked. And when knew you were just a kid, I thought that it didn’t make sense to me to just… wait around. I thought of virginity like just a social construct—a gradient of experience, not something to save or… Sex never seemed like a big deal, just something to burn off some tension, so I didn’t think twice about it.” He looked Barry in the eyes, “That night on the phone was a mistake. One I won’t ever make again.”

Barry searched his gaze for a long minute.

“Len…” he brought his free hand up, hesitant and then determined, grazing along Len’s face. It sent shivers up the back of his spine, his neck. “Okay. Then this, between us, we can move forward. I want to move forward. I want to find some way for us to be together, somehow.” He shook his head, then. “But about my family, hurting my friends… you’re not forgiven. Not for that, and more. I can’t… I’m not ready to just let those things go, not right now. I can’t trust you with those things yet.”

Len nodded. “I understand.” He was afraid to ask, but he needed to, “where does that put… this? Are we together, after tonight?”

Barry’s fingers splayed over his skin, spreading so his palm was pressing down over the Mark.

“We’re together. And no more not talking or cold shouldering. It doesn’t help and I shouldn’t have—I can’t expect you to read my mind. I know I’ve been avoiding dealing with this—with us.” Len’s hands clenched reflexively against Barry’s waist. “Obviously that didn’t work. I don’t know if this will work, I don’t know if I can handle it—who we are, what you’ve done, what you might do in the future. But I want to try, at least.”
Len wanted to lean in and brush a gentle kiss to his cheek. Instead, he responded with words. “Whatever you want, Barry.”

He’d swear he could feel Barry’s heart beating, filling him with the feeling of Barry. He felt the fear there but also an emotion he’d felt before but hadn’t thought to name. It made more sense coming from Barry, he had a word for it, a foreign but crystal clear sensation. Hope. It ached.

“Tonight I want…” he hesitated and Len wanted to promise Barry the world as reassurance. “I want to stay.”

He felt his own hands tremble by his sides. “Stay?”

“Here, for the night.”

“You don’t have to push yourself, Barry. Not just about sex, but this—it’ll be okay.”

“No, I want to. I can’t move forward if I keep running away. I can’t keep pretending that I don’t want to be closer to you,” he whispered.

Len couldn’t even characterize how those words made him feel. Something tight and longing and desperate all at once. He wanted to thank Barry, but he didn’t know the words. And he could feel the pool of Barry’s emotions, ones without words, without language to characterize.

“Do you want… there’s my room, or there’s a spare room.” Len wasn’t going to make any assumptions from now on about anything related to Barry. Clearly he was going to guess wrong if he tried.

“In with you is fine. If that’s okay?”

“It’s all okay,” he responded, then caved into temptation and pulled Barry in for another hug, breathing in the smell that reminded him of summer air after a storm. Lightning flashed outside the window and Len felt for a second like he might actually understand the person in his arms. Barry was born half of lightning long before the particle accelerator exploded, and Len didn’t know how he hadn’t realized just want that meant sooner. Barry wasn’t a hero because he had powers, the Flash was a hero because he was Barry.

The moment dragged on for as long as he could reasonably let it, comforted by Barry returning the embrace before Len forced himself to let Barry go. They looked at one another for a moment and Barry stepped back finally, across the room to scoop up his shirts from the ground but didn’t put them on.

“Should we… it’s late, right?”

Len nodded and the tension in the room seem to dissipate enough to breath again. Barry followed him down the hall, looking around as Len rummaged around for a new toothbrush for the other to use. It was all awkward and perfunctory; they each took a turn in the washroom, Barry first. Part of Len still half-expected Barry to be gone by the time he made it back to his room, even though the bleed would let him know if that had happened. He dodged his own reflection in the mirror. When he got back to his room, he had to pause in the doorway, to stop and stare.

It was almost surreal. Barry was in his house, his room, in his bed. His knees were up, sitting under the covers on the far side of the bed, his torso bare. Len dimly noticed Barry’s jeans were on the floor and he tried to quell whatever that knowledge was doing to his nervous system. Mostly making his heart skip. He finally dragged his feet into the room and kicked the door shut behind him while Barry looked down at his knees. Then, feeling more nervous than he ought to, Len dragged his
sweater overhead and doffed his own pants. He typically slept in his underwear anyway, but it had been a long while since he’d last shared his bed with another person, and for his first night sleeping beside his Soulmate—beside Barry—he wished he had some way to make it special.

“Is that why you always wear sweaters, or long sleeves?”

Len looked up and Barry was nodding to his arms, his tattoos. Len was still in a thin white tank top but his arms were on display, his shoulders and the tattoos on them, the sleeve down his right arm. He wondered, too late probably, what Barry might think of think of them and he flicked out the light.

“No, I just like sweaters.” Len walked across the room and slipped into the bed, sitting next to Barry, at least a foot of space between them. “I prefer to keep things cool and dress warm for it.”

Beside him, almost lost in the sound of rain on the windows and the world outside, he heard Barry snort. “D’you plan out your puns, or is it something that just happens?”

Len smiled, not that Barry could see him in the dark. “Both.”

They were silent for a minute, the white noise of the rain enough to keep it from feeling too quiet.

“I don’t… I should have said this sooner, Barry. I have absolutely no clue what I’m doing. I’m going to piss you off sometimes, it’s who I am, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.”

Len wished he could decipher the feelings he found in the bleed, but they were as much a mess as his own, as static-sounding as the rain. There was no anger there though, not that he felt and that, at least, was something. He felt the bed dip as Barry laid down so he followed suit, eyes slowly adjusting to the dark, the sliver of grey that made it through the dark blinds over the window.

“Same, Len.”

“Would it be to much to…” Len rolled onto his side, facing Barry, and didn’t know how to finish his sentence, but Barry guessed. His hand was stretched in the small space between them—no man’s land—and Barry reached forward, holding it. Some of the tension in the room subsided.

Neither of them spoke after that, or maybe it was that neither knew what to say. The silence dragged on too long. When Len’s breathing was even and he was on the edge of sleep, he dreamt he heard the whispered word’s ‘I’m sorry’ and dipped into a shallow repose. He didn’t know what Barry was apologizing for, but he knew he was far more sorry than Barry could ever be.

Chapter End Notes

Well. That’s some progress. (please don’t kill me)

And WHOA-OH. Please be honest, how many of you guessed that Barry was a virgin? Anyone? I have been subtly hinting at it but I didn’t want any overt foreshadowing because I wanted it to surprise the reader, shift their paradigm (like it shifts Len’s). I’m all about that in this fic, uprooting expectations and giving everyone emotional whiplash. Also, the idea of ‘saving’ one’s virginity, is something I headcanon is more common in this universe, where people have Marks and Soulmates to wait for, and it’s a bit of a nod to where ‘marked and waiting’ came from in terms of etymology. It just
comes as a surprise to Len because he lost his virginity young and he sees Barry as this young and beautiful hot and amazing person who can have it all, so obviously people should be throwing themselves at him.

For the record, you’ll get an actual description in detail of Len’s tattoos in an upcoming chapter. They’re on more than his arms. My ultimate goal is/was to draw all his tattoos so... we’ll try for that. No promises.

(ps – even though they’re 'together' now, we’re still pretty far from the finish line for this fic; lots of actual plot and many more action scenes and messes to go!)
Chapter Summary

Something There That Wasn’t There Before (Disney) and The Way We Touch by We Are Twin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rain beat down outside and Len apparently kept his room cool. Barry pulled up the blankets, laid, and tried to sleep. He hadn’t shared a bed with anyone since a brief relationship after college, ended quickly because the other person wasn’t too keen to wait around for a MaW. So he listened to the rain and dozed in and out, attempting not to roll over too much. He got the impression it was about the same for Len, waking up once when their feet and ankles knocked together. It got better eventually, sometime around when Len—definitely in his sleep—rolled over and put an arm over Barry, cuddling into him. Len’s even breathing near Barry, the weight of his arm, both were enough to lull him into a deeper sleep, enough so that when he woke up hours later to the alarm on his phone going off, Barry was surprised to find himself alone in the bed, sunlight filtering in through the blinds.

He woke groggily to the insistent sound and the light filtering in through the blinds, stretching across the bed to grab his phone off the ground from in his jeans pocket to turn off the noise. Then he blinked around the room, orienting himself.

What a strange day. What a strange night. He was in Len’s bedroom, in his bed, had slept in his arms. And while there was some residual foreignness about that, some leftover anxiety about being so close and open around Captain Cold, there was also the private, warm feeling in his chest, tugging at his lips, remembering Len’s arm around him in the dark, how warm he’d felt with his back tucked against Len’s chest. The strangest part was how not-strange it felt to want that much, at least, to enjoy it. All he’d had to do was stop pretending he didn’t.

And then he recalled how much of an ass he acted like the night before and cringed. How mortifying. What was he thinking? He was so desperate and upset when Len had started talking about taking any opportunity, so sure the other man was going to turn around and do just that the next time someone offered if Barry didn’t get there first and he—Barry swallowed. He'd almost pushed Len, both of them, into something neither wanted. And that wasn’t really okay. He needed to apologize.

Barry got up and dragged his clothes on before looking around. He hadn’t really been paying attention the night before, but now he noticed that almost everything in Len’s room seemed to be greys and muted blues—so different from his own red color scheme—and he had a gorgeous painting on the wall above his bed. Barry hadn’t really studied art history but it looked old and expensive—a mostly naked woman and man with boots and a hat, little wings on them, in a forest of some sort with a little cherub reading a book. They were all light and the backdrop was all dark, and Barry found himself staring at it for a good minute before remembering he where he was.

Then he ventured out into the hall, taking a second to check his hair in the bathroom before finding the living room and kitchen. There was no sign of Len, but there was a sliding glass door leading
outside along the back wall of the kitchen. It was open so he poked out his head, surprised to see such a big yard outside. There was a garden on the north side of it, looking in full bloom with ripe tomatoes weighing down vines, a few tall stalks of corn and sunflowers—honest to god sunflowers—and plenty of greenery, with a few buckets and tools sitting along the fence. After a minute of staring in bemusement, Barry finally turned and found what he was looking for. Len was sitting on the other side of the yard, on top of a tarp in front of what looked like raspberry bushes with a small container at his side.

“Are you picking berries?” Barry asked, walking over in bare feet, not having bothered to put his shoes back on. The grass felt cool and wet beneath his feet and he wanted to keep his feet on the soil forever.

Len didn’t start, must have felt Barry wake up, and half-turned to with an amused expression. “I think there’s the making of a pun in there somewhere, Scarlet.”

He was caught between laughing and groaning. “You know not everything is an excuse to make a cheesy joke, right?”

“So they tell me. Not convinced yet though.”

Barry felt a smile spreading out on his face despite himself. “And here I thought it was just dedication to your alias.”

“That too.” He arched an eyebrow at Barry and he found himself sitting down beside Len, crossing his legs and reaching for a raspberry off the bush.

“I can’t believe you garden.”

Len shrugged beside him, dropping three berries into the small container. “I like to keep busy, have hobbies. I don’t exactly keep a regular day job and even Netflix gets old.”

“Netflix never gets old.” Barry challenged, plopping the next berry into his mouth.

“Those are for the pancakes, you know.”

“You’re making pancakes?!” Barry couldn’t keep the surprise from his voice as he said it. He wasn’t quite sure the last time anyone had made him breakfast.

“Unless you have to head straight to work?”

“I have time.” He actually did, but even if he didn’t, pancakes might be worth being late over (he’d definitely been late for less). He was grinning now, and when he looked over at Len he saw the other man’s face break out into a small smile of his own, a real one, before he looked down, almost as if he was embarrassed about smiling. Seeing him like this, shy, was surreal and so at odds with what Barry had come to expect. Gardening, fine art on his walls, raspberry pancakes for breakfast… Barry was starting to wonder who the hell Len Snart really was. Because the stone-cold killer image was getting difficult to reconcile in the morning light.

“I want to say sorry. About last night, how I acted. I pushed things too far and I put you in a shitty situation. Again, I think.” Barry plucked another ripe raspberry off the bush to avoid looking at Len, and after a beat, the other pulled a few more of the fruit down too.

“It’s okay. I understand what it’s like to feel like you’ve run out of options.” Len shifted, and turned to look at him. “But I don’t want you to feel that way, not with me, kid. I caused it and I get it’ll take time to fix, but this is me telling you it doesn’t have to be that way.”
Barry’s throat felt tight but he nodded. “I know. I just…”

“You don’t do middle ground. I got that.” He tilted his head to the side. “Actually, your father mentioned it.”

“He did?”

“Mmm.”

Barry looked down at the ruby toned juices on his fingers. “He helped me remember why I need to communicate more.”

“He’s a smart man. Helped me realize I need to listen better.”

He glanced at Len, at his serious expression, and nodded. “Yeah, that too.” The other stood then, lifting the full container of berry-picking bounty.

“Shall we?”

The tiled kitchen floor was cool under his bare feet and Barry wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself, unsure about just watching Len cook. “I’m gonna’ zip to grab a change of clothes? So I can head straight to work from here.”

Len looked over from grabbing out bowls and a skillet, “go for it. You’re welcome to use the shower here if you want.”

Barry almost refused, but nodded instead. Twenty minutes later, he was exiting Len’s bathroom in a fresh outfit he’d zipped back home to grab, trying not to feel too weird about using the other man’s body wash, knowing he was going to smell like Len all day. The scent of bacon distracted him from that line of thinking and he heard Len laugh in the kitchen.

“I can feel your hunger pains from here, Barry.”

At least the other was amused. It was warm in the bleed, which felt less like a raging storm and more like a… well, still strong and intense, but after spending the night asleep in Len’s arms he didn't feel so suffocated by it.

“Laugh it up,” he wandered into the kitchen, “I just hope you made extra.”

“Enough to feed a small army.”

“Perfect.”

It was a moment like Barry never thought he'd be having with Len. The other man glancing over from cooking, something warm emotion with hints of longing filling the bleed when Len looked at him before going back to cooking, and now it made Barry a little self-conscious but not uncomfortable, sitting down and watching Len finish making food. Len had his sleeves pushed up when he brought the plates to the table and Barry could see the tattoos on his right arm again. He wanted to study them, half mesmerized, catching a glimpse of what looked like a card—a jack?—and maybe a pair of boots or skates on his wrist, but instead he let his drop to the food and filled his plate.

They managed to make it through breakfast with idle chatter, enough to make him feel at ease, but it was all too soon before Barry had to head to work and he found himself not wanting to go. He wanted to stay, he wanted to work on this.
“What are you doing tonight?” he asked before scooping up his bag. Should they hug goodbye, kiss? What was the protocol here? Len was just leaning against the wall by the entryway, arms crossed but casual.

“Tonight? Nothing important.”

“Joe’s got a poker game with some of his friends from the precinct coming over. They don’t get along that well with lab rats like me so I normally make myself scarce.”

Len frowned for a second but then his expression cleared and he glanced at Barry in a way that made him wonder if Len was trying to read his mind, as if the bleed wasn’t already enough.

“You’re always welcome here, Barry. If you want to drop by tonight, do.”

He nodded, relieved, and was out the door in a blink.

**********

Barry felt nervous about returning to Len’s that evening. He’d told Joe he was hanging out with Cisco and Caitlin told them that he was with Iris. At work, Eddie had complimented how Barry had smelled—since when were they close enough for him to do that? Eddie was hugging him daily now, overflowing with happy emotions from Iris’s pregnancy still—and Barry was too flustered realizing he smelled like Len’s soap to even thank him for it.

Len greeted him at the door in a long-sleeved Henley, expression neutral, some nervous anticipation in the bleed. Barry really didn’t know what he—they—were doing still. Was this anywhere close to how normal people dated? He didn’t think so. All he really did know was that they needed to keep talking, that he wanted to know who Len really was, that he wanted to try and find some middle ground, and this was the easiest way he knew how.

“You wanna’ go for dinner or eat in?” Len asked as Barry followed him into the living room and eyed the spot he’d stood and shouted the night before.

“Umm, eat in.”

“Your thoughts on take out?”

He laughed, “I’ll eat anything, Len.”

He nodded with a half-smile and told Barry to make himself at home while he dialed a place for some Chinese food. Len’s house was refreshingly cool, Barry’s light blue pull-over feeling less hot almost immediately, and he wondered what kind of AC the man had, no doubt it was top of the line. It must be how Len justified his ridiculous propensity for sweaters, Barry thought as he looked around the living room. He’d paid more attention to the kitchen that morning, which was an open space with cream tiled floors and a breakfast nook where they’d eaten. There was a dining room adjacent to the living room on the far side that also opened to the kitchen but it didn’t look like it saw much use, papers and books in piles atop the table. Barry noticed that despite the cool blues and the temperature, Len’s house was also oddly comfortable, with warm woods, dark leather couches, bookshelf hosting a vine-like plant and a modest sized television mounted on a wall. It was so normal, less like someone’s evil lair or some rundown safe house, and more like someone actually lived there and cared about it. Barry found himself looking at the art both in the dining room and
living room, noticing it was all abstract instead of like the one in Len’s room.

Then Len finished on the phone and came back out to join him, and after the minute of staring at each other, Barry wondered just how awkward this was going to be.

“I can only stay for a few hours. I need to do some rounds of the city tonight, and Joe’s expecting an update on the STAR Labs situation later.”

“STAR Labs situation?”

Len moved to the couch and Barry sat down too, torn between being close and not being too close, sitting within reaching distance.

“The government wants to buy it. Are buying it, by the sound of it. They had people come in just this week to examine it and we had to move all the Flash stuff out and make ourselves scarce until they cleared us.”

He couldn’t parse Len’s emotions and glanced over to see his eyebrows drawn together. “What’re they gonna’ do with it? Not turn that damn thing on again?”

“Oh—ah, no, probably not. Repurpose it for research, according to Caitlin. Clean up the hazardous parts and turn it into a state-of-the-art military research facility.”

“Military?”

“I don’t like it any more than you do.” And Len really didn’t seem to, tension, anxiety, frustration all coming through the bleed but it didn’t come close to matching Barry’s own feelings when he thought about it.

“What happens to you and your friends? Won’t they be out of work?”

Barry wondered, maybe a little belatedly, if he should really be telling all of this to Captain Cold. He’d learn in the news soon enough anyway, though. “Ah, they’ve each got some prospects, I guess. Caitlin’s interviewing with the university, Cisco’s fielding offers from Mercury Labs, and both Stagg and Rathaway Industries. Every major player wants him, but I think he’s more likely to go work for Palmer Tech.” He couldn’t help but feel a little bitter that Palmer was so eager to offer Cisco a job, not because Cisco didn’t deserve it and Barry didn’t want the best for him, but it would mean moving to Starling, away from Team Flash and Barry honestly didn’t know what he’d do without Cisco, or without Caitlin. They were a team.

“Barry?”

“I—sorry. Just thinking. I’m not mad at Cisco, I just wish he wasn’t considering moving 600 miles away.”

“That’s less than an hour for you, isn’t it?”

Barry rolled his eyes but leaned more into the space between them. “It’s the principle of the matter.”

To his surprise, the other chuckled. “Worried he’ll start working for the Starling vigilante squad and forget about his crime-fighting roots here in Central?”

He couldn’t help the actual tightening of his stomach, what he knew was a flash of jealousy, thinking of his friend working with Team Arrow instead of with the Flash, but he pushed it down and snorted. “With his crush on the Black Canary, I wouldn’t be surprised.”
“Wait, you don’t actually know Oliver Queen and his—”

“We shouldn’t talk about this,” he said immediately. They were not talking about Oliver. Ever since the man’s name had been plastered all over the news, exposed as the Arrow even after Roy took the fall for him, Oliver had been out of the Vigilante game and gone off with Felicity into the sunset. Except now he was back in Starling, fully public as the Arrow or whatever the hell he was calling himself now—Green Arrow?—and provided with a special status to operate in Starling within certain restrictions, mostly related to killing and property damage. It was unsettling to Barry—and probably to Oliver—that everyone knew his identity now, but Barry still didn’t have all the details on that, or on what was going on Starling with Thea and Laurel that brought Oliver back in the first place.

“I was just curious if you vigilante types were starting a club, Scarlet. Maybe a league of some sort.” Len was tense, maybe because Barry was suddenly so on edge and he forced himself to relax.

“You make it sound like a bowling team.”

The other man smirked. “I think I’d pay to see that.”

Barry pictured it and then he couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, that’s fair. The costumes would make it spectacular.” He sighed and sat back, eager for food to arrive but not actually minding this so far. Still, he’d rather change the subject than get into all that history. “Your sense of art is interesting. What’s this one supposed to be?” He waved at the splashes of color that looked vaguely jarring to him.

Len considered the painting. “It’s a Pollock, called Full Fathom Five. It’s about the depths of the ocean, but mostly I just liked how it looked.”

“Jackson Pollock? Wait, Len, did you steal that?” he sat up straighter and Len had this half-amused half-guilty expression on, definitely more relaxed now.

“Everything in this house is an original.”

“Len!” Barry knew he sounded scandalized but the grin on Len’s face, the jubilation—jubilation?—in the bleed made it hard to keep it up before the corners of his lips were drawing up. “I can’t believe you. How much is all the art in here worth?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Barry groaned and let Len tell him about art, apparently one of his favorite things to steal. At least art theft wasn’t likely to hurt anyone, and it wasn’t like he was stealing things that could be used to advance medicine or science. Still, he was grateful when food arrived and saved him from commenting on the fact that Len apparently had a collection of priceless paintings sitting in storage that Barry would be welcome to look through if he wanted.

Food provided a pleasant distraction and Len had ordered enough to satisfy his appetite, which he appreciated. They ate with relatively companionable small talk in the breakfast nook again, skirting art once Barry took control of the conversation, and Barry managed not to drop anything or make a fool of himself as he ate, which was always a plus.

“How do you manage to eat enough, every day?”

“High calorie protein bars that Caitlin and Cisco designed. I eat them when I’m on the run or to supplement meals.”
“Is it weird?”

“Eating?”

“Having superpowers.”

Barry paused, done eating now, and set down his drink on the table. “Honestly… not really. It feels like—like finally being myself. Like I was just sort of… waiting for it happen, my whole life just kind of a prelude to being who I am now.”

He looked at Len, wondering if he sounded crazy but the other was just tilting his head, considering. “You’re one of a kind. Not the powers, I mean. Just—you.”

Barry couldn’t help the warmth that spread through him, smiling down at his empty plate. He wasn’t quite sure what to say, so he didn’t say much, and was happy to zip around and clean up in a blink after they were done eating, before Len could stand. Then he was leaning in back in his chair, a little smug.

"Did you just?"

"I'm kind of awesome."

Len chuckled but didn't disagree, and Barry nodded to the living room, “While I’m here, should we, I dunno’, touch or cozy up or something?”

“I’d like that.”

They moved to the couch again and Len sat at least a foot from him, annoying Barry. He got that Len was trying to be ‘congenial’ or something, but wasn’t too sure about being treated like glass just because of what he’d admitted last night. Len hadn’t ever really hesitated to invade his space until now, and for a second Barry almost missed it. “You know I—just because I’m a virgin doesn’t mean we can’t touch, or that you can’t touch me.”

Len frowned but leaned back, lifting an arm in a clear invitation so Barry moved over and pressed himself next to Len, letting that arm fall around his shoulder, almost immediately wishing for more contact, for how Len had felt pressed against him while he fell asleep the night before.

“Even before, Barry, you weren’t too keen to invite me into your space. I don’t know where the lines are with you.”

Right, mind reading, not a thing. Well, it was a thing, but only for Grodd, and definitely not for him and Len. “Let’s say that all casual touches are okay? Arms on shoulders, holding hands, hugs, all that stuff.”

“None of that seems casual to me.”

Barry blinked, tilting his head to look at Len. “Okay, casual touches and those things?”

He didn’t miss the way, sitting so close, Len’s eyes flicked between his lips and meeting his gaze. “And cuddling?”

Barry relaxed into Len a little, staring down at the buttons on his Henley. “Last night was nice.”

“Then we’re in agreement.”

They continued chatting for almost an hour, Barry eventually shifting until he was half-facing Len to
talk, knees pressed together. They talked about safe things to discuss, for the most part—Iris a bit, because Len was curious and Barry graciously ignored the jealousy he felt in the bleed when Len asked about her, and then Barry's college days and how he'd become a 'badge', and a bit about Lisa, with Len smiling when he talked about her, how she was almost an Olympic figure skater. Barry only remembered he had other things to do when Cisco texted him to ask why he wasn’t at STAR Labs yet and he had to go. Before he could talk himself out of it, he pressed a kiss to the edge of Len’s mouth before speeding away. Baby steps.

**********

The night’s rounds were almost boring and Barry, much as he loved running, was a little sad he couldn’t return to visit Len when they were done. Instead, he turned toward home and filled Joe in on all the recent STAR Labs updates, listening to how his poker night went.

Before going up to bed, Joe leaned back against a counter and told him, “Hey, Barry, I know you’ve been down recently. It’s a lot to take in—STAR Labs closing, your friends getting new jobs, maybe moving away, Iris and Eddie picking a date for their wedding. But it’s gonna’ be fine, Barr. We’re family, and we’ll figure it all out.”

Barry’s smile was wan and he wished he could tell Joe the truth. But he looked at Joe’s leg, at the way he still walked with a slight favor to his good leg, and Barry wasn’t ready to yet, so he just bade his almost-father goodnight. On his way up the stairs, Joe reminded him, “Oh and don’t forget—dinner with Iris and Eddie tomorrow night! Iris said she has some good news—I think it’s about her promotion, something with investigative journalism, but pretend to act surprised when she tells us, right?” That, at least, made Barry smile for real. Joe was going to be so excited to hear the actual good news Iris was waiting to tell him.

Then he was up in his room a few short minutes later, ready for bed but buzzing with energy, in front of his laptop taking pointless online quizzes, thoughts drifting more and more toward sex until he realized he hadn’t had an orgasm yet that day. He dropped down onto his bed, mentally cueing up some images, sighing and then a thought clicked into place. He was a little embarrassed, but also suddenly determined, because this much at least, he was definitely down for. The only problem was that Barry wasn’t quite sure how a person was supposed to go about inviting another person to masturbate together through their strange neurological connection. Len would have figured out by now that their bleed sessions were the first real sexual contact Barry had had, the most intimacy he’d had, and it was all just phantoms touches. And he’d respected Barry’s space over the last month, and was clearly trying to now so…

Barry laid back, kicked out of his pants, and texted Len, nervous. You up? He knew Len was, but it was a conversation opener.

What’s up?

He swallowed, nervous. Len would be able to feel how nervous he was? This was embarrassing.

Now that we’re talking again and working on things I was kindof thinking we could go bakc to what we were doing before? He let out a breath he was holding when Len replied.

What were we doing before?
Dammit. He focused on the bleed and was met with mostly that tinkering feeling, the one that to him felt like curiosity. Would it be too immature to use innuendo? ‘Please go and masturbate’ seemed crass. He edited the text twice before sending, trying to at least cut down on typos this time.

*With the bleed.. we’ve both been avoiding it and that was cool but now that we’re talking again, if you’re not doing anything right now or you’re interested, I’m about to get myself off and I’m just saying that you’re welcome to go back to doing it at the same time again.*

He should probably punctuate better but it would get the point across. And oh, yep, arousal licked through the bleed less than thirty seconds later, a feeling like warmth and tightness in the pit of his stomach.

*Don’t suppose we can do the whole thing where I ask you what you’re wearing?*

Barry almost laughed.

*Lol, just picture me naked :p*

He felt another hot pull of arousal and realized he’d actually just sent that text, flushing with embarrassment but he was starting to get hard, half his thoughts already directed to thinking about Len’s hands on him, Len kissing him, the way he smelled, and the way he sucked on Barry’s neck that one time.

*Don’t mind if I do ;)*

It took over a minute to get that text and another for Barry to bother checking it, one hand on himself now, feeling Len’s there with him, his own free hand ghosting over his neck, wishing Len was there to kiss it. He almost laughed when he did see the text, surprised at the winking face but somehow not surprised at all. He typed out a response with one hand as quick as he could without being too fast for the phone—a skill he’d pretty much perfected—and hit send before he could think better of it, other hand not leaving his cock.

*I’m thinking about you kissing my neck*

The response back was quick and he checked it, feeling a phantom hand now slide over his neck, right where his own had been. *I’m thinking about kissing every inch of you*

Barry gasped and bit his lip, a frission of electricity going through him. Suddenly he understood why people sexted. His hand sped up on his cock, starting to vibrate when he pictured where Len’s mouth might end up on his body if he were here, what parts of his skin Len would kiss, where he might suck or lick. It was over too soon after that, unable to restraint a gasp, unable to hold back with the feel of Len’s hand on him, alongside his own vibrating one. He was faster than Len but kept his own hands drifting lazily over his body, hoping the other would feel it, shivering when he felt Len come, then sighing.

*That was hot*, he sent to Len after cleaning himself up.

*Consider this an open invite to text me anytime you’re horny*

Barry huffed out a laugh. *Duly noted*

Then he wondered, a little unsure, how long it was going to be before they were doing this not through text but in person, how long until he felt Len’s hands—*mouth*—on him for real. And Barry realized that he could probably have it any second he asked so long as he actually wanted it, so long as they were communicating, on the same page and...
Next time I come over, can we talk all this? Contact and sex and all that?

Absolutely

Cool. I’m off to sleep.

Goodnight, Barry

He smiled. They hadn’t even said goodnight when they were in the same bed together. Goodnight, Len

**********

After dinner with Iris, Eddie, and Joe, Barry stepped outside for some air. Joe was still beside himself, calling everyone he knew after hugging Iris, Barry, and even Eddie about ten times then getting their permission to tell people. Joe’s parents were the first call, while Barry was still in the house, and he’d heard cries of excitement through the phone. Eddie was grinning and his relief was obvious, no doubt having harbored some residual fear about Joe’s original disapproval of his relationship with Iris regardless of their Bond. That was all done with now, though—it was too obvious to anyone who watched, including Joe, that Iris glowed when Eddie was around, that Eddie’s smile was brighter when she was near.

So Barry stepped out front and sat on the steps while Joe made calls and Iris teased him about how she had just been planning to post it on Facebook, Eddie siding with Joe and saying some things were nicer done the old-fashioned way. They were all making calls then, and Barry had sent a quick text to Caitlin and Cisco—Caitlin called Iris a minute later to congratulate her—but that was about it. He took out his phone and texted to good news to Len.

That’s a good thing, right? She wants kids?

Barry sighed. Len didn’t know a thing about Iris beyond what Barry had told him. How could he?

It’s a great thing—her and Eddie are really happy. They just told Joe.

Good then. Congratulations to them

Barry wasn’t sure how to feel about it, with the sudden and jarring realization that he was never going to have kids. He couldn’t even begin to think about how he felt about that though, because Iris was stepping outside. He pushed those thoughts aside and smiled up at her.

“Hey Barr,” she sat beside him on the steps.

“Iris,” he nudged her shoulder, “shouldn’t you be phoning every long-lost cousin right now?”

She laughed. “It’s amazing. I knew he’d be excited but he’s really excited. He’s digging out a cigar for Eddie from his old stash right now.”

“A cigar? Isn’t that for when the baby is actually born?”

“Don’t tell them that.”

He laughed and they looked out at the dark avenue together, lit by streetlights and windows of houses. A few minutes went by in companionable silence, a gentle breeze picking at his loose strands of hair.
“Hey Barr… you gonna’ tell me what’s been going on with you?”

He looked over, “what’d you—”

“Don’t, Barr. I know you, okay? You’ve been up and down and all around these past few months. And if you don’t wanna’ tell me, that’s fine. I get that you have secrets and I won’t always know them all. But please don’t lie to me and tell me its just STAR Labs.”

Barry felt his breath get caught in his throat. “Iris I…” she just looked at him, waiting, concerned and he found words, unplanned and idiotic words, coming out of his mouth, “what would you do if Eddie was a criminal?”

“What?” she looked ready to laugh. “I can’t even picture that.”

He frowned and conceded the point—he couldn’t imagine Eddie as anything less than a sweet guy, even after seeing Everyman impersonate him. “Okay, you’re right, not Eddie—but say you had some other Soulmate, a mobster or a murderer or something?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “A murderer, Barry? Wow, umm, I don’t know. I guess I’d try to make it work, try to understand that person. Or maybe not. I can’t even imagine it, or what it’d be like to not have Eddie.” She looked at him while he looked out at the street, and he could feel her eyes on him. “Where is this coming from, Barr?”

“I—nowhere. I’ve just been thinking and I—”

“Who is it?” her voice was sharp and sudden and her eyes capture his. She was leaning forward and the intensity of her gaze made him feel like she could stare straight into his heart, his soul. He wished he could look away, unable, and her brows furrowed, mouth dropped open in a gasp. “I’m right?”

He pushed past the stone in his throat, forcing out the words because there was no point pretending, and he couldn’t lie, not to her, not about this, voice shaking and “it’s Leonard Snart. He’s—”

“Captain Cold,” she breathed, voice as quiet as his own. He swallowed down the fear that welled up in him, the truth being something he couldn’t take back, and nodded. “Your Soulmate is Captain Cold? Barr, I—wow. Wow. How long have you known?”

“Since the museum cave in with Grodd.” He finally broke her gaze and looked away, dragged his hands through his hair.

“That’s ten weeks!” she hissed just above a whisper, “You’ve known as long as I’ve been pregnant.”

“I guess so. I didn’t really think of it like that. You’re the first person I’ve told.”

She sounded surprised all over again. “No one else knows?”

He shook his head, clasping his hands between his knees, his feet two stairs below the one he was sitting on. “My dad knows, and Caitlin has some idea but we haven’t really talked about it, not properly.” And then he hurried to add, before she could even think about it, “You can’t tell your dad, or anyone else.”

Her hand was on his arm then, concern stretched across her feature. “Why are you hiding this, Barr? Dad would want to know. And your friends, not just Caitlin but Cisco too, and even Eddie and I bet Felicity, Oliver.”

He couldn’t even dream of telling Felicity, not because he didn’t trust her to keep secrets but because
he was afraid of what advice she might actually have for him. Felicity was the only person he’d ever known go through being beside her Soulmate for so long without being with him, despite both of them obviously wanting to be, thanks to Oliver’s stupid guilt complex and thinking he couldn’t be with her and be the Vigilante. At least they were finally together now.

“Len’s hurt so many people, Iris. He’s hurt Caitlin and Cisco both before, and even after we found out and Bonded, he still ended up hurting your dad.”

“The gala,” she breathed and he nodded. “Why would he do that if you’re his Soulmate?”

“I… it’s been a mess. It still is a mess but we’re working on it. He says it was an accident, there was other stuff at play—he wanted to make sure Mardon didn’t try to get revenge on your dad, wanted to make sure no one got killed, but… that still doesn’t make it okay. Right now I’m not ready to forgive him for what he did to your dad, how he’s hurt people, but the rest isn’t so bad.”

“Barry I’m so sorry.”

He didn’t want her to be sorry. He didn’t want her to pity him, he didn’t want her to think less of Len. “It’s fine. Len’s not like you’d think, not when he’s one-on-one, away from crimes and…” he sighed. “It’s a work in progress but I care about him, and he… he really cares about me.”

To his surprise, instead of getting angry at him, calling him a fool, Iris just settled down, nodding. “Of course he does, Barry. I’m sure his heart’s not made of ice.” She smiled then, if a little strained, and bumped his shoulder. “D’you remember those Soul Signs things I used to read into?”

Barry returned her expression with an added wince. “Yeah—I thought about those. Me and Len are supposed to be just like Bonnie and Clyde one, all messed up with ‘quarrels and strife,’ right?”

“Oh my god of course that would be the part you remember. It’s not all Bonnie and Clyde, Barr—it’s Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Cleopatra and Marc Antony, Brad and Angelina—”

"Most of those are romances where people died young in suicide pacts—is that supposed to make me feel better?"

She elbowed him. "Come on, Barr—it’s passion. Your Soul Sign is called Vitalis and it means passion, burning bright with deep romance and intense feelings. Maybe there’s something to these Soul Sign things."

She was clearly trying to get a smile out of him but it started to work despite everything, feeling a real smile tug at his lips when he looked down at his knees. “I’ll be sure to tell Captain Cold that he’s supposed to burn bright.”

She laughed, the sound like light tinkling summer rain, then smiled for real before growing serious for a moment. "Even if it’s all a mess right now, Barr, I trust you. If you say he’s okay, I believe you. And for right now, I can respect your secret. I won't tell anyone.”

"I… I don't think you know how much that means to me, Iris." His eyes stung. But she nodded and smiled as though something was settled before looping her arm in his.

“Okay, so tell me what he’s like, Barr. Tell me about your Soulmate.”

He sighed and started to talk, and for the first time since Initial Communion, he really started to think it might all turn out okay.
See that? See that?! Happy scenes, actual happy scenes, with people laughing. Barry smiling while talking about Len. Communication. What a beautiful thing. (and haha the song choice, I really hope someone laughed? Does anyone actually listen to the chapter summary songs??)

Now to reintroduce the overarching plot that exists outside of their insulated relationship, and build in new types of angst in the next few chapters. ;)

As a side note, all the art I select for Len is carefully done. The painting in his room, Correggio’s Venus with Mercury and Child, has the alternate title of “School of Love” and Mercury in Roman lore has winged boots that let him get around quickly, not to mention a hat that Jay Garrick’s is designed after. Coldflashcw / Bealeciphers suggested it :)

This one, Full Fathom Five, is a blue/white/green Jackson Pollock painting that is reminiscent of the ocean and the title is taken from a verse in the Tempest that is about someone’s father being shipwrecked and having drowned at sea. As Wikipedia states, modern use of the phrase “Full Fathom Five” now can refer to massive and unanticipated changes, basically the same type of paradigm shifts I like to keep introducing in this fic. I know it might be lame to explain my symbolism but I put effort into that research and thinking about what type of art Len would like.

ps - I haven't added Vitalis to the Glossary yet because I'm being lazy; it's just Barry's Soul Sign. I have to do a mass update to the glossary soon, I have a ton of words to add...
Len had to wait three days between his last dinner with Barry and seeing him again. He was surprised by his own impatience, but with how they were texting daily now, and with the new dimension to their joint masturbatory sessions—something he would argue went beyond masturbation but he didn’t know what else to call it—he was eager just to see Barry, talk to him, hopefully hold and ideally kiss the other man. And now Len felt like he was allowed to do those things, which itself might have been the most amazing part, even though he was trying not to push it.

But the kid had obligations, things like family dinners and Flash duties—some criminal issue unrelated to the Rogues he had to deal with that he didn’t give Len details about. By the third day though, Barry must have been impatient too because Len got a text after his morning shower, during which he’d felt the phantom of eager hands on his skin as he stroked himself to completion.

Were you in the shower?

You could tell?

Yeah.. it was neat

Of course Barry would say words like ‘neat,’ Len thought with a smile.

Free tonight?

Len was only too happy to open up his schedule, rain check on Mick for beers, moving him to a lunch date a week later when he’d be back from Keystone again. He’d seen Lisa the day before already, a long coffee date where he told her about the progress with Barry, about their mutual apologies. There were plenty of things he didn’t mention too, but told her about Barry staying the night at least, acknowledging they were together. His sister had made it clear she wanted to meet Barry still, to talk to him herself sooner rather than later, and he figured that was fair, though he made it clear that it wasn’t happening yet.

Barry showed up at his door right after getting off work, sun still in the sky, wearing a thin cotton button-up with the sleeves rolled up and jeans, the end of summer weather bringing warm air into Len’s cool sanctuary. He smiled at Barry and got a shy goofy grin in return that made his Grinch-like heart grow three sizes, he was sure.

“Whad'you feel like doing?” Len asked.
“Hang out? Maybe go for a walk later, go grab some food?”

He acknowledged that with a tilt of his head, Barry following him through the house. “Would you like a drink? Beer?”

“Ah, just a water.”

Before Len had even finished pulling out the ice Barry was asking, “do you always keep your house so cold? Also I really don’t need ice.”

Len shrugged and put it away. “I told you I like to keep things cool. Why, do you want a sweater?” He eyed Barry’s exposed forearms, not exactly sad to see the skin but he’d much rather Barry be comfortable.

“Um. Sure.”

The second of hesitation didn’t go unnoticed on Len, like Barry’s acceptance of showering here the other morning. He was pushing himself to accept things from Len, but pushing himself a bit in this way was at least minor enough that Len didn’t mind—he liked providing for Barry. And a minute later Len was in his room, watching the leaner man trade his button up shirt for one of Len’s warmer sweaters, elbow patches on the sleeves. He couldn’t help the quick tug in his gut from seeing Barry unbutton the one shirt, white tee underneath, and then the increased tightening behind his navel at watching him stretch to pull on the sweater. Giving up, Len looked away.

“Don’t tell me you have a thing for sweaters?” Barry’s voice held a hint of a tease and Len glanced over at him with a half-smirk, only to feel that earlier tug in his gut intensify at seeing Barry in his clothes, a little too big for him but looking obscenely cozy. “No way—do you?”

He chuckled along with Barry’s half-nervous laughter. “No, kid. It’s you I have the thing for.”

To Len’s surprise, he could feel that Barry was surprised.

“That shocks you?”

“I, no I just—I don’t think anyone’s ever been that into me before.”

He had no idea—“You have no idea, do you? How gorgeous you are?” Barry’s laugh was enough to tell Len that no, he had no idea.

“You’re just biased, Len.”

He shrugged a shoulder and stepped closer, across the room and into Barry’s space, giving him plenty of time to move if he wanted to. But Barry didn’t move away, standing straighter in what might be a challenge but plenty confident. Len stopped a foot from him and couldn’t help the way his eyes skimmed up and down, considering, because Barry was here, in his room again, in his sweater and he let himself indulge for a minute.

“Biased or not, Scarlet, you’re not the type of guy that people say no to.”

Instead of smiling, Barry shook his head, mouth drawn to one side. “You might be surprised at how many times I’ve been dumped and rejected, Len. I wasn’t always this confident, and I’m clumsy, like really clumsy, and always late but you know that one I guess, and I’m nerdy—did you know I used to run a blog? Theimpossibleisoutthere. Yeah. It was pretty awful. Kind of like date-repellent too, as it turned out. Things I’ve learned: no one wants to talk about Big Foot on a first date.”
He was rambling. Barry Allen was rambling and it might be the most adorable thing Len had ever seen. His grin was probably a testament to that. “You believe in Big Foot?”

“Not anymore,” Barry groaned, and then tilted his head back to avoid Len’s gaze, definitely embarrassed. Instead of reassuring him though, Len couldn’t help but tease,

“Don’t worry kid, I’m sure he’s real, right alongside zombies, aliens, and the abomina—”

“Aliens definitely exist.”

His vehemence was too much. Len gave up trying to hold back his laughter as Barry launched into an explanation of the number of stars in their galaxy, let alone their universe, and the number of earth-like planets, and Len just let him, nodding along, telling him he’d believe it when a green man from Mars waltzed through downtown, earning a glare. Before long they were sitting on the bed and Len was flopping backward onto it while Barry sat beside him, legs crossed and still lecturing Len about aliens, their validity, and he offered vague comments all related to movies and shows, mostly Star Trek, but then—

“Wait, Barry—how have you never seen Battlestar Galactica? How hasn’t Cisco bullied you into a marathon yet? I’m sure he must’ve seen it.”

Barry dropped down to lay beside him with a groan, head falling onto Len’s outstretched arm. “Not you too. D’you know how much flak he’s given me over missed references?”

“Didn’t you say you loved Netflix?”

“Are we gonna’ end up watching Battlestar Galactica tonight?”

Len rolled onto his side, careful not to dislodge his forearm from under Barry. “Unless you have something else you’d rather do?”

Barry looked over at him, smiling and relaxed, and then a heartbeat later Len felt something in the bleed, a flutter in his stomach and a pull in his chest, nerves and excitement. Barry could change in a heartbeat. His face was close to Len’s, still with that smile, the way his lips curved upward, and he was bringing up a hand to cup Len’s face, thumb along his jaw, turning toward him even as Len’s free arm found his waist. After a ghost of Barry’s lips a hair’s breadth from his own, a shared inhale, they were kissing.

Barry’s lips were soft under Len’s, each of them moving in sync, tilting their heads to align themselves, deepening the kiss, pulling back by a fraction so Barry could capture Len’s bottom lip, coming together deeper when Len’s tongue darted out along Barry’s lips. He tried to remember to breathe. Tried to focus on the feel of Barry’s tongue against his, the feel of Barry alongside him, but before long he could barely focus at all, caught up in sensation, shared sensation, sensitized anywhere they pressed together.

It got hotter as it got deeper, shifting until Len was on top of Barry, legs intertwined as one of his hands found its way to Barry’s hair, the other hand up his sweater, skimming along his left side. He kissed Barry like it mattered, like it was the only thing that mattered, spurred on by the little noises Barry was making, aborted sounds that didn’t make it past Len’s lips as he swallowed them. Barry’s fingers were in constant motion, curling around the back of Len’s neck then snaking up his back, teasing at the hem of his sweater riding up. Everywhere Barry touched him was sharp and electric, magnified focus.

And Len could feel the bleed—Barry’s hot and impatient arousal licking through him, tugging low in
his abdomen, his nervous energy, the way Len’s fingers slid along his skin and in his hair like phantoms against himself, the tightness in Barry’s jeans making Len harder. He sucked on Barry’s bottom lip to hear the other gasp and felt a frission, something—he did it again and Barry’s body vibrated again, quick and sudden before subsiding. God. Len kissed him deep, letting Barry pull him in, wrapped up in him, and they could have kissed for an hour and he wouldn’t have noticed the time elapse, hands slowly becoming more insistent, impatient, Barry quivering more underneath him, his arousal spiking higher. Len pulled back to breathe, to orient himself, to not drown in the sensations that were too strong, like someone had turned up the dial on the world for this moment in time. He tugged at Barry’s hair enough for the other to tilt his head back, then kissed his throat and sucked gently at the skin even while he slid a hand up to thumb against one of Barry’s nipples. The noise Barry made, that gasp, breathless and desperate, the whine that followed—that sound would haunt all Len’s fantasies from then on.

But it was probably too much, too fast—Len couldn’t feel fear or anger, just pleasure in the bleed, but he knew it was a lot, them both coming undone, breathing ragged and hard as hell even with all their clothes still on. He needed to keep his own wits about him, to talk about this before he got carried away. So he gently kissed Barry’s once more, smoothing over where he was tempted to nip instead, releasing his gentle hold on the other’s hair, body, leaning back on his knees, straddling one of Barry’s legs and trying to catch his breath.

Beneath him, Barry looked amazing, flushed and dazed, lips red and wet and slightly parted. Len resisted the urge to kiss those lips again, knowing he’d get wrapped up if he did. His eyes traced down to Barry’s torso, to his sweater and the way it was rucked up to his chest, exposing his Mark, his long lean body on display, up to his pink nipples. And Len’s eyes dipped lower than that, to the obvious erection, wanting to run his mouth over it, to suck at it on the outside of Barry’s jeans and drive him wild. Len held that urge in check and forced himself to look at Barry’s eyes instead, though it didn’t do much to smother his desire.

“We should probably cool it before we get carried away.”

Barry sighed in agreement, flopping his arms out to his sides. “Yeah.” His voice sounded raspy and Len swallowed back what that did to his libido. "That was intense.”

Len mmm’d and moved off him to lay back on the cool duvet cover.

“Your text said you wanted to talk about this? Seems like a good idea.”

“Maybe on the couch.”

Len chuckled and stood, offering Barry a hand and dragging him to his feet. They were both walking a little awkward and Len wanted to put his head in the freezer for an hour, settled for getting himself a ice cold beer and pressing it to the side of his head and neck for a minute before he joined Barry in the living room.

“So,” Len said as he sat, “do you have any specific questions?”

Barry dragged a hand through his hair and drank deeply from his glass of water before replying. “I should probably start with an explanation, actually—about my powers, and a bit of, well you probably noticed the whole—” he raised a hand and Len watched it vibrate—“this.”

“I did.” And he was very curious.

“Right,” Barry looked caught between a mischievous smile and chagrin. “So that’s a thing. I can control it most of the time but I when I get turned on it just sort of happens.”
“Well I, for one, will not complain about having you vibrate against me, Barry. You do realize most people pay a lot of money for vibrating a fraction that dexterous.” He couldn’t help but smirk when the other blushed.

“I—is it weird though?”

“It feels amazing.” And Len was just connecting the dots about what that interesting and amazing sensation was in their joint phantom masturbation sessions was, how there was always something intense as hell right before Barry came.

Barry nodded, “okay I should probably let you know about some of the, uh, pitfalls of the powers though. For starters I’m kind of sensitive—my skin I mean, because my cells replicate at an advanced rate so my skin is newer than most people’s and when I get aroused at all, like turned on but also just in general, my perception starts to speed up so things start to slow down so the more you touch me the more everything starts to feel really sensitive and good.” He started to speed up as he said it, rushing toward the end. Len blinked, catching up.

“So you feel things more intense? All things, or just things sexual things? Or just things when you’re aroused?”

“All three? I feel things more intense when I’m aroused but my skin is more sensitive in general, but when I’m turned on and you touch me it’s like… way more sensitized than that, I guess.”

Len tried to digest that objectively, mostly ignoring the swoop in his stomach that came from a place of wondering just how much fun that would be to test. Because fun aside, “does that mean you could hurt more easily? Feel more pain?”

“I don’t think so? Things don’t hurt more than they used to, less I think, because it’s just my skin, not all my nerves. But my skin gets like a live wire when I’m turned on.” He rushed to amend, “that doesn’t mean I don’t like more intense touches—I don't need you to be too gentle or handle me like I’m gonna’ break. I mean I definitely get turned on by your rough side, taking charge, the whole leather jacket badass thing you’ve got going for you.”

Len’s eyebrows shot up.

“Aaaand, I just said that out loud.” He dropped his head into his hands. “Somehow, in some universe, this is Felicity’s fault.”

“Who’s Felicity?”

“A friend, but never mind. The point is I need a verbal filter.”

“I really don’t mind you telling me you’re into me, Red.”

He sighed and leaned forward and stared and the coffee table and Len could feel embarrassment flare in the bleed. “There’s one more thing I need to tell you about my powers.”

“Oh?”

“This is the worst...” Now Len was really curious. “Thanks to the metabolism advancements, my system being sped up, my perception speeding up, and the sensitivity issue, I, ah—I’m fast.”

That’s what he was embarrassed about? Len snorted and leaned back against the couch cushions. “Not worried about it, kid.”
“But I’m... really fast sometimes. Like I, uh, I was too close for me to want to admit it when we were in your room earlier. It’s tied into my metabolism somehow, things speed up and...”

Now that could be interesting, how close he was just from some intense kissing. Could Barry orgasm without direct contact? “Still not worried about it. Keeping up with a superpowered young lover is gonna’ be an exciting challenge on it’s own, that’ll just level the playing field a bit.”

Barry barked out a laugh and Len felt him relax, noticed him relax visibly a second later when he scooted over on the couch, putting up his feet on the coffee table and leaning back. He still seemed nervous though. “I didn’t really see this being something you’d be so happy about.”

Len leaned into Barry’s side, taking advantage of the fact that he was allowed casual touches, that Barry was apparently into at least his ‘badass’ aesthetic, if not always all of the things that went with it. “We gonna’ talk about the fact that you don’t seem to have a refractory period, or...?”

“Oh right, that. You noticed? Never mind of course you noticed. So there’s that.”

“The powers?”

“Definitely.”

“Is there a limit...?”

Barry dragged a hand over his face. “If I say it’s a bad idea to push it past five but it’s possible...”

“FIVE!?”

“This is so embarrassing.”

“That’s not embarrassing, Barry. In what kind of time frame are we talking?” Len leaned forward because he couldn’t help it. He shouldn’t be this curious. He knew that women could do that, orgasm after orgasm, but a man doing it, Barry doing it, was way hotter than it should be.

“That was—I mean I was pushing it because I was testing it but—that was in less than a half hour.”

Len couldn’t even exclaim; his throat was too dry. He leaned forward to sip his beer and found some version of his voice. “So if I sum this all up... you’re a virgin who can vibrate and gets oversensitized so you cum quick but can literally have have back-to-back orgasms maybe indefinitely?”

“I’m gonna’ go find a rock to crawl under and pretend this conversation didn’t happen,” Barry replied, a little eye-roll to mask his self-deprecating wince.

“None of that is anything to be ashamed of, kid. Flaunt it. People would kill to have what you have.”

He sighed but nodded. “I get that, sort of. I just haven’t really had a chance to explore any of this or talk about it before—my other powers are cool and fun, these ones are just things that make me worry I’ll go too fast and give myself—or you—a friction burn, or else ruin the mood by ending it too quick.”

Len winced at the words ‘friction burn’ and made a mental note to stock up on a few different types of lubricant. “We’ll sort things out as they come, Barry.”

He was silent for a moment, nodding, but then—“Please tell me that wasn’t a pun.”

Len smirked and took a sip of his beer. “You know, most people don’t catch them as quick as you
do.”

“I—did you just do it again?”

Len grinned. This was way too fun. A whole world of new speed-related puns was opening itself up to him.

“Guilty as charged. Now, let’s move this to the kitchen so I can at least feed you while we talk. I can feel your stomach grumbling.”

He put on some pasta and started a sauce, cutting up the necessary vegetables, a recipe he got from Mick and was consistently told he was making imperfectly by not using fresh basil, but this time he had a little herb garden on one of his window sills and could make it ‘the way it was meant to be eaten.’ If nothing else, it would spare him the lecture from Mick about not pulling all the stops for his Soulmate.

“So… explanations outta the way, anything you want to ask about?”

Barry was leaning against a counter, the dark of evening taking hold outside the windows behind him, just a bit of light left from the sun on the horizon, framing him. “Nothing about the physical mechanics—I’m not an idiot and I have google—but I don’t know anything about your experiences, or what you’re into?”

Len nodded, the smell of garlic and onions filling the kitchen, the sizzle of meatballs frying in the other pan, feeling the now-familiar sensation of Barry’s hunger in the bleed. Normally when Len had a conversation about what he was into, it was a transaction or more the variety of ‘what are we down for this second.’ He wasn’t entirely sure what to tell Barry and hoped the kid’s hunger would distract him from Len’s hesitation.

“I’m sexually experienced, and I don’t just mean relative to you. I’ve tried most things and I’d be comfortable trying pretty much anything you’re curious about with you. And for the record, in case you’re worried about it, I dropped into a clinic after you stayed the night and got tested for every STI under the sun, even the things they don’t usually screen for. I’ve got a clean bill of health in that department, and papers to prove it.”

“I, uh—thank you. That’s good to know. I didn’t really think about STIs, actually, since apparently I’m immune to almost all viruses and most pathogens now, thanks to how fast I regenerate. Caitlin’s tested my blood a lot, and says I can probably fight almost anything off before it takes root in my system. I can get parasites maybe, but she's not even sure about that.”

Len’s eyebrows shot up and he had to glance at Barry. That was convenient. And he definitely wanted to know more about Barry’s powers, because the more he learned, the more he found it wasn’t just speed—his metabolism, his healing, his sensitivity and refractory period, and now immunity from most illness? What else was there? But Barry was still talking and he didn’t have much chance to ask. “But that still doesn’t tell me what you like, Len. What should I—you’re kind of taking the lead on most of this.”

He frowned as he added more ingredients to the sauce he was making, crushed tomatoes and spices. “I like sex, Barry. I like whatever feels good and whatever makes my partner feel good. And you do realize that there’s a lot we can do, will do”—hopefully—“that doesn’t have to involve penetration? Hands, mouths, frottage?”

Barry scowled. “Of course I know that. But I still want to get to that point, penetration I mean, and I guess you might remember, that time in the bleed when I fingered myself, before this all blew up for
a while. So I’m open to doing that, at some point, just not... yet.”

Len nodded, ignoring the slight flush to Barry’s cheeks as he talked fingering himself. Len turned away to give him space and check the progress on the meatballs, giving the kid a second. “That’s good to know. But also, if you’re interested, if we ever do have anal sex, it doesn’t have to be you taking it.”

There was a beat of silence and Len glanced over at him, Barry’s face slightly strangled. “I, uh, I mean you’d consider... I just kind of assumed.”

“I get that.” He did. Almost everyone he’d been with assumed he was an unequivocal top. “And generally I do prefer topping but that doesn’t mean I haven’t or wouldn’t bottom, or that I don’t enjoy it.”

Barry swallowed. A peal of something tight and hot clenched in the bleed and Len couldn’t help but wonder if Barry was picturing it, Len underneath him, opening up for Barry as he pressed inside. Len tried and failed to suppress a smirk, getting a little hot under the collar himself.

“So you’re not totally opposed to that idea then?”

“No, I, haha, well you can tell I guess. I’d be into trying that, at some point. Same with... same with me on bottom. I mean I do want to try that. I think that’s something I’d be into. I guess I want to try most things, eventually.”

Len smiled and stirred the sauce, which smelled done. “Eventually, I’d like that. And however you want to play it for your first time, we’ll do that.” He looked straight at Barry as he said it, making sure the other knew he was completely serious.

“I’ll think about it... I’m not sure what I’d like better.”

He nodded and moved to strain the pasta. “There’s no rush on figuring it out, and you can decide in the moment, don’t have to plan it out. We’ll take this at whatever pace you want to set. Just because things heat up between us, or if it gets to a certain point where one or both of us is getting into it, you can stop us at literally any time.”

“I know, Len, I get that. I’m not worried about consent, or saying no.” For a second, Len could feel Barry’s fluttering heart while he turned off the burners. “But thank you.”

“No need to thank me. Now let’s eat.”

**********

The next week had Len feeling lighter than he had in a long time. He woke alone in his bed the morning after his evening with Barry but didn’t mind. After watching Battlestar Galactica for a while, Barry cuddled under his arm on he couch, then cuddled laying along side him, then with his head in Len’s lap—the kid moved a lot— Len couldn’t help but feel happy the evening and the feeling carried over to the morning. Barry hadn’t been able to stay because he got a call, one he explained only with a pained expression and a “Flash stuff” before he had to go. There was the telltale feeling of the rush of Barry running for a while after that, the energizing sensation that kept Len up, scanning forums for new art to considering stealing, seeing what was going on in Central. He’d probably want to talk to Barry about that, the Flash and Cold dynamic, sooner rather than later.
So far he hadn’t wanted to rock the tenuous boat, somehow managing to keep it not just floating but actually sailing, so long as they talked about anything but their costumed personas. But after an hour of reading forums and considering how he might bring that up, Len eventually got a text that said Joe was giving Barry a ride home so he didn’t wait up.

They managed to see each other another time that week. They went for dinner and Len managed to pay before Barry could try and take the bill—since the kid seemed to let Len provide him with food, if no other gifts still—and they did make it for that walk Barry had suggested. They kept mostly to ‘safe’ topics in conversation, though Len did try to enquire about the Flash, feeling that Barry had been busy running off and on, and had definitely been in at least a minor squirmish. He’d been hoping to breach their personas, but that line of conversation only got him frosty shut down. "It's a meta, we're dealing with it." followed shortly by, "I don't want to talk about this with you."

Backtracking, Len turned things to Iris West's pregnancy, and heard about her and Eddie Thawne, watching Barry relax by degrees. Neither of them brought up family histories, despite how curious Len was about the situation with Barry's father and him being innocent. But going down that route might invite questions about his own past, ones he'd rather not answer. Barry didn't stay over at Len's place again, getting a call from the precinct apparently.

That was fine by Len. He was still learning so much about Barry. Like that he seemed to love contact, more affectionate than Len would ever have guessed from his early recalcitrance, and maybe he’d always been so stiff because he was holding himself back so much. And when he was more relaxed, Barry's smile came easy, that and he seemed to like a competition in any form, interpreting even a comment from Len about how he liked to play pool as a challenge for him to go and learn to play so that he could beat Len at it. And the bleed felt less like a raging fire now when they touched, holding hands on their walk, kissing deep before Barry had had to run off. Watching him zip away as a streak of lightning was really something else. His Soulmate had superpowers.

It was all going great until Friday.

Len texted Barry on Friday morning, relaxing in his yard after a work out, staring at his now-dying garden, all picked now as the season waned, autumn on the horizon. It was September finally.

**You free anytime this afternoon?**

It was two hours later before he got a response, feeling all the emotions he'd learned to associated with Barry's day-job in the meantime. Boredom, frustration, sometimes a twinge of embarrassment. He couldn't help but remember Barry's 'lab rat' comment when the thought about the kid's working, hating cops all the more for it. He didn’t really focus on the bleed while Barry was at work though so it was all in the back of his mind, out of the way. *Can't—got a lead on Grodd. Looking into it after work.*

**Have fun.**

Len was surprised Barry had specified, but he supposed knowing about the gorilla as he did might make a difference in Barry's willingness to tell him what the Flash was up to this evening. He knew where the Flash would be, what he would be doing, and Barry was trusting him with that, to not use it to his advantage, and that much Len could honor. Mostly, part of him worried about Barry. That gorilla monster was not pleasant the first time around, and why Barry was trying to find it again was a mystery to him. Would Barry explain that, if he asked? He decided not to push his luck.

Instead of waiting around and worrying though, Len spent most of his day planning his next art heist, something fun and easy and over in Keystone, low-key enough that it shouldn’t problem to avoid pissing off Barry. He also went to check on things: his accidental ‘territory’ in town and its denizens, his assets, the bar, the rest of his life that didn’t revolve around Barry Allen. He managed to catch up
with Hartley a little bit, leaning that he was taking a job with the city's symphony orchestra, and then ate dinner with Mark and Shawna at the bar. As their MateMaker, Len let them regale him with the story of Mark’s latest acquisition for her—an antique copy first edition copy Gray’s Anatomy, pages and binding still in pristine condition. Even Len whistled appreciatively when he saw it.

“Glad to see you’ve got some sense of taste, Mardon.”

“Shawna brings out the best in me,” he grinned at her and she rolled her eyes but smiled, nudging his arm. They actually were good for each other, it seemed. Shawna had been back in school part time before Bonding with Mardon, still waiting tables at the bar in her evenings and weekends when she wasn't patching up a Rogue, and now she was considering going back full time with Mark encouraging her. For his part, Mark wasn’t doing anything that was too likely to get him killed and had managed not to piss of any drug lords or rob any banks since they Bonded, and even talked about taking a night course or two himself. They were still sickeningly cute, like characters right out of a cheesy BondCom movie sometimes, but Len didn’t mind as much anymore. Some small part of his brain wondered if one day he and Barry would be able to look at their relationship troubles like some BondCom movie, laughing about it. Still, there was only so much of Shawna and Mardon's flirting he could handle so Len didn’t stick around for dessert, taking a beer with him to the now-empty workshop out back.

As soon as he sat down, he felt restless from the consistent feeling of Barry running, almost nervous. He tried to focus. Half an hour after dinner, looking over a pile of truck schematics, it hit him. The bleed burst to life, sharp and sudden, full of pain.

Barry had taken a hit, a bad one, something like a punch to the gut that had Len tasting blood. The feeling was peripheral and not really like his own pain, definitely less intense than Mardon’s lightning into Barry had been, but even though it abated fast he knew Barry would be reeling from it. Len stood up, already working up to a low growl, wanting to find him though that was impossible, but then, abrupt and fast and—

Len dropped onto his knees, the inside of his head white hot like a brand burning into it down the center line, searing stabbing pain like it would split in two. He gripped the edge of the table and tried to stand, made it to one knee and fuck Fuck it hurt on the inside of his brain and what the hell was going on and visions of—medical labs—sounds like screeches—anesthetic—fear—

_Vengeance for Father._

It rang out in a deep voice that cut through the agony-like noise inside his head, pounding like a pulse, and Len ground his teeth and tried to think, tried to focus around the taste of copper and the pain and was that Grodd? How was he here, inside Len’s head? How was this—it hurt—Len stop wasting time to think, angry and head splitting, reaching on instinct for what had worked last time—

Len tried to remember the image he’d called up before, one of his father but he couldn’t remember which one it was, a million to choose from, so he grabbed the first memory that floated up. He slammed the memory forward, his father after a hard case, the time when he got into a fight with his partner, almost got a suspension and he was pissed because Lewis Snart played the model cop at work—came home that day and hit the drink and Len was fourteen, made himself scarce because he knew better but it was late when he returned home and the old man was still up, still angry and mad now that Len was out so late, mad and the shouts started as soon as he was in the door but he filtered through that part and to the part that mattered: the bruises, the pain he could take, the way his father hit and the way Len kept snarling at the old man because if he didn’t the bastard would just hit harder and call him a pussy for it.

He huffed in a breath when the pain in his head subsided like a wave rolling back with the tide. He
felt a spike of confusion somewhere in his brain, dulled by the pain. A second later, there was an image of him, from the monster’s perspective it looked like, colors half-muted, back in that museum hallway, cold gun up, Barry shouting at him in the background. It felt like a question.

“Yeah that’s me. Whadd’you want, you overstuffed gorilla?” he said it aloud.

_Father—vengeance for father._

There was something then, another memory, the inside of a cage and it wasn’t all pain but there was a man—was that _Harrison Wells_—standing, reaching in with a voice that sounded half-sinister to Len, “Don’t worry Grodd, one day things will all be different for you. I’ll always be here to look out for you.”

Was Wells some type of father to this monster? Was _that_ how Barry knew the gorilla?

Len shuddered and immediately sent back an image of him in his childhood, it was right after Lisa’s mom left again and she was four while Len was ten, hiding in Lisa’s room with her with one hand over her mouth, trying to shush her and telling her not to cry before then hearing their father’s footsteps in the hall anyway, the man alerted from Lisa’s sniffles and pounding on the door of her room, yelling that she better not be crying or she’d be sorry and Len held her tight, promised he wouldn’t let ‘dad’ hurt her.

“Fathers aren’t all they’re cracked up to be, you big dumb ape.”

_How are you here, Ice Man?_

“You’re the one inside my head, you monster. Come out where I can fight you.”

_Not there—here—_

An image pressed behind Len’s eyelids, a dank tunnel, water flowing in it and heading to a grate, the open air—a sewer? a dam?—and there was Barry, cowl down and standing right in the center of his vision, something in his hand, expression totally bewildered, and a little scared and—oh _shit_. This conversation wasn’t in _his_ brain, it was in Barry’s. Of fucking course it was. Of fucking—could he _see_ that?! Could he—

_How are you here, Ice Man?_ Grodd’s voice boomed inside his head, and before he could think to answer, stomach clenching tight and hot and sick, something else welled up into his brain, another memory, unbidden and unsumoned by Len—

It was them—him and Barry—but it was him, seen from Barry’s eyelids, it was Len’s hand on his shoulder, Len declaring they were Soulmates, and he could feel the too-fast heartbeat that went with the memory, the static in his head, see and feel hands clench the mattress, _feel_ Len kissing him gently and the image dissolved, maybe favorably because Len didn’t want to experience that panic attack from Barry’s point of view but _holy shit he had just seen a memory from Barry's point of view._

“How are you here, Barry?”

_No words_, Grodd’s voice replied, almost confused but still angry and intense inside his head, _Memory_. There was a pause and then, _No, Flash, Ice Man is nothing… No. NO! NO trust, no forgiveness for Cait-Cait for anyone. Only father._

So it was a disjointed conversation—he and Barry sending memories to Grodd, getting his telepathic messages through their NAB, and each of them answering aloud with words, responses unheard by the other.
There was pain in Len’s back, his ribs and arms. It flared out, red hot. Barry. Len tried to stand, stopped and swallowed even as another memory came up, another from Barry’s perspective, on high def behind his eyelids, of Harrison Wells—standing up, behind glass—“Stranded in this time, unable to return to my own. And the only way back was the Flash”—then a man in a yellow suit yelling that he would kill everyone Barry had ever loved, take everything from him, and there was a swirling vortex behind him until a blond man—Eddie Thawne?—shot the yellow-suited psycho, and Barry sped forward and threw the yellow man into the glowing blue light; it swallowed him whole.

*Your excuses mean nothing, Flash.*

Was that Barry’s attempt to reason with an insane telepathic gorilla monster? “Barry, get out of there,” he growled to nobody. There was pain from the back of his head straight down his back, then his knees, his face, splitting pain down his arm, choked off breath and fuck Barry was—

*I will avenge my—*

Len acted without thinking. Instead of a memory to fight the monster, instead of his father, Len pushed the only thing he could think of to reason with the creature, to at least distract him. Len pulled up the memory of his grandfather’s funeral—the organ music in the church as he stepped down an aisle toward the casket, Lisa’s small hand in his, the adults milling about and talking in hushed tones, his father smelling like beer and whiskey, and Len walked up the three steps to his grandfather’s body laid out in a suit with roses dropped onto his corpse like apologies, the stained glass windows that with stained light filtering in through them, leaving red and orange light on his grandfather like blood-red designs, tears on Len’s face as he stood in that red light and dropped a rose onto the body of the only person who ever looked out for him. He was twelve and it was the last time Len had cried.

“Vengeance doesn’t bring them back, Grodd. Nothing does.”

He felt a tug in his gut, then, and the sudden and restless feel of running, and the invasive feeling of Grodd in his brain abated almost instantly. Len's head was aching, a migraine-like pain, as though someone slipped razor blades inside his skull. But Barry was safe. He knew that much at least, could feel it. So he stood on shaky legs, gripping the table, sweat rolling down his back, his neck, clammy. Barry was safe, but now he’d seen part of Len he never wanted to share, parts of Len that his Soulmate, that *Barry* wasn't supposed to know, to see, to feel.

Fuck. Len needed to be alone, and he needed a drink.

Chapter End Notes

So, welcome back overarching plot. How lovely of you to join us. Next chapter picks up with Barry and more hints of that plot before we sidestep for a little while for feels. I’m not 100% sure I’m pleased with the pacing to be quite honest, as this comes a bit out of left field, but I needed to get moving on the plot.

And I've got to say I was fascinated by at least one commenter saying that Len will never open up about his past to Barry so Lisa opening that discussion would be good, and yeah... Len wouldn't have, but Grodd kind of forced his hand. I've had this scene in mind for ages, by the way, as of introducing Grodd in chapter 1, and had always
planned for him to have an interesting effect for Bonded Soulmates. Anyway, in the next little arc for this fic, we'll get to see more of Len's variations again, not just his attempts at gentleness with Barry but also his anger, some badass moments, his confidence coming out more again as he doesn't walk on eggshells as much around Barry soon.

ps - I spent almost two hours trying to find a better song than "Slide" for this chapter and couldn't find anything I liked better. I was so frustrated omg. This was the hardest chapter for that so far. Normally I have a much better idea of what I'm looking for.

pps - full disclosure is that I have never seen Battlestar Galactica and, like Barry, I have been given a lot of flak over it...
Barry made it back to STAR Labs without issue, too fast almost, still reeling from what had just happened. They’d found Grodd thanks to a series of disturbances at the the dam and he’d spent the whole evening trying to track him through tunnels and into the strange structure, but they’d been wrong—the voice recording of Caitlin had done nothing but piss Grodd off, and after all that, Barry still couldn’t fight him one-on-one, especially not in a confined space like the dam. Grodd’s fists and anger were already dangerous enough, but inside the dam it could be deadly in seconds for more than just Barry if he punched the wrong wall, especially with how many cars and people were around there. They needed a new plan.

But that wasn’t the part that left him reeling. What the hell had happened? Memories of Len’s—Len’s!—flashing through his brain, and it had taken him way too long to figure out what was going on, thinking they were coming from Grodd at first even though it made no sense, some type of cruel trick, but then hearing Grodd talk to Len—Barry was still shaking when he made it into the lab. Grodd in Barry’s head somehow meant Grodd in Len’s head. Len’s memories in his head. And those memories—Barry couldn’t think about that right now, couldn’t get mired down in what he’d seen, felt—he had to debrief Caitlin and Cisco, and Joe was there too, keenly worried about anything Grodd-related.

“Barry!”

He heard them exclaim when he zipped into the room, the sound stretched out when he was in the speed force, clutching the side of the nearest table as he stopped, resumed human speed, breathing heavy.

“What the hell happened out there, man?” Cisco asked from behind him, Caitlin hurrying over.

“Are you hurt?”

He shook his head. “Whammied. Memories.” He swallowed and pressed off his cowl, turning to lean back against the table.

“Why don’t we go to the med room and—”

“After.” He gave her a meaningful, beseeching look and she returned it with concerned expression but nodded.

“After.”

Joe picked up the thread, looking worried but then focused. “I take it the recording of Caitlin’s voice went over as well as the banana from last time?”
Barry nodded, the recorder on the table behind him, and then he pushed off his from his hands and stood properly, dragging fingers through his hair. Something so twisted and angry was welling up, then cut off, like Len was trying to push down the bleed. Barry shook himself and turned to Joe.

“And apparently she’s not forgiven. No one is. All Grodd wants is vengeance.” He felt so on edge, thrumming and tense. And a second later, the bleed flared to life again, and suddenly could feel Len, and Len was—

“Vengeance for what?” Joe asked and Barry tried to focus.

“He thought I killed Eobard—his ‘father’—and he’s pissed about it,” Barry willed himself to stop pacing for a second, feeling so much shame and horror filtering through, so much rage, so much—

“But you didn’t kill him! I mean, we don’t think he died, do we?” Caitlin amended, with a somewhat sheepish glance at Cisco for confirmation, who shrugged and replied,

“I dunno’, hard to say with him getting swallowed up by that wormhole. But Eddie shot him right in the chest so it’s a kinda’ fair bet.”

“I showed that to Grodd,” Barry swallowed back against the sensation of burning in Len’s throat, the feelings in the bleed, and he pushed it all to the side. “I wanted to show him that Eobard wanted to go, and show him what happened, but it just made him angrier.”

“Showed him all of it? Dude, no wonder’s he went Planet of the Apes on you. Probably gonna’ blame Eddie too now,” Cisco supplied and Barry winced. Shit, he hadn’t thought of that.

“We’ll let him know to keep an eye out for monster-sized gorillas,” Joe responded dryly, shaking his head. “I’m not too worried about that, Eddie isn’t wandering around the sewers looking for this damn thing. Speakin’ o which, what are we gonna’ do about getting Grodd out of the Keystone-Cleveland dam?”

Caitlin caught Barry’s eye with a concerned expression and he wondered how bad he must look. There was a question in her eyes and he shook his head just once before forcing himself to sit down in a chair, to sigh, to relax by a fraction. His knuckles felt a phantom fire, not flame but pain and he clenched and unclenched his hands. “So we come up with a new plan. One that doesn’t break the dam or get anyone hurt. There’s gotta’ be some way to lure him out of there.”

“And then what, Barr?” Joe asked, shaking his head. “We’ve got nowhere to contain that thing, and we’ve tried playing nice enough times before—he won’t come quietly.”

Barry looked up at him, no clue what to do, and didn’t miss Joe exchanging a glance with Cisco and Caitlin.

“What?”

“We were talking, Barry...” Cisco started and Caitlin picked up when he trailed off.

“And we all agreed that maybe with everything else that’s going on—Cisco fielding job offers, me getting set up at the University next month, and since the military is about to take possession of STAR Labs—”

“—that maybe taking General Eiling up on his offer to work together and stop Grodd wouldn’t be such a bad idea?”

Barry jumped out of his seat, “What?! NO! No, not up for discussion. The military tortured Grodd
and made him this way! They injected chemicals into his brain that let him mind control people, not to mention the mental memory thing he can do to whammy people. We can’t let people like Eiling just take him! After what he did to Bette, after what he did to Firestorm, you want to work with that asshole?"

“Barry,” Joe was raising his hands in a placating way, stepping forward, “we’ve gotta’ consider our options. How long until Grodd does something else that puts people in danger? How long until he goes on a rampage around Central City? We’re talking about one psychotic gorilla who won’t hesitate to kill, and giving him to the authorities that are trained to deal with this sort of thing.”

“Trained to torture, you mean! He hasn't been in your head Joe but he's been in mine and what I feel when his memories are inside my head—”

“Eiling’s a monster, Barry,” Caitlin cut in him off and spoke in a quiet but firm tone. “I don’t like him any more than you do. But Eiling came by again, yesterday, and again now while you were out. He knows we’re looking for Grodd and he knows that we don’t know what else to do, not unless we kill Grodd. Eiling wants to work with us, said he wants the Flash on his team. If Grodd can’t be reasoned with…”

“Why can’t we keep him here, in the pipeline?”

Cisco answered, “military’s about to own the pipeline, Barr. Tomato-tomahto.”

He ran his hands over his face. Right. “I’m not working with Eiling and I'm not giving up Grodd to Eiling so easily, okay? It’s not happening.” Barry felt a phantom of burning in his throat and closed his eyes against the feeling.

“Barr—”

“I need to go for a run and clear my head.”

“Why don’t you let me look at your head first? In the other room?” Caitlin asked and Barry opened his eyes, saw all of them looking concerned.

“Yeah. Okay. But then I’m going for a run right after.” He looked at Joe, “don’t wait up.”

Then he followed Caitlin down the hall, and didn’t miss that she closed the door behind her before pointing at the med table. “Sit.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re a mess, Barry.”

“It’s the bleed.”

She stared and him and he swallowed. Her expression went from shocked to sympathetic in a second —

“Is everything—”

“Can you explain to me how Grodd could have opened some—I don’t even know how to—some psychic channel between me and him?”

“You and… your Soulmate?”

“He was there, Caitlin, inside my head—it was, it makes no sense. His memories played in my mind,
like he was sending them to Grodd when I was fighting him. Grodd was *talking* to him, and it was like I was getting half a conversation.”

Her eyes went comically wide. “Grod opened up a telepathic communication channel between you and Sn-you and ‘him’?”

Barry clenched his hand, feeling the phantom burn in his knuckles intensify. “I can’t even begin to describe…”

“Is it still open?”

“No. It was gone as soon as I ran away from Grodd.”

She sat down, thought for a minute, looking flabbergasted, and Barry was about to go, not able to stand another second not running to Len’s side, when she stood up and snapped her fingers.

“What?”

“A translator.”

“A what?”

“Grod acted as a translator for the neural pathways. It’s the only way, even with your intense Bond, Barry. It’s like this—the reason the NAB normally transfers only certain information is partly because of where the receptor cells are in the brain—near centers of emotion—and partly because patterns of neural activation are unique to each individual, at least to a certain extent, and especially more complex activation for things like memories. The NAB allows specialized cells in a person’s brain to mimic the pattern of activation in that part of their Soulmate’s brain, picking up on it and replicating it into the phantom of emotions, and sometimes touches and other things. But the more complex it is, the more it’ll fail to transfer at all or else be transferred as white noise, because your brain won’t have meaning or a pathway for that pattern of activation. So it *can’t* be that Grodd just opened a channel into the NAB because if he did, all your Soulmate would get is advanced white noise.”

“O…kay. So how is he a translator? This isn’t because my bleed is too strong?”

She gave him a dubious expression, like she wanted to ask, but focused again. “It kind of is. Grodd has telepathy, which is different than the NAB. He doesn’t replicate neural activity, he interprets what is at the forefront of your consciousness by tapping into the neural signal projected outward in ways science can’t *fully* understand yet, but basically using your brains’ own interpretation of the signal instead of relying on his own. But what *must* have happened is that Grodd tapped into not only your projected neural signal, but also Snart’s, by virtue of how strong your Bond is, and how we discussed that you probably have NAB receptors that extend all the way to your hippocampus now. This really just confirms that theory. So Grodd can pick up on his signal coming in from your brain, and translate that pattern of mental activity for you, even though you don’t even feel it there. It’s possible it would work with other Soulmates; it might be the case that everyone has NAB receptors in other parts of their brain that just remain inactive—there’s still so little we know about the brain and the bleed.”

She finally slipped up and said Len’s name, and didn’t even seem to notice. Barry shook his head to clear it, didn’t mention it. “I… okay. So there’s really nothing I can do to make sure it doesn’t happen again?”

“I… don’t think so Barry. Nothing except keeping Grodd out of your head.”
He felt a flash of frustration strong enough to force him to exhale, not sure if it was his own or Len’s anymore. “Got it. Now if you’d excuse me, I really need to go see Len.” He zipped away before he had to watch her eyes widen at hearing Len’s name.

Len’s house was a quick run for Barry from STAR Labs. It wasn’t too close to downtown, unlike the lab, but it wasn’t on an extreme outskirt of the city like Barry might have expected. It was in an old residential neighborhood, one that used to be an outskirt suburb before urban sprawl and zoning changed that, now a cheaper part of town but mostly well kept, older bungalows with yards in the back. The lights weren’t on in the house but the bleed got stronger as soon as Barry ran up to the door and he knew Len was in there. He wanted to rush in, to burst down the door, feeling on edge and thrumming with whatever was coursing through Len’s system, his own worry choking him up. He tried the handle and found it locked, pounded on the door, receiving no answer until he started to shout,

“I know you’re in there, Len! Open up!”

The night was dark, it was late evening now and overcast, a streetlight burnt out partway down the block, helping hide the silhouette of the Flash on Len’s doorstep.

He had no idea what he was doing but he needed to be here.

He kept pounding until the door swung open. It was dark inside but he could see Len clearly, cut on his forehead, drops of blood on his shirt, sleeves rolled up, knuckles red and dripping blood and a half-empty bottle of vodka in one hand, the other on the door and making sure there was no room to get past him and into the house.

“What the hell are you doing here right now?” his voice was low and angry, eyes too bright in the dark, everything contorted but Barry could feel—

“You’re hurt,” were the first words out of Barry’s mouth, as though they explained everything. As far as he was concerned, they did.

Len looked at his knuckles, as though that’s what Barry was talking about. With some scathing kind of acid in his voice, he said, “I’ve had worse, kid.”

Barry had no idea what to say to that, except—“Is that glass?” there were shards of glass in Len’s knuckles and he suddenly had a much better idea of why they were bleeding so much. “Let me in, I can patch you up.”

“I have someone I go to for that, when I need to.” Len didn’t move. It stung but he understood, understood that Len didn’t want him here, that the man wanted to be alone but Barry needed Len to understand that what he saw, it didn’t change anything between them.

“Len…”

There was so much emotion there, enough in the bleed that he could feel it, eyes burning till he blinked. There was so much shame. Barry didn’t know what Len felt off him, unable to parse his own feelings right now, but after a long, tense minute, the other stood back and let Barry in, locking the door behind him. “I can’t believe you’re still in that damn suit.”
Barry pushed back the cowl. He hadn’t even realized it was up, sometimes the suit was like a second skin to him. Then Len turned to him and pressed the bottle of vodka into Barry’s chest. “Here, you might as well catch up.”

Barry took the bottle and eyed it with disapproval, something to focus on at least, wishing Len would turn on a light. “I can’t.”

“I’ve got beer,” Len turned and started walking toward the kitchen, a crunching sound under his feet and Barry looked down to see broken glass shining on the carpet, illuminated from the light filtering in through the living room window, red drops of blood catching his eyes. He hurried to catch up.

“No I mean I can’t. Catch up. Literally, I can’t get drunk. My metabolism won’t let me.”

Len stopped walking in the entrance to the kitchen and looked at him. Barry wondered if he was drunk and wondered what that would feel like in the bleed but he didn’t look drunk—inebriated sure, but he wasn’t swaying or slurring. He did drop his forearm onto the wall between the kitchen and living room and rest his forehead against it though, a cross between a dry laugh and a sigh escaping him.

“You can’t get drunk. Of course you can’t. Of fucking course.”

Barry gave Len a wide berth as he walked into the kitchen, dropping the bottle on a counter and pouring Len water instead.

“Do you have a first aid kit?”

The other man nodded and ignored the water, marching to the bathroom and Barry followed. Finally, Len flicked on the light in the bathroom and Barry winced. The mirror was shattered and in pieces all over the sink and floor and Len didn’t even look at it, just moved to the standing closet inside the room and grabbed down a towel and a hefty first aid kit. Each movement made Barry’s knuckles alight with a little more pain and fire but Len didn’t even flinch.

They moved until Len was sitting on the closed-lid toilet and Barry on the side of the tub, gloves off, using tweasers to carefully pull out the glass, not missing how Len managed to stay completely still, barely so much as a hiss as Barry worked. The silence was only broken after a few minutes, when Len commented, “wish you’d brought the vodka in here.”

Barry shook his head. Half the bottle had been gone. “There’s a glass of water.”

“I’ll get as drunk as I want to, kid. Drunk enough for both of us.”

He sighed and dropped another shard into the tray before dribbling some water over the back of Len’s hand to clear away the blood and moving to the next knuckle. “That won’t solve anything, Len.”

He didn’t respond and they lapsed into silence again. Barry maneuvered his hands, each in turn, slowly until each shard was gone.

“Who do you go to? When you need patching up?” It felt like the only safe thing he could ask.

“I don’t rat out my friends, kid.”

He could finally make out that the tattoo on the inside of Len’s right wrist was a pair of skates, some other design, a card for certain, on the back of his forearm but Barry was distracted and Len’s sleeve covered part of it. “I wasn’t asking for the Flash, Len. I was just… it’s good to know that you’re
Len looked down and to the side, eyebrow moving as if to arch, a “hm” sound escaping. Then Barry was dabbling the knuckles with rubbing alcohol and Len finally let out a real sound, a sharp hiss of displeasure until Barry grabbed out bandages.

“Whatsoever, it’s not import—”

“Shawna Baez.”

“Peek-a-Boo?” he was surprised, even as he picked up Len’s hand again and started wrapping a bandage around the knuckles.

“Med school drop out, back in school now. After her escape, she wanted a way to pay me and Lisa back, but didn’t want to be too involved in all this… She’s never been interested in crime, kid.”

“Tell that to Caitlin—Shawna almost killed her.” He didn’t know why he said that, because he didn’t want to argue. He moved to bandaging the other hand.

“She told me. But only after you kept her and the rest of them in solitary confinement for months.”

Barry looked down, eyebrows drawing together. He wasn’t proud of that, he just hadn’t known what else to do.

“You realize that’s a form of torture, don’t you, Barry?”

He fixed his gaze.

“Well?”

Barry dropped the bandaged hand and stood to clean up the supplies. Was Len purposefully picking a fight or did Barry walk into this one?

“What’d’you want me to say, Len? That I messed up? I already know that. We didn’t know what else to do with the meta’s—they were dangerous, are dangerous.”

“Baez isn’t.”

“Is that why you betrayed me at Ferris Air? Because you didn’t approve of my methods?”

God, were they really talking about, right now?

“I already told you why I did what I did.”

“Because you saw an opportunity?” he washed his hands and couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice, off his tongue, couldn’t look at Len but this wasn’t why he was here. Goddammit, this wasn’t why he was here. “Whatever, Len, I don’t wanna’ talk about Baez or the meta’s.”

“What do you wanna’ talk about, kid?” Len’s voice had a hard edge to it, cold and restrained, a sharp flash white hot fury simmering away beneath the surface and Barry stared at the sink, at the broken glass in it, the shards on the ground beneath his shoes. He could feel his throat, tight as he realized he had no idea what to say about what he’d seen. It had been so personal—Len’s memories, his childhood, Lisa and his father. Barry shuddered, recalling the feel of the blows in Len’s memory, the fear as he held his tiny little sister and implored her to be quiet.

“I don’t wanna’ talk about anything, Len. I won’t pry into things you don’t wanna’ talk about.”
Len didn’t answer and Barry didn’t need the bleed to see the hard lines of tension in him, staring straight ahead, the bathroom turned into a battlefield, blood and broken glass, bandages and broken promises.

Without overthinking it, Barry moved in front of Len, kneeled down and picked up his bandaged hands, kissing each of Len’s knuckles in turn, overtop the binds he’d placed there. “I’ll stay.”

Len inhaled slowly, down up at him where Barry was kneeling. “You don’t have to.”

“I will. And it’s late, we should get to bed.” He didn't want to keep talking. He didn't want to fight.

“I don’t need your pity, Barry.”

“It’s not pity, Len—I care about you.”

There was something sharp in the bleed, like Len’s heart hurt more from hearing those words, sadness spreading out along the edge of his perception and bleeding into it, enough that it must feel fathomless to Len.

“God, Len—what is it, why d’you—”

“Just leave it, Barry.”

He swallowed, tense, but Len still hadn’t taken his hands back from Barry even if he wouldn’t look at him anymore, eyes down, and Barry shook his head. “Leave it? How can I not ask when you’re in pain? What can I do to show you I care, Len?”

Len dragged in a breath, “I’d stop you feeling all this if I could.”

Barry wanted to cry. In this space, it was hard to tell where his emotions ended and Len’s began. So he stopped trying to figure it out and just smoothed his thumbs over the back of Len’s hands.

“I’ll always want to know how you feel.”

It was a wash, a mosaic of feelings, ones that ached, but disbelief was there and it hurt. That Len didn’t believe that Barry would want to know, would care; he knew his pain was hypocritical at this point so he swallowed it back and stood up.

“Let’s go to bed, Len.”

He didn’t argue, this time, just stood and let Barry walk them back to Len’s room, holding one hand still. He turned on the light and winced in the sudden bright, Len flicking it off a second later.

“Lamp.”

Len sat on the side of the bed while Barry fiddled with the lamp on the side table until it illuminated, then sat beside Len, listening to their breathing, eyes closing. He missed the sound of rain from before when he was last here, the slow and steady pour, a dim noise that helped bridge gulf between them, one he was desperate to fix now but had no idea how to. He let his emotions filter in, filter out, felt the stillness of Len and the depth of things that Barry could feel but couldn't name. When he opened his eyes again, he knew one thing he needed, one way to connect.

“Can I see it—your Mark?”

Len breathed out through his nose and Barry felt his hesitation, head tilting to the side to consider. But he sighed and nodded, moved over, away from Barry’s side and turning to face him, kicking his
shoes off and moving to sit up on his knees on the bed. And finally, he pulled off his sweater and undershirt.

And oh. Barry understood why Len had hesitated. It wasn’t just his arms. Len was covered in tattoos.

They were evident in the low light. Len had the word “Cold” tattooed on his left shoulder in ornate, gothic letters. It was encapsulated within a light, almost shimmering white-blue snowflake. On his left collarbone was Lisa’s name in similar, but more angled and cursive script. His other collarbone was bare, and for a moment Barry pictured his own name there, but that was stupid, in part because… the whole right side of Len’s torso was already dedicated to Barry, in a way.

The most prominent among his tattoos was a design, an obfuscation design, Barry realized dimly, and it was covering Len’s whole right side, surrounding and hiding his Mark. The Mark was there in the rest, a jagged snowflake, white and iridescent, identical to his own. Several other snowflakes, all of which were tattoos in varying sizes, were scattered around his right side, elegant and white like his Mark, mimicking and masking it. Other tattoos on his torso were placed in an elaborate array that included the snowflakes into it. There was a skull facing forward with eyes that looked like constellations and a crown on top of it, a simple star, some roman numerals, then swirls and lines building in intricacy, what looks like a row of stained glass windows, ones familiar and sharp, Barry recalling them from a memory not his own. Finally, there was a weaving endless knot in a Celtic design that cut through and behind the other images.

Barry wanted to run his fingers over it, to trace each line and follow them, make sense of each swirl. And that was just the front. The design bridged up and into a full sleeve that extended down Len's right arm. His shoulder displayed a folded paper crane that looked like it was floating on water. His bicep had a distinct ring of barbed wire around it, chased underneath by black birds. There was a jack of spades on his forearm, that card he kept seeing, and when Barry looked closer, he noticed that the jack’s face was a skull. For some reason, it made him sad. Below that, turning Len’s arm so he could see the wrist, he saw the pair of figure skates on the inside of it.

Barry let go of his arm.

“Is there more?” he breathed into the space between them. His fingers were drifting up now but suspended in the reverent air. With a glance at him, Len shifted, turned so that Barry could see his side and his back. There was more. The stained glass window extended around his side, and on his back was an angel and a demon—grappling, neither winning, but the demon overtop. And finally he couldn’t help but graze his fingers along Len’s skin.

Barry smoothed them over the lines of ink, felt them catch on old and faded scars, ones covered by the tattoos and blending in. He ran both hands along the designs, over Len’s shoulders and Len was turning again, letting Barry trace them to the front, until his fingers found Len’s Mark.

Before he could decide what to do next, Len’s fingers grazed his neck. Barry let out the breath he’d been holding. He tilted his head to look up at Len, who was still sitting up on his knees, and then let his eyes drift closed, let Len slowly bridge the space between them until they were kissing. Barry’s hand landed on Len’s bicep, lips pursing if only barely, pressing back against Len’s. His lips were always so much softer than Barry expected, each time they kissed, and they fit against his own like they belonged there.

The kiss was chaste, undemanding, and if he trembled it was because the bleed made him weak. The fear, there, the awe. The sadness. It was enough to make him want to cry and he pressed his lips against Len’s harder, and then he pulled back because it was too much, too much.
“I know,” Len whispered against Barry’s hair, pulling him close. “I know.”

Barry breathed in deep against Len’s shoulder, holding himself together, hugging Len back because he needed to, needed to hold them both together. It seemed like every move so far between them until recently had felt like Len’s knuckles—shattered glass, shards stabbing in each time they moved and cutting his hands on the pieces. But god he was trying to bandage it now, trying to make this work, wanting this to feel smoother, softer, wanting to hold Len together and let him know that he was safe.

Barry traced the Mark with his fingers, and then titled his forehead to rest on Len’s shoulder, the bare skin there. Then he spoke, softly, slow as he figured out the words.

“When we Bonded, at first… I was scared, really scared...not of you but of this, of what it meant, of being close with you.” Barry breathed the words into the space between them. “But I think I’m starting to get it. You’re not who I thought you were, Len. And I know you don’t want me to know this, to see what I saw but I—you never have to be ashamed of what you’ve survived. You never have to hide from me.”

He swallowed when he felt the mess that caused inside Len, the way his own throat constricted. “There’s a lot I have to hide from you, Barry. A lot of things I’ve done, I do, that you would hate.”

Even so, Barry didn’t drop his hand from Len’s Mark, or lean back. Instead, he let himself stay there, struggling with himself. Len’s hands were clutching the suit, the stupid suit he was still wearing that now felt so wrong inside this room, so wrong for this conversation.

“I know. I know, Len, that you’ve hurt people, killed people.” For a second, Barry wondered what he would have turned out like, growing up like Len did. But it wasn’t an excuse, there was no excuse for murder and there couldn’t be, not if the world was going to function. But even so, he found it in him to say, “I can’t fix that, and you can’t change that. The best we can do is move forward from here, Len. I can hate what you’ve done, what you might do again, but I don’t think I could ever hate you.”

“I hurt people.”

“I know.”

“I’ve hurt you.”

“I know.”

“Barry…” Len dragged it out like a question that Barry didn’t have the answer to. He could feel something, through the bleed, but it took him a moment to place, so similar to his own emotions that it was hard to disentangle. It tasted like ashes in his mouth, like an apology on his tongue. Regret.

“I’m too broken for you, Barry,” Len whispered into the room, barely audible but his voice was so close to Barry’s ear and it sounded—god it sounded so wounded. So honest.

Barry’s hands shook against Len’s skin, Len’s hands clutched hard into the suit, and he didn’t know what to say. How many ways he wanted to tell Len he was wrong. He felt tears on his face, finally, trying to stifle a sob. Len’s sob, coming out Barry’s mouth because Len was just there, calm and still and cool on the surface, like ice, even though his insides felt like agony. Barry swallowed it back, and pulled away from the facsimile of a hug they were sharing, but didn’t bother to wipe his eyes. Len felt even worse as he pulled back, but Barry took Len’s hands and brought them up to the hidden zipper on his suit, guiding the other’s fingers to pull it down, to push it off his shoulders.
Then he shrugged out of it and pushed it to the ground and the moment felt thick and slow and fast and tense all at once. He took Len’s hands in his and pulled them forward, pressed them to his own face, over the tear tracks.

“Kiss me,” he whispered.

“Barry…”

“Trust me.”

Len’s expression looked as vulnerable as Barry felt, but he forward and Barry leaned back, pulled Len with him, falling to his back on the mattress, Len above him, leaning over Barry and into his space until he gently sealed their lips together. And into that kiss, soft and half-afraid, Barry poured all the feelings he couldn’t find words for. He didn’t know how to say he forgave Len, for the meta’s, for any and everything else, didn’t even know if he would really mean it if he did, couldn’t place words to all the mess and pain behind them, between them. But he tried to put forgiveness into that kiss, absolution. Because Len had betrayed him, had hurt him, had hurt people he loved but just for right now, that didn’t matter. What mattered was that Len was in pain. What mattered was this.

He moved his lips against Len’s, let tears leak down from his eyes but pushed up gently into the other, and when Len finally pulled back, eyes dark and almost black in the low light, Barry’s lips followed him before he dropped back against the mattress. “I don’t care if we're a little broken, Len, if you're broken, if you can't see the good in yourself. I see it in you. We're in this together. You're my Soulmate.”

And it was warm and small but strong inside his chest, magnificent and a new kind of ache all at once. Whatever Len was feeling, it was beautiful.

But the man didn’t say anything. He just rolled off Barry and gathered him into his arms until they were hugging each other, until they were on the edge of sleep and had to move to turn off the lights, to shuck their pants and pull back the covers drowsily, only to reach for one another again and fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I'm kind of having a sad day, so I decided to post this angsty chapter and make everyone else sad too. And in case you haven't noticed this little tidbit, that is literally the first time Barry verbally calls Len his Soulmate -- up until now he's said "Bonded" or "in this" or "together". And Len noticed.

Couple of other notes about this chapter: this was originally gonna be way earlier (and thus different) in the story, and was going to be Barry and Len's first kiss after IC. Rough, right? Can you just imagine how much worse everything would have been if this happened /before/ the fight with Mardon? Don't say I never did anything for you guys, I definitely changed the order to make them less soul-crushing.

Also, I’m sure some of you picked up on this, but I have to highlight it: Barry’s so against what Eiling has done, only to have Len point out that solitary confinement in the pipeline is literally another form of torture. I have some very big reservations about what
happened to the meta’s in the show, personally, but Barry’s moral system is very “do no [physical] harm” and he can be short-sighted about these things. It’s one of the things I like about ColdFlash as a pairing, that they actually balance each other out with respect to these things (because I can only imagine Len has some big reservations about confinement and prison, being a criminal and all).

Anyway, next chapter is a lot lighter for the most part, with only mild turbulence, but after that I encourage you all to buckle your seatbelts for a bit because it'll be an topsy-turvy and bumpy ride for a few chapters. But I've burnt through most of my backlogged writing again for this so the next chapter(s) won't be up as quick, sorry guys.
Len woke slowly, warm and comfortable, sunlight filtering into his eyes. He’d got up once in the middle of the night, getting out of bed to drink water and take a piss, carefully sidestepping glass on the bathroom floor, sleepy and unimpressed with himself. But then he’d went and crawled back into bed beside Barry, immediately feeling the other man move closer, cuddling into him, and he managed to sleep again. By the time he awoke, it was light out and he actually felt rested for once. When he did wake, Barry was there, snuggled warm into Len’s side and arm thrown over Len’s torso, blankets rucked down to their waists because Barry was a goddamn heater. Len blinked open his eyes and glanced down at Barry, taking in the sight of his smooth and unbroken skin, not so much as a scar, and he wanted nothing more than to run his fingers along the skin, maybe through Barry’s hair that was tickling his shoulder, but he didn’t want to rouse the other. He couldn’t really believe Barry was in his bed, arms around him, not after what an ass he’d made of himself, not after what Barry had seen of him. But Len would take it, selfish enough to want to hold it while it lasted. He dozed, leisurely, thinking he should probably get up, should probably go start breakfast, should probably give the kid space when he awoke, like Len had done last time Barry stayed over, not wanting him to feel awkward about waking up in Len’s bed. But it was hard to convince himself to move while weighed down comfortably by Barry’s arm, and before he noticed the time pass, Barry shifted at his side, mumbled and then moved, blinking. Len smiled, charmed, feeling Barry’s comfort, his second of confusion, not much yet in the bleed despite their closeness, evidence of Barry’s brain just coming online, leaning up and face scrunching against the light.

“M’Len?”

“Good morning, Barry,” he couldn’t keep the smile out of his voice, the way his fingers finally got to indulge and trace along the skin of Barry’s back. More things filtered into the bleed, warmth tinged with a growing nervousness, a slight flush of embarrassment, a low level tug of arousal—also growing. He definitely should have let Barry wake up on his own.

“I, ah, good morning.” He surreptitiously shifted his hips away, as if Len couldn’t already tell he was hard, that he had been since before waking—as if Len wasn’t getting hard himself. “Sorry.” Maybe he’d felt Len’s annoyance and misplaced it.

“Nothing to apologize for, kid. Morning wood isn’t a big deal.”

“I mean for, since we haven’t—”

“We won’t do anything you don’t want to do, Barry.” Len pushed himself into a sitting position after Barry rolled over and flopped onto his back with a sigh, and he felt a tug of deeper arousal, more insistent than the combined effects of sleep and testosterone.
“What if… I do want to?”

Len’s throat went dry even as he swallowed around his surprise, considering the events of the night before. He felt Barry’s fingers skim tentatively along his back, no doubt along the lines of his tattoo. Len turned enough to look at him, to try and gauge if he was doing this out of some misplaced sense of obligation. Even as Len did, his body was already jumping tracks, reminded of the conversation they’d had the other day about Barry’s sensitivity, thinking of all the ways Barry might shiver under his touch. And Barry looked nervous, sure, but not angry, not tense in the wrong way, a slight flush to his cheeks and lips and god Len just wanted to devour those lips.

“Anything you want, Barry,” his voice was lower and raspier than it should be, but Len didn’t care. He forced himself not to roll on top of the other, not to hungrily press their bodies together, but to lay back slowly alongside Barry, on his side, before bringing his fingers up to gently skim over Barry’s chest. He watched Barry’s face the whole time, how his eyes tracked the movement Len’s hand on his chest, the hitch in his breath.

“Will you… I want to feel your hand on me. It happens all the time in the bleed but I— it’s so much different with you really here.”

Len was pleased he actually asked, didn’t leave Len to guess what he wanted. He kissed Barry, gently, cupping his jaw then moving his hand down to hook a finger in the elastic waistband of Barry’s underwear, along the outside of his hip. “D’you wanna’ do away with these?”

“Ah—right.”

Barry shifted, leaning up, hands disappearing below the duvet cover, a blush on his cheeks and Len couldn’t help but kiss his shoulder before Barry leaned back. “You too?”

Len didn’t hesitate, reaching down and pulls his boxer briefs off before kicking them out of the bed. He didn’t bother to replace the blanket, comfortably naked.

“This is gonna’ be over way too fast,” Barry whispered, looking at Len, eyes skimming up and down fast and then away. Len refrained from laughing, not at Barry’s ‘issue’ but at his adorable and unnecessary embarrassment over it. As far as he was concerned, the ache between Barry’s legs when Barry looked at Len’s naked body was about the best compliment he could get.

“Like I said, not a problem.”

“Uh huh.”

“You nervous?”

“I shouldn’t be—why am I nervous? God I’m excited, I want this—so why am I this nervous?”

Len titled his head, eyes studying Barry, who rolled onto his side so they were facing each other. “It’s new—seeing instead of feeling, letting me control your pleasure instead of you.” He didn’t add the rest, about how Barry attached so much meaning to these actions, to sharing this, but he doubted it needed to be said.

And Barry was nodding, then shifting, leaning forward and kissing Len, a little too fast, a little too abrupt, but it was deep in an instant. Len immediately reached for the side of Barry’s head, smoothing into his hair, and Barry rocked forward, kissing insistently, a little breathlessly. The sound he made when their bodies pressed together, fuck, if he kept doing that it would be over too fast for Len too. He ran a hand up Barry’s torso, along his skin, his back, his hip, caught up but not drowning in it, waiting for permission to go further. He didn’t have to wait long. Breaking from the
kiss, breath heavy, Barry captured Len’s hand in his, and with a sharp spike of arousal and excitement and more, guided Len’s hand onto him.

He loved the feel of Barry’s cock in his hand—full and hard, and true to form for his apparent sensitivity there was already a pearl of precum on the tip, circumcised. If anything, he was frustrated his hand still had a bandage on it, unable to get the full effect of Barry's length against his palm, but it didn't matter. Len rolled his thumb along it to gather up the liquid and ran his hand down the shaft, feeling his way, how Barry’s cock was long but not as thick as his own. Barry gasped at the simplest touches, shivered—no, vibrated, whole body blurring for an instant and then still again—repeating this as Len stroked him.

He could feel it all, phantom in the bleed, intense because they were touching, side by side, and it pulled at him and made him ache in a good way, but it made it easy to tell how close Barry was, practically feeling his own balls tighten when Barry was right there, on edge. And he wanted to look down, to watch, to see Barry in his hand when he came, but he couldn't take his eyes off Barry’s face, contorted with pleasure, eyes closed and mouth falling open to let out a choked moan, a gasping sound, and his whole body seized up for a split second before he vibrated and shuddered in Len’s hand, coming.

Len stroked him through the aftershocks and let Barry lay back, watching Barry breathe deep, pleased with the turn of events of the morning, caught between smirking and grinning and smiling. Barry was right, it had been over pretty damn fast, but the other had enjoyed himself and that was all Len cared out.

“I, uh… that was definitely more intense than when it’s just me,” Barry was grinning.

Len just laughed, “You don’t say.”

“I, uh,” he looked over at Len, “d’you want me to?”

“Only if you want to.” He could live without having an orgasm this morning.

“I do.”

Or not. Because he definitely could go for having an orgasm this morning. “Then be my guest. Unless you’d like to clean up first.”

Barry looked down at the mess on himself and snorted. “Tissues?”

Len reached for some off the bedside table and a second later—Barry wiped up with speed that looked like a quick blur—Barry was turning to him, a shy smile lighting up his face, warm sensations filtering through their connection. He slid his fingers along Len’s side then hesitated for a second, and before Len could even reassure him he asked—“Lube? Not—I mean for vibration, for my hand to—unless you don’t want me to vibrate my hand on you? Do you want me to? I don’t have to, I mean obviously I can contain it if I—”

“Vibration is fine,” Len cut him off because as adorable as the rambling was, realizing that was on the table had just made his cock twitch and he was suddenly impatient. He fished lube out the bedside table and handed it to Barry, knowing he felt eager and totally unashamed about it. And god it was worth it. Scant seconds later Barry was leaning close and swallowing his nerves, kissing Len before reaching down with slick fingers, sliding them over Len’s erection—that alone was worth his weight in gold. Len’s hand clenched reflexively against Barry’s skin, holding his waist. But then, after the delicious feeling of Barry experimentally pulling, stroking, adjusting to a different angle than he’d be used to on his own body, the cheeky little fucker pulled back from the kiss to grin at Len
before his hand started to vibrate and—fuck. Len gasped, pressed his hips forward and swore quietly.

“Fuck, Barry—you have no idea—”

“Oh I have some idea—”

“God, this—” Len would be embarrassed about the gasping if Barry hadn’t made noises far more wanton a few minutes prior. Barry mixed stroking with vibrating, not a constant pressure, a slight twist to his hands and he took it to a faster, more impatient pace than Len usually gave himself but it was gonna’ get him there quick, especially after feeling the phantom of his own hand on Barry, the feel of the other’s orgasm. Before long, with a few more curses and a failed attempt to keep his hips from bucking up, he was groaning Barry’s name and spilling out over his hand.

He blinked open his eyes to the sunlight of Barry’s thousand watt grin. They kissed, gentle, and Len was smiling too. But Barry rolled off to get tissues and it didn’t take long for Len to notice,

“Kid, are you hard again already?”

Instead of blushing, Barry rolled his eyes. “After that? Yes. Definitely yes. But I’ll take care of it in the shower because I’m hoping to convince you to make me breakfast again,” he waggled his eyebrows and Len dropped onto his back and laughed. Trust Barry to care more about food than sex.

“Breakfast it is.”

**********

A knock at the door surprised Len as he turned sausages in the pan. He heard a key in the lock a second later, and “you home, Snart?”

Shit. Mick. They were supposed to have lunch today. Barry was still in the shower, and Len was in his underwear in the kitchen, had been humming to himself.

“The fuck?” There was the telltale sound of crunching glass, “—Len?”

“In here, Mick. Don’t worry about the glass.” He hadn’t cleaned up anything yet except the bathroom floor so it’d be safe for Barry to shower. Evidence of his evening was all over the floor, vodka on the counter, bandages on his hands stained red along the four bumps for each knuckle.

“What the hell happened in he—” Len heard Mick ask as he came into the kitchen, and before he could even begin to formulate an answer, Mick was switching tracks, “—are you cooking? Shit, Snart, you got laid, didn’t you?”

Trust Mick’s priorities. Len scowled at him, “why don’t we reschedule lunch?”

“You blew me off once for this kid already, buddy.”

“Barry’s in the shower and I’m sure he doesn’t really want to—”

“Hey Len can I borrow some clo—ugh!”

There was a pause, a half-second tableau where Barry was in a towel looking scandalized—and delicious, water dripping down his lean, too perfect body—standing in the opening of the kitchen
that led to the hall.

“Nice.”

“Mick.”

“You weren’t lying when you said he was pretty.”

Len felt Barry’s shock and embarrassment in the bleed. “Barry, this is my friend Mick. Who was just leaving.”

“Nice to meet you, pipsqueak.”

Barry let out a strangled sound.

“I’ll get you some clothes, c’mon Barry. Mick, watch the food.”

Len stalked out of the kitchen without a second glance, one hand on Barry’s back, directing him toward Len’s room. Which still had the Flash suit on the ground. Perfect.

“What is Heatwave doing in your house?” Barry hissed in angry whisper as soon as the door was shut and Len furrowed his eyebrows and resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“He’s my best friend, we were supposed to have lunch today.”

“Your best friend? I thought you were just accomplices.”

Len frowned over at Barry from the door of the closet where he was searching through clothes for him and Barry, some pants that might actually fit the other.

“We’ve known each other for almost fifteen years.”

“And he knows about me?”

There was something harder in Barry’s voice, and—“No. Not that.” Len’s eyes flicked to the Flash suit and back up at Barry. “Mick’s always known I have a Soulmate, and he knows we Bonded recently. So I told him about Barry Allen, of CCPD’s finest. That’s all he knows.”

Barry was tense and Len wasn’t sure what else to say. “Your secrets are safe with me, Barry.”

“Just get me some clothes.”

He did and they dressed in silence.

“Are we having lunch with him?”

“I can tell him to go.”

There was definitely some underlying feeling of frustration; Len focused his attention on it, trying to decipher his next step. This wasn’t just ‘Barry and Len’, they’d stepped into ‘Flash and Cold’ territory again, which Barry still shut down hard and fast. But to his surprise, Barry took a minute then heaved out a whole-body sigh and shook his head.

“No, I… he’s your best friend? He’s important to you?”

Len paused, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes, peering at Barry and trying to make sense of the
Barry steeled himself and looked Len in the eye when he responded. “Okay. He’s your friend, and he already knows about me. And eventually… eventually you’ll spend time around Iris, and Caitlin, and… whoever else. So let’s just do this lunch thing.”

There was doubt written in every line of his face, but Len would take it, especially because he liked the thought that Barry was thinking about the future, about introducing him to others. He stepped closer to the other and before he could complain, pulled Barry in for a quick kiss, lingering a moment longer than he should have, really, hands loving the feel of Barry’s waist, loving seeing him in one of Len’s sweater again.

“I'll make it up to you.” He whispered it against Barry’s lips then spun on his heel and let Barry decipher what he meant as he walked back to the kitchen, smirking to himself when Barry caught up and sent him a half-scandalized glare that almost made Len laugh.

“Glad to see you made it back. I was sure I’d be eating these waffles alone.”

Instead of blushing or stammering like Len half-expected, Barry zeroed in on the most important part of that sentence. “You made waffles?”

Mick scoffed and looked at Len, “What Len, don’t you treat this kid right? Or are you making him some shitty old pancakes—”

“Says the guy who won’t use fresh basil in his penne con—”

“I used it fresh when I made him dinner,” Len grumbled, knowing he looked like he was pouting, picking up the vodka and putting it away in the liquor cabinet in the mostly-unused dining room.

“For once, you lazy bum. Kid, grab me the eggs from his fridge?”

Len leaned in the doorway of the kitchen and watched.

“You aren’t too jumpy when you’re wearing clothes,” Mick told Barry, taking the eggs and ignoring Barry’s indignant expression. “You do know who I am?”

“I think the whole city knows who you are.”

Mick grunted in amusement and Len crossed his arms, amused himself but also careful, mindful of having these two particular people interacting.

“You aren’t too bad, jailbait.”

“You aren’t too bad, jailbait.”

“Nice, not afraid to snap back,” he gave Len an approving nod and he rolled his eyes at Mick in return.

Barry responded, “I don’t get intimidated too easily.”

“Good thing if you want to be Len’s guy.”

Len snorted. Barry seemed to be doing okay, hesitation aside, so he didn’t intervene as Mick kept talking to him while they moved to the breakfast nook to eat brunch, asking him questions like “You
really are a badge?” and “What kind of chemicals do you work with?” and, Len’s personal favorite, “so if some of those chemicals were to go missing…”

“I’m not stealing chemicals for you to light things on fire!”

“Len will do the stealing, you just have to look in the other direction.”

Barry just looked affronted. “Len isn’t coming to the precinct to steal from my lab! He isn’t coming to the precinct ever. He’d be arrested in a heartbeat!”

“After hours—”

“It’s a no.”

The best thing in the world, Len was quickly deciding, was watching his best friend and his Soulmate argue. Barry looked so scandalized and Mick was genuinely angling here, no idea who he was asking for favors.

“No opinion, Snart?”

Len peered into his mug of coffee and sat back, even as Barry surreptitiously took another waffle from the stack. “I say we’ve gotta’ at least give him plausible deniability. No stealing that can be traced back to him.”

“Len!”

Mick laughed and Barry narrowed his eyes at Len’s self-satisfied shrug.

“Change of pace, Mick, before he has a hernia. Why don’t you tell me how Pam’s doing?”

Mick rolled his shoulders and went to pour himself more coffee. “Turn for the worse. She's getting sick, pneumonia they think.”

“Mick, I’m—”

“Save it. She’s old, I understand. Tough as nails though.”

Barry cast Len a confused glance and he sighed out through his nose. “She accepting visitors?”

Mick snorted, “you want to be mistaken for someone else that bad?”

Len started to wonder if it was worse than Mick had implied, or if that’s just the way things were. He’d never really seen anyone grow old. Alongside him at the table, Barry’s confusion was mounting in the bleed. Ignoring it, Len started picked up plates and moving across the kitchen, cleaning up.

“They’re offering me these pills, just hit the market last year, experimental treatments,” Mick started, staring at his coffee, leaning against the stove.

“Pills?” Len knew that Mick didn’t have a great track record with pills.

“NAB blockers.”

“NAB blockers?” Barry sounded alarmed, and Len couldn’t blame him. With what Snow said about the bleed—
“That or surgery, if I want it.” Mick addressed the answer to Len, even though it was Barry who asked. Neuroamygalectomic surgery, an option only for people whose Soulmates were dying, or those who had Soulmates with life sentences or on death row. The thought made Len shiver.

“Is this person your Soulmate?” Barry asked, and Mick grunted in acknowledgment.

“Platonic. She’s my family.”

Barry nodded, “I’m sorry.”

“Not you too. Save it, she’s old. She’s sick.”

“She’s 93,” Len supplied. He glanced at Mick. “You considering the pills? Or the—”

“Of course not. You should know me better than that, Snart. There’s no way in hell I’ll let them take the last of my Bond to her, I don’t care if I do have to feel it all in her last few months.”

Len nodded, unsurprised. He’d be the same in Mick’s position. There was no universe in which he’d ever willingly give up his bleed with Barry, no matter how too-intense it became, or if one of them got dementia. He’d heard the bleed could get weird toward the end of a person’s life, flaring up and down, but still, there was no way that Mick would consider not being there in the NAB to comfort Pam.

“That’s a pretty common opinion, actually” Barry looked awkward, but kept talking. “Not wanting to lose the Bond. They’re actually working on using nano-technology to perform the surgery soon because a lot of people avoid it thanks to the possible repercussions of brain surgery, even though it’s a really advanced surgery. Guess that’s why they’re making blockers, but that’s probably a bad idea. My friend, uh, she’s a doctor, anyway, she was telling me about how the bleed gets stronger when you block it. She dabbles in symbolonology and I guess Palmer Tech’s nano advancements have made it possible—”

“I don’t give a shit how painful it is—”

“No, I didn’t mean—of course not. I was just talking about the science.” Barry looked at Len for help and Len almost snorted. Of course Barry would get excited about science and make an ass of himself.

“Kid’s a nerd, Mick.”

“You’re a nerd, Snart,” he complained in his gravelly way.

“Which is precisely why he’s my Soulmate.”

Mick grunted but any tension was broken, and they moved into the living room, Barry taking a spot beside him on the couch, Mick on the opposite couch with his feet up. Len casually draped an arm around Barry as he listened to Mick complain about his job in security, asking him about his house and if he’d be moving soon. Len had stayed in this place longer than any other in the past few years, a full eighteen months, and he frowned when Mick pointed it out.

“I like it here.”

"I can tell, you put up art."

"I put up art at some of the safe houses too.” This house wasn't much like the other safe houses though and Mick knew it. For one, it has a yard, and for another, Len was attached to it.
“You have a garden.”

He did, not that he was entirely sure he’d bother in the future again. His therapist—someone that Mick had suggested Len see—had suggested filling his free time with productive and non-destructive hobbies, and that he try to create more stability in his life. Mick knew damn well why Len had a garden.

“Maybe you should try it.”

“I’ll stick to burning things, watching things come alive.”

Which was exactly why Mick needed so much therapy. Len resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Things come alive from gardening too, Mick.”

“Nothing like fire.”

Barry shifted uncomfortably beside him and Len let the conversation flow away from fire, on to hockey and the Keystone Combines—which apparently he was going to have to educate Barry about because the kid hadn’t even been to one of their games—and asking Mick how he was liking being on that side of the river, at least until Mick brought up Lisa.

“What about her?”

“You’ve been avoiding her.”

“She tell you that?”

“It’s not hard to spot. You aren’t talking about her and she only dates Ross D when she’s had it up to here with you. You do know that?”

Len considered that, leaning back against the cushions, arching an eyebrow. “That can’t be true.” He felt Barry’s mirth from that.

“She knows you hate him.”

“I hate that he doesn’t give two shits about her.”

Mick let out a half-laugh. “Admit it, buddy, you’d make it look like an accident if you thought she would fall for it.”

Len couldn’t help the chuckle that dragged out of him because, well, Mick wasn’t wrong.

“Who’s Ross?” Barry asked. Len glanced over, slightly amazed that the other was still here, valiantly taking his day off to lounge in Len’s livingroom and make small talk with his enemies.

“As asshole,” Len replied. Ross was Roscoe Dillon, a narcissistic two-bit criminal, married with a kid, another on the way. But Barry didn’t need to know that. As it was, Barry frowned.

“I’m sure Lisa can handle herself.”

“The kid met Lisa?”

Len covered quick before Barry could say something stupid. “Briefly. Lisa’s not his biggest fan right now so I’m keeping her outta the picture until she chills out.”
“As if either of you are actually chill about anything,” Mick grumbled. “Why’s your sister got a problem with this kid?”

Barry shifted under his arm and Len realized he probably thought it was because he was the Flash. “Long story, Mick,” he supplied. “You know how she can be. I’ll give her a call, and if she promises to play nice then maybe I’ll let her meet Barry properly and she can relax a bit.”

“Whatever you say, Snart.”

*************

It was early evening by the time Len was done cleaning up the mess he’d made around his house. Mick had left pretty soon after noon and Barry had stayed for a little while into the afternoon. Len was glad for the chance to talk to tell him a bit about Mick and Pam, to watch some TV and not argue with Len’s choice in friends, in his criminal social network. It was gonna’ be a problem eventually, he figured, because right now they were just brushing things under the rug, but with Barry curled up beside him on the couch it was hard to worry about that. By the time he left, Barry had actually lamented leaving but apparently had things to do. Len managed to steal a goodbye kiss before he was out the door with his Flash suit in one of Len’s bags. The kiss was short but even that had Barry’s heartbeat a bit quicker, and Len was definitely getting the idea that Barry would be something else to keep up with if his libido was any indication.

Then he’d cleaned up the glass around his house and re-bandaged his hands, considering if he’d be able to convince Barry to stop by the next evening, or even if he could get him to go out for an actual date, when he got a call from Lisa. Might as well make a date with her and Barry, if they were both free, and see if he could navigate that without any murder threats.

“Sis.”

“Lenny—glad you answered. We have trouble.”

He stood up straighter at the steel in her voice, already walking toward where he stored the gun and parka when he was home. “What kind of trouble?”

“The kind where you’ll want to get yourself to our little Rogues Den before Weather Wizard does something we’ll all regret, brother. We have company.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this whole chapter was a goddam detour. A happy detour, but like, ploooooooot. We need it. So next chapter is plot (and some humor, but like, plot). And the one after. And the one after that. And probably like, 5-7 in total. Some shit’s going down. Finally. (and no this won’t be the climax of the story, there is more ground to cover yet after that). But overall, I felt like parts of this chapter were kind of awkward and not my favorite, but I wanted to include the first half and this was the best place for
Barry to finally meet Mick and to get through some exposition I'll build on later.

(don't worry, eventually Lisa and Barry will also talk)

Also, Mick's dialogue is SO HARD TO WRITE. The man does not use contractions *near* as much as other characters in the show (especially not nearly as much as Len), and he has some really particular speech patterns that are hard to capture because it's a lot about where he places emphasis. It's a challenge and I should probably go back and read how I've done it in previous chapters, because it might be off haha. It probably doesn't help that I've been watching a lot of Prison Break, since Dominic Purcell's character in that has a very different speech pattern.

Anyway, guess next chapter we get to see who "company" is and what the hell Mardon is up to now :D
Iris drove to Marigold Street listening to her audio notes from the last time she’d been down here. That had been with a senior journalist, Jackson, who introduced her to a contact or two in this area of town. He was retiring, and between his exit and Mason Bridge’s ‘disappearance’, Iris had wrangled a promotion not long ago. Really, more than an official promotion, the editor had asked her to work on an in-depth investigative piece, the type of thing he knew she actually liked to do, the type of piece that might matter.

Right now, she went over what she knew. Marigold Street was former mafia territory belonging to the Darbynian crime family, up until they’d been almost wiped out not that long ago. The Santini family had made a push forward, them and every other facet of organized crime with a stake in Central, from the Chinese to the Irish who mostly stayed over in Keystone, even as the lower echelons of the Darbynians scattered. But the Santini’s were the closest, sharing Marigold as a border with the Darbynians, and they'd tried to stake out the first and biggest claim. This street and the surrounding blocks were strategic territory, apparently, a host of small businesses that worked ideally as fronts for laundering, a few older apartments, and more than one abandoned building for storing inventory nearby, not to mention the street itself was about as far from any police precincts as possible in Central City. Beyond that, the area had been a hotbed of crime for years due to it's position on the border between mafia families. When the Darbynians fell almost a year prior, there had been a lot of chaos, and Iris could remember reading about a lot of violence and more than a few deaths in this part of town for a few months.

But something was different now. There was some new player in town. Marigold Street was changing, and whispers had reached Jackson just as he was retiring, whispers about the Santini wanting to take this place over but not being able, and about strange things and people around here that didn’t seem possible. But Jackson was uninterested in pissing off the mafia for his last piece with the Picture News, so that fell to Iris, who couldn’t be more excited. If it had to do with meta-humans, and she suspected it might, then she was interested, and if this could be a new meta, all the better. And she wasn’t supposed to report directly on the mafia, but she was encouraged by her editor to write a piece on ‘gentrification’ and see what she could dig up, and to keep digging until the loose threads started to make sense.

Iris pulled up by a parking meter and almost wished she hadn’t dressed so well. She looked around the street and realized she was going to stand out; at least her jacket was long, but really there was nothing for it. She locked her purse in the trunk and just kept the essentials on her, dodging glances from some of the creeps hanging out in doorways. Then she went to find some information.
Iris had had a contact to meet, something she went readily to do, but he didn't show up, and she ended up wasting an hour waiting before she decided to try her luck elsewhere. She walked around for at least an hour beyond that with no luck, not a single person would agree to talk to her, and as evening hit she decided to call it quits for the day and grab a bite to eat before she drove home. She made a beeline to the nearest shop, a small café and bakery with a name that looked Polish, and greeted the woman behind the counter, ordering herself a decaf coffee and sandwich and a chocolate pastry—the second one that day, because she was eating for two. It was almost a shame Eddie was working the evening shift today, because she'd been in the mood to bake later and he was a great helper in the kitchen.

“That be all?” The woman behind the till had just a hint of an Eastern European accent.

“Yes, thanks.” Iris waited for her coffee and realized—“actually, ma’am, I’m wondering if you could tell me a little bit about this neighborhood.”

Instantly, the woman was suspicious. She was older, a little rounder in the well-lived way, but her face that had been soft before drew into hard lines as she peered at Iris. “Who’s asking?”

Iris wasn’t sure why she’d have expected any less. “My name is Iris West and I’m a reporter,” she fished out her card from her wallet, deep in her jacket pocket, and handed it to the woman. “I’m just trying to learn a little bit about the experiences of the people in this part of Central City, for a piece on social mobility and gentrification.”

“Gentrification?”

“It’s when a lower-income neighborhood attracts the—”

“I know what it is,” the woman waved her hand dismissively and passed the card back to Iris. “We haff’ no gentrification here.”

Iris felt a thread, in there, heartbeat picking up. “If it isn’t gentrification, maybe you could tell me a little bit about what is going on? Your own impressions and experiences, of course, I’m just looking to understand how people in this neighborhood—.”

The woman snorted. “You seem sweet, dear, so let me give you a little advice. This part of town, even now, you’re better off not to ask too many questions, yeah?”

Iris wasn’t the type to give up that easily—“Ma’am—”

“Oliwia. Oliwia Karpenko.”

“Mrs. Karpenko, I’m not someone who gives up easy. Something strange is going around Marigold—”

“Something good.”

“Good?”

The bell over the door rang and Iris looked up. Hartley Rathaway was standing in the door. Iris recognized him instantly, if not from the tabloids then from her research on the Flash and her heart seized. But his eyes glided right over her to the woman behind the counter.

“Mrs. Karpenko!”
“Hartley you little prize, you,” she smiled wide and her voice was filled with a lot more warmth than she’d shared with Iris. For her part, Iris was taking her pastry and coffee and moving to a table to have a seat where she could casually watch the exchange. She draped her hair a little over her face as she did, trying to be hidden and indistinguishable, but even as she sat, she almost spilled her coffee everywhere and half-jumped because—

Poof—

Peak-a-Boo was suddenly standing next to Hartley.

“I told you to wait for me, Piper,” Shawna Beaz said with an exaggerated frustration as Mrs. Karpenko greeted her, seemingly unfazed. Iris sat still and kept her eyes averted, pulling out her phone. She felt the other woman’s eyes glance at her then away and was immeasurably happy that the meta had never actually seen her face.

“Shawna, darling, there’s no keeping up with boys like this one.”

“Tell me about it. I wouldn’t even try. One boyfriend is bad enough.”

“He has not stolen you a diamond yet?”

Shawna laughed at the woman’s smiling question and clapped Hartley on the shoulder. “What—a wedding? Then he’d have to live with me making this guy,” she shook Hartley, “my Maid of Honor.”

Hartley—Hartley Rathaway, the evil Pied Piper who’d deliberately tried to murder Barry for basically no reason, tried to liquidate his insides—leaned against the counter and smiled wide, showing all teeth, calm and happy as a clam.

“I can hardly be blamed if he has perfect genetics. That hair is unnatural.”

“Uh huh, you spending my whole wedding hitting on my husband? You’re right, Maid of Honor revoked.”

Mrs. Karpenko put drinks and a bag of food on the counter without taking payment. Iris’s eyes narrowed as she pretended to play with her phone.

“There’s another pie in there, for your boss.”

Shawna peered into the bag, “you’re gonna’ make him fat. You know how much pie that man eats?”

Mrs. Karpenko didn’t seem to mind that she’d be making someone—could this be the mystery don she’d heard whispers about?—fat, just smiled and said he needed some fattening up anyway. They talked for another minute, the woman inquiring about Shawna’s classes, before Peek-a-Boo disappeared out the door, actually walking through it this time, with Hartley behind her.

The old lady turned to Iris. “Something good, ya?”

**********

She probably shouldn’t be doing this, Iris knew. It was dangerous, and idiotic, and exactly what a good journalist should do. She was following a meta-human and a would-be murderer. At least she
was smart about it, leaving the bakery a few minutes after, keeping a long distance behind them, crossing the street to her car to make it look like she was doing something else, then when they rounded the corner, surreptitiously following. Mostly, she was glad that Shawna didn’t use her powers in broad daylight all that much or else she’d never be able to track them. Instead, Iris was able to make it, undetected she was pretty sure, to an alleyway. They went in a door on the side of a building, one she was pretty sure backed onto a bar she’d strolled past on the way here, and when she snuck up to the door she saw it was locked with a code access. Nothing there.

Iris went around the back of the building as the sun dipped lower in the horizon, surprised to a see a small and mostly empty parking lot, and the building she was hoping to enter had a big bay door on the back, one that had probably been designed to open into a warehouse for shipping. It was open halfway, a car parked just outside it, and Iris pressed herself to the wall as soon as she rounded the corner and saw the door because there were figures moving inside. Voices drifted out a second later—Shawna and Hartley again.

Iris tried to control her heartbeat. This was both wonderful and insane. Wonderful because she was never afraid to find answers for herself, and this was definitely where the answers were sitting. Insane because even if Shawna didn’t recognize her, hadn’t seen Iris when she hit the other woman in the back of the head and knocked her out at STAR Labs, Iris remembered Shawna, and knew exactly what these two individuals were capable of. It wasn’t just Iris anymore, either, and that guilt was eating away inside her chest—there was another life inside her she was putting in more danger every second she stayed there to eavesdrop.

“Think Len would give a speech at my wedding?”

Hartley’s voice, a bit louder and it sounded annoyed—“You’re not even engaged, Shawna.”

“I can still dream. I’m with my Soulmate, it’s only a matter of time, you know.”

The other didn’t respond, not that Iris could hear, but there was a loud clanging sound. That was just as well because she was still trying to decipher—did she hear that right? Did Shawna say Len? The only other person she’d heard say that name was Barry, when he was talking about Leonard Snart.

“What was that for?” Shawna’s voice came out as an unimpressed drawl. “Weddings piss you off that much, Piper?”

“It’s just a desk.”

“Uh huh. You’re not the type to get mad and stupid. Is Mark giving you lessons on how to punch?”

“I already know how to…”

Iris stopped listening. Shawna had definitely said Mark, and Iris could only think of one ‘Mark’ that Shawna Baez would know. So as much as she wanted, really wanted, to stick around, Iris knew she’d gathered enough information for one day. Iris turned to go, stepping away from the wall, about to turn around the side of the building when she walked into something hard and tall. Someone hard and tall. Someone—

“Mardon,” she breathed.

“Well look what we have here,” he grinned and stepped forward, even as she stepped back. This could not be happening right now. “Iris West.” And he knew who she was. She turned to bolt but he caught her arm before she could make it so much as a step and she fought hard, grappled for a few seconds, making too damn much noise in the small alley, Mark shouting before Iris made good use
all of the self-defenses lessons she’d grown up on, jamming a hard elbow into his solar plexus and catching him by surprise, throwing him off.

She made it all of four steps before Shawna Baez blinked in front of her.

“Stop her, Shawna!”

The other woman feinted forward and Iris found herself stepping back a second time, almost tripping over her feet, panic rising as the other woman smiled in a scary way. “Now who are you? A spy?”

“She’s West’s daughter,” Mardon said somewhere behind her and Iris half turned. He was standing, still winded from her elbow. She really hadn’t pulled it at all.

“Detective West?” Shawna’s eyes were wide then narrow. “Oh, I do not like that man.”

“Please—”

“Guys!” That was Hartley’s voice and they all paused for a second. Iris’s hands were up in front of her and she was backing slowly away as Shawna and Mark walked her into a corner against the back of the building on the other side of the alley, moving almost in unison to cage her in. But Hartley's shout had stopped them up and he kept talking, “much as I'm never one to enjoy raining on any proverbial parades—no pun intended, Mark—need I remind you about Captain Cold’s strict ‘no killing innocent people’ rule?”

It was a strange day when the Pied Piper was the one coming to the rescue. Iris swallowed against her dry throat and stepped back against the wall she was caged to, brick against her back, broken glass crunching under her heeled boots. Mardon had a small storm in one hand, like she’d seen at the police gala before the windows shattered in with lightning and ice. *Fuck*, why had she decided to stalk meta-humans?

“She ain’t innocent,” Mardon stopped two feet from her. “She’s seen our hide out, our operation. Her dad’s a *cop*, Piper, one who’s friends with the Flash. We *know* that.”

But of all people, Shawna was frowning, “he’s right, Mark. Lisa’s inside the bar and you *know* Cold’ll hear about it.”

To Iris’s surprise, Mardon seemed to actually listen to Peek-a-Boo, his mini storm abating slightly. Normally, Iris would have taken his half-second distraction to run, but right now, despite her instincts screaming at her, she stayed put. Because no matter how fast she could run, she couldn’t outrun Peek-a-Boo, couldn’t fight off Mardon, and couldn’t take the risk of a lightning bolt or something else hurting the life growing inside her.

“Please, just let me explain—” she started, but Mardon growled and stepped closer, Shawna’s hand on his arm to stop him. The two of them had some silent debate with their eyebrows and facial expressions, while Rathaway stayed off to the side, at least until Shawna stepped forward and grabbed Iris’s arm.

“Let’s go, West. Inside.”

“She ain’t innocent,” Mardon stopped two feet from her. “She’s seen our hide out, our operation. Her dad’s a *cop*, Piper, one who’s friends with the Flash. We *know* that.”

But of all people, Shawna was frowning, “he’s right, Mark. Lisa’s inside the bar and you *know* Cold’ll hear about it.”

To Iris’s surprise, Mardon seemed to actually listen to Peek-a-Boo, his mini storm abating slightly. Normally, Iris would have taken his half-second distraction to run, but right now, despite her instincts screaming at her, she stayed put. Because no matter how fast she could run, she couldn’t outrun Peek-a-Boo, couldn’t fight off Mardon, and couldn’t take the risk of a lightning bolt or something else hurting the life growing inside her.

“Please, just let me explain—” she started, but Mardon growled and stepped closer, Shawna’s hand on his arm to stop him. The two of them had some silent debate with their eyebrows and facial expressions, while Rathaway stayed off to the side, at least until Shawna stepped forward and grabbed Iris’s arm.

“Let’s go, West. Inside.”

“She ain’t innocent,” Mardon stopped two feet from her. “She’s seen our hide out, our operation. Her dad’s a *cop*, Piper, one who’s friends with the Flash. We *know* that.”

But of all people, Shawna was frowning, “he’s right, Mark. Lisa’s inside the bar and you *know* Cold’ll hear about it.”

To Iris’s surprise, Mardon seemed to actually listen to Peek-a-Boo, his mini storm abating slightly. Normally, Iris would have taken his half-second distraction to run, but right now, despite her instincts screaming at her, she stayed put. Because no matter how fast she could run, she couldn’t outrun Peek-a-Boo, couldn’t fight off Mardon, and couldn’t take the risk of a lightning bolt or something else hurting the life growing inside her.

“Please, just let me explain—” she started, but Mardon growled and stepped closer, Shawna’s hand on his arm to stop him. The two of them had some silent debate with their eyebrows and facial expressions, while Rathaway stayed off to the side, at least until Shawna stepped forward and grabbed Iris’s arm.

“Let’s go, West. Inside.”

“She ain’t innocent,” Mardon stopped two feet from her. “She’s seen our hide out, our operation. Her dad’s a *cop*, Piper, one who’s friends with the Flash. We *know* that.”

But of all people, Shawna was frowning, “he’s right, Mark. Lisa’s inside the bar and you *know* Cold’ll hear about it.”

To Iris’s surprise, Mardon seemed to actually listen to Peek-a-Boo, his mini storm abating slightly. Normally, Iris would have taken his half-second distraction to run, but right now, despite her instincts screaming at her, she stayed put. Because no matter how fast she could run, she couldn’t outrun Peek-a-Boo, couldn’t fight off Mardon, and couldn’t take the risk of a lightning bolt or something else hurting the life growing inside her.

“Please, just let me explain—” she started, but Mardon growled and stepped closer, Shawna’s hand on his arm to stop him. The two of them had some silent debate with their eyebrows and facial expressions, while Rathaway stayed off to the side, at least until Shawna stepped forward and grabbed Iris’s arm.

“Let’s go, West. Inside.”

“She ain’t innocent,” Mardon stopped two feet from her. “She’s seen our hide out, our operation. Her dad’s a *cop*, Piper, one who’s friends with the Flash. We *know* that.”

But of all people, Shawna was frowning, “he’s right, Mark. Lisa’s inside the bar and you *know* Cold’ll hear about it.”

To Iris’s surprise, Mardon seemed to actually listen to Peek-a-Boo, his mini storm abating slightly. Normally, Iris would have taken his half-second distraction to run, but right now, despite her instincts screaming at her, she stayed put. Because no matter how fast she could run, she couldn’t outrun Peek-a-Boo, couldn’t fight off Mardon, and couldn’t take the risk of a lightning bolt or something else hurting the life growing inside her.

“Please, just let me explain—” she started, but Mardon growled and stepped closer, Shawna’s hand on his arm to stop him. The two of them had some silent debate with their eyebrows and facial expressions, while Rathaway stayed off to the side, at least until Shawna stepped forward and grabbed Iris’s arm.

“Let’s go, West. Inside.”

“She ain’t innocent,” Mardon stopped two feet from her. “She’s seen our hide out, our operation. Her dad’s a *cop*, Piper, one who’s friends with the Flash. We *know* that.”

But of all people, Shawna was frowning, “he’s right, Mark. Lisa’s inside the bar and you *know* Cold’ll hear about it.”

To Iris’s surprise, Mardon seemed to actually listen to Peek-a-Boo, his mini storm abating slightly. Normally, Iris would have taken his half-second distraction to run, but right now, despite her instincts screaming at her, she stayed put. Because no matter how fast she could run, she couldn’t outrun Peek-a-Boo, couldn’t fight off Mardon, and couldn’t take the risk of a lightning bolt or something else hurting the life growing inside her.

“Please, just let me explain—” she started, but Mardon growled and stepped closer, Shawna’s hand on his arm to stop him. The two of them had some silent debate with their eyebrows and facial expressions, while Rathaway stayed off to the side, at least until Shawna stepped forward and grabbed Iris’s arm.

“Let’s go, West. Inside.”

“She ain’t innocent,” Mardon stopped two feet from her. “She’s seen our hide out, our operation. Her dad’s a *cop*, Piper, one who’s friends with the Flash. We *know* that.”

But of all people, Shawna was frowning, “he’s right, Mark. Lisa’s inside the bar and you *know* Cold’ll hear about it.”

To Iris’s surprise, Mardon seemed to actually listen to Peek-a-Boo, his mini storm abating slightly. Normally, Iris would have taken his half-second distraction to run, but right now, despite her instincts screaming at her, she stayed put. Because no matter how fast she could run, she couldn’t outrun Peek-a-Boo, couldn’t fight off Mardon, and couldn’t take the risk of a lightning bolt or something else hurting the life growing inside her.

“Please, just let me explain—” she started, but Mardon growled and stepped closer, Shawna’s hand on his arm to stop him. The two of them had some silent debate with their eyebrows and facial expressions, while Rathaway stayed off to the side, at least until Shawna stepped forward and grabbed Iris’s arm.

“Let’s go, West. Inside.”

“She ain’t innocent,” Mardon stopped two feet from her. “She’s seen our hide out, our operation. Her dad’s a *cop*, Piper, one who’s friends with the Flash. We *know* that.”

But of all people, Shawna was frowning, “he’s right, Mark. Lisa’s inside the bar and you *know* Cold’ll hear about it.”

To Iris’s surprise, Mardon seemed to actually listen to Peek-a-Boo, his mini storm abating slightly. Normally, Iris would have taken his half-second distraction to run, but right now, despite her instincts screaming at her, she stayed put. Because no matter how fast she could run, she couldn’t outrun Peek-a-Boo, couldn’t fight off Mardon, and couldn’t take the risk of a lightning bolt or something else hurting the life growing inside her.

“Please, just let me explain—” she started, but Mardon growled and stepped closer, Shawna’s hand on his arm to stop him. The two of them had some silent debate with their eyebrows and facial expressions, while Rathaway stayed off to the side, at least until Shawna stepped forward and grabbed Iris’s arm.

“Iris shut up. They were gonna’ get Captain Cold. Her heart beat erratically inside her chest as they walked her inside the building. Shawna took Iris' phone on Mardon's suggestion and teleported off
with it in case her dad or Eddie found out she was missing and used it to track her, and Iris gave up any hope of texting Barry for an easy way out of this. But they were gonna’ get Captain Cold. She held on to that. Captain Cold didn't kill innocents, and Captain Cold was Leonard Snart and that—that meant something. It was all she could do not to panic, right now.

“Still think we should just kill her and be done with it. That was my original plan, y’know—take out Iris West where her father would have to see—”

Iris’s system flooded with terror just thinking of what Mardon might consider doing but—

“I’d put a cork in it if I were you, Mark,” Hartley cut in, “unless you’d like for your med student Soulmate to come back have to listen you detail your plans for gruesome murder.”

Mark huffed and a lot more made sense to Iris suddenly about the little dynamic going on here.

“I can handle Mark just fine,” Shawna reappeared next to Mark just as Hartley was heading toward a door in the warehouse space, and she pushed Iris into a chair. Mark grabbed out a rope and Hartley distinctly shook his head before disappearing through a doorway.

“Y’know, Iris,” Mark was leaning close to peer into her eyes after he had her arms tightly bound behind her, stretched painfully behind the back of the chair, “sort of figured you for more of a fighter. Dad’s a cop, but you don’t seem to have any hidden weapons hanging around, even in this neighborhood.”

She sent him a scathing look. “Never needed them, not like they’d make too much difference against you three. I’ve seen what you can do, I’ll take my chances reasoning with Captain Cold.”

“Smart girl,” called a high, female voice and Iris whipped her head in that direction, away from Mardon’s sneer. A woman was coming into the room in a leather jacket with long brown curls bouncing behind her, Hartley a step behind. “Guess that’s to be expected from Detective West’s daughter. My name is Lisa Snart.”

“Golden Glider,” Iris narrowed her eyes while Lisa’s smile grew, eyes almost twinkling.

“So happy I convinced Cisco to give me that alias. I’m glad you’ve heard it.”

“This doesn’t concern you, Lisa,” Mardon growled, and off to the side, Iris saw Shawna and Hartley exchange a put-upon glance, the former rolling her eyes.

“But it does concern my brother, who’s on his way, by the by,” she winked at Iris then directed her next comment to Mardon. “So no murder. Got it?”

Iris’s eyes flicked between them and Shawna, trying to quell her heart beating fast and heavy in her throat from the pain in her arms and Mardon’s seemingly constant anger. Was he why it was so cold in here?

“Mark’s stupid mad but not that stupid mad, Lisey,” Shawna drawled, coming over.

“What’d you ladies think we should do with her, really? Let her walk, knowing our hide out, when her dad’s a cop and she’s a reporter?” Both women’s eyes widened at Mardon’s words, and Iris had a half second to appreciate that the man was thorough in his research, at least, even if the implications of his words were setting in. “Smart money says she’s dead when Cold gets here.”

“Well,” Lisa put on a winning smile that didn’t reach her eyes, “best to let the Captain figure that out then, hmm? So why don’t you give the girl some space, for now?”
“And if she screams for help?”

Lisa’s false smile dropped and she just looked agitated by Mardon, walking over to Iris and, ignoring Iris’ flinch and snarl, the woman wrapped the scarf she’d been wearing around Iris’s head, making her bit down around it and tying it at the back of her head. If nothing else, she was gentle about it, making sure not a single one of Iris’s hairs were caught in the gag.

“Satisfied, Weather Wizard? Now do be a dear and go play with your toys until Lenny gets back?”

She narrowed her eyes and Mardon seemed angry, but he didn’t argue, just cussed under his breath and went to kick over a bucket on the ground. They dispersed, Hartley at a table, tinkering with something, eyes jumping up to survey the room every once in a while, like he was trying to pretend he wasn’t focused on it when he was. Mardon’s corner turned literally frosty and he was hurling balls of ice and snow at a mattress that looked like it was used to this treatment, with Shawna’s eyes never leaving him for long after she blinked up onto the catwalk, and Lisa stayed leaning against a table in front of Iris.

Their dynamic was interesting, and Iris tried to focus on that, on them, instead of on her own gnawing panic bubbling around inside of her. There was a hierarchy here, they listened to Lisa, they argued but didn’t fight, they joked and gossiped like... like normal people. But they were still the Rogues. And at least one of them would rather leave her dead body on her father’s doorstep than talk reason, something that meant that no matter what came out of this, she was in over her head. She didn’t want to think about it. She didn’t want to—god, what if something happened to her baby? She couldn’t think like that—but what it—she needed to breathe, to focus. Breathe, and focus. God, Barry had better be even a fraction right about his Soulmate. Because if he wasn’t, Iris and her baby were dead.

“Just a little longer, West.”

Iris didn’t even realize it until Lisa spoke, but she’d been crying, tear tracks down her cheeks. The binds were really starting to hurt, cutting off all circulation and Iris realized she was biting into the gag to stop herself from all out sobbing.

But Lisa speaking was like some kind of beacon, because not ten seconds later, a motorcycle was rumbling in through the bay door, the sound reverberating through the large space, the rafters and catwalk up high, through Iris’s chest with her heartbeat until the engine rolled off.

Mardon was coming over, Hartley was standing, Shawna disappeared and reappeared at Mardon’s side, and Leonard Snart was getting off his bike. Lisa just stayed where she was and smirked at the scene while Iris’s eyes flicked around the room trying to focus on every Rogue at once. But she fixed on Cold, who had some sense of presence, something that drew others’ eyes to him, focused and waiting. Or maybe that was just because he held the fate of Iris’s life in his hands.

He was wearing a leather riding jacket and what looked like black jeans, combat boots, and his cold gun was on his hip in a nice looking holster. He looked at her, straight in the eyes as soon as his helmet and was off, before he looked at anyone else. It felt piercing and unpleasant, the way it seemed to stab her chest, just that look alone, but Iris straightened her back under it—or tried to, because the binds wouldn’t let her.

Then he turned to Mardon. In a voice low and controlled but full of an unmistakable fury, Snart asked, “What the hell is the meaning of this?”

“Don’t look at me, Snart!” Mardon squared his shoulders and Iris felt her heartbeat increase again. “She came to us, not the other way around!”
“You expect me to believe that Iris West just happened to stumble in to the Rogues’ Den with as good as an invitation?” he sounded sardonic and unamused, but Iris had a view of his eyes and they were like ice, face like stone. She was glad no one was blocking her view.

“I expect you to believe—”

“She did, actually,” Hartley stepped forward, moving out of Iris’s field of vision with Mark in the way. “She followed Shawna and I from the bakery.”

Shawna did a double take in Iris’s direction and she felt her stomach clench. Hartley had noticed her. She swallowed, unsure what to say, but Cold redirected his attention to Hartley.

“Why you? And why didn’t you do anything about it?”

Hartley didn’t seem the least bit fazed by Cold’s snapping, just dropped his head to the side with a kind of condescending lilt to his voice. “Well if we’d noticed at the time, I can assure you we’d have done something, Leonard. Do give us a little credit. As for why she was following us, I can only imagine the person to ask would be her.”

Iris wished she could see his face—Rathaway sounded snarky and she would love to see his delivery. Maybe Iris wasn’t giving Cold enough credit either, because he didn’t even threaten to ice Hartley for his glib tone of voice. Instead, he looked over at Iris, considering, then back to Mardon and Shawna.

“Clear out.”

“Clear o—hell no, Snart! I intend to be here for this. Iris West has been at the top of my kill list for far too long to walk away now.”

Iris felt her whole body tense. Would Leonard give in to the man who had a storm brewing around him, a cloud forming in his fist. Cold just glanced down at the hand then narrowed his eyes at Mardon though, the picture of unaffected cool.

“We’re not killing her, Mark.”

“Are you kidding me right now?! She’s knows our den so it’s not like we can just let her go. She hand delivered herself to us, Snart. Let’s use this to—”

“I said NO, Mardon.” Leonard stood up straighter, voice like ice and Iris was starting to appreciate Cisco’s skill with the naming thing more by the minute.

“But—”

“You’re not using her in some twisted revenge plot! We don’t hurt innocents and we don’t need the heat of killing a detective’s daughter, another detective’s life partner.”

“She’s hardly innocent—she found us! What the hell do you expect to do with her? Have a goddamn tea party?!’”

Lightning cracked in his hand and Shawna put a hand on Mark’s back, glancing over her shoulder at Iris for a half-second. She looked scared. Leonard didn’t. He just crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side for a moment, sizing up the Weather Wizard.

“Rules aren’t rules if you break them whenever things get tough. That’s hardly fun.” Cold actually smirked, and pointed a gloved finger at the meta-human with a storm literally brewing in his hand.
“I’ve been telling you from the start that you need to up your game, Mardon.”

“Maybe you’ve just gone soft. Gathered some friends now you’re sitting back and getting lazy with your ‘games’ motto.” He sounded disgusted. It took less than a second though, hadn't even gotten all his words out before Cold had his gun in hand, powered up and right between Mardon’s eyebrows. The air seemed to go out of the room. Even Iris’s eyes bugged out of her forehead and she gasped into the gag. Lisa stood up straight, finally, alert. No one moved.

“Try it, Mardon,” Captain Cold's voice had lost any warmth. “Just see if I’m slower than your powers on the draw. Because I will ice you, Mark. Call me soft one more time and we’ll see just how hard you are when you’re frozen stiff.”

Iris had one thought against the pounding in her chest: how could this be Barry’s Soulmate?

She saw Shawna’s fist curl around Mardon’s sweater on his back, clearly ready to teleport her Soulmate to safety. “Mark—” she whispered, urgently. Iris wondered if their bleed was transferring anything, if the other woman was using her emotions to ask Mardon to back down. She realized with a start that Eddie was probably able to feel her fear, that kind of terror would transfer despite their quiet bleed, and reached out for her bleed in the back of her mind, something she hardly even felt unless Eddie was around or upset. In her emotional state she’d been too distracted, but sure enough there were waves of anxiety coming off Eddie, concern, maybe something like panic. She almost felt guilty, no way to control her own terror from getting to him, thinking how horrible it must be for him to know she was in trouble but have no idea how to get to her, to help her—

Her thoughts were cut off, though the bleed wasn’t, as Mark dropped his arms and Shawna sighed audibly. Cold lowered his gun. “Glad you can still see reason.”

“This isn’t the end of this, Snart. You're choosing West over Rogues.”

“Say that again and you’ll regret it. I'm choosing strategy over idiocy, Mark. Shawna, get him out of here. You too, Hartley.”

In a show of concern that surprised Iris, Shawna looked over her shoulder at Iris before glancing back at her boss. “What are you gonna’ do to her, Len?”

He seemed a lot warmer when he replied to her than to Mardon. “I won’t hurt her, don’t worry. Just get him,” Cold jutted his chin at Mardon, “somewhere with some sunshine and help him relax.”

She rolled her eyes but nodded, disappearing with Mardon before he could protest, reappearing at the bay door and dragging her partner through it by his hand even as he spluttered and protested. If he hadn’t just tried to convince a room full of people to murder Iris, it might’ve been cute.

“I said you too, Piper.”

“But—”

“Go.”

There was a tense moment, and then something weird happened. Cold’s face relaxed, looking almost affectionate. “It’s not personal, Hart. I just want to talk to West in private.”

His eyes flicked to Lisa and back to Len, then finally to Iris, appraising, before he smiled in a way that was far too congenial, raising his hands before him in surrender. “Got it, I’ll make myself scarce, head to the library and plot the untimely demise of my parent’s building across the road.”
Cold actually snorted and shook his head.

“What about me, Lenny?”

He waited until Hartley was all the way through the door that led into the bar out front—or so Iris guessed by the sounds that came in when it was opened—before turning to his sister.

“Untie her then head out front. I’ll call you if there’s trouble.”

Lisa was coming closer even as her brother moved to a switch panel on the wall and closed the bay door. Iris half expected Lisa to give her some friendly word of advice here, but the other woman didn’t, and didn’t waste time untying Iris either. She just took out a hidden knife and cut the binds and Iris shouted into her gag at the sudden release before Lisa was taking that back too.

“I liked this scarf too,” was all she said, dropping it on a table before passing her brother. “Try not to make too much of a mess, Lenny. I will clean up after you if I have to.”

For some reason, it sounded more like a threat than anything, but Iris wasn’t really paying attention. She was rubbing life back into her hands, pins and needles up her arms, eyes pressing out a few more tears from the sharp pain of it. She sniffed and looked up, after a minute. The warehouse was empty except for her and Cold, and with the big bay door shut, the fading evening sun now held away by the sheet metal, the large space seemed far more ominous than even before, dark shadows and high ceiling, tables with guns and tools on them, doors that led to even deeper, darker places. She swallowed back all that and looked at Cold, at Leonard, who was just standing there, eyes on her. When she met his gaze he didn’t drop it, just watching like she was some puzzle he had yet to figure out.

“You and your Rogues won’t get away with this, Cold,” she ground out, finally. She wanted to stand, to run, no Peek-a-Boo in sight to stop her, but she’d seen his speed just minutes ago with Mardon, and the gun was powered down now but holstered close at his side.

At her words, he nodded his head to the side, eyes glancing down but eyebrows stretching up, smiling like something amused him. “Get away with what, exactly?”

“Young reporter.” He grabbed a chair and dragged it along the ground, an uncomfortable scraping sound echoing in the space, and she moved to stand but—“sit down, Miss West.”

She sat back down. Cold stopped his chair three feet from hers and turned it around, sat on it backwards so that his legs were on either side of the seat, feet planted on the floor, and his arms were crossed on the back of the chair, leaning forward onto them, pure confidence.

“Mind telling me how you found this place?”

“Reporter.” She crossed her arms.

“Ah, yes. Reporters do have a nasty habit of showing up where they don’t belong, don’t they? How’s that working out for you?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

He leaned back. “You know you’ve put me in something of a tight spot, Miss West.”

“You mean because Barry will kick your ass if you hurt me?”
Cold’s eyes flickered for a moment between hers, intense. “I do have something of a deal with him not to do so, yes.”

“I don’t mean because he’s the Flash, Snart, I mean because he’s your Soulmate.”

His smooth demeanor dropped for a moment, and for that second he looked truly surprised. His voice was totally different when he asked, “Barry told you?”

“I—he didn’t tell you he told me?” That sounded just like Barry and she resisted the urge to cuss him out for his secrets right then and there. As it was, she bit her lip, and Cold didn't answer, just narrowed his eyes in more calculated way, sitting up straighter.

“What did he say about me?”

“I—are you asking me for what my best friend gossiped to me about you?” she was three quarters incredulous because that could not be what was happening right now.

“I—”

“Your Rogues kidnap me and tie me up and you’re asking for juicy details?”

He frowned and his voice was cold with that repressed anger when he responded, “you’d rather we talk about your predicament without discussing your only bargaining chip, Iris? You waltz into my territory and get yourself abducted, and I don’t suppose you’ll give me your word to keep all this a secret, either?”

As if it was her fault the Rogues kidnapped her. She stood up finally, adrenaline helping steady her feet under her, “Not a chance! Just because you’re Barry’s Soulmate doesn’t mean I support what you do, or that Barry does. Exposing this little clubhouse would—”

“Help nobody. Not the Flash, not the citizens of Central City—nobody.” Snart was standing now too, behind his chair but too damn close to run still, even if she had anywhere to go, even if he didn’t have that gun.

“How do you figure that, Cold?”

“Because, Iris, I keep the strongest and most dangerous criminals of this city following a code, one that even the Santinis don’t bother to observe. The Rogues keep this neighborhood safe from the mob. Expose this place, make us pack up and move—it won’t stop us. It’ll just leave the people around here out in the cold.”

She didn’t know quite where the first name basis had come from, but her mind was sailing past it, thinking of the bakery, of the old lady saying “something good” was happening to this neighborhood. The whole meaning of that finally hit her and she felt like a fool for not putting it together as soon as she’d seen Hartley and Shawna, as soon as she knew the Rogues were around this part of town. Captain Cold was their boss, Leonard Snart was the—the mob boss moving into this neighborhood.

“Does Barry know about this?”

“This place?”

“Your little mafia territory.”

“He knows enough,” Cold’s glare was hard and Iris took it as the threat it was, bristled under it.
Barry was gonna’ hear about this the second she got out of here.

“You’re insane. Whatever good you think you’re doing—you’re wrong. The people of this neighborhood don’t need more crime and criminals—they need police, they need stability, they need protection—”

“I do protect them—”

“Protection from people like you!”

The stared at one another for a long minute, Iris breathing a little heavier than normal, wishing she felt more in control, wishing she could actually have a fucking drink. Wishing she wasn’t so terrified for her baby.

Cold seemed calm though, not murderous. He moved around the chair in a way that almost seemed relaxed, hands in his pockets, except it wasn’t at all relaxed, wasn’t anything but deliberate, and the cold gun was still holstered on his hip, so close to his hand. “It seems, Miss West, that we are at an impasse.”

“So what’re you gonna’ do, Cold? Murder Barry’s best friend?” her eyes were on the gun, then flicked back up to him, willing herself not to take a step back. For a second, it was almost as though the floor shook beneath her feet and she pulled herself up to her full height, defiant.

“Of course not.” His eyes were hard though, intense like he might just do it regardless of what he was saying. “If you know about me and Barry then you should know I won’t hurt you.”

She wondered if this man could care about Barry enough to just let her go. It didn’t seem too likely, based on what she’d seen so far. She wondered how he could care at all, considering the things he did.

“I don’t know that at all, Snart. Being his Soulmate hasn’t stopped you from hurting other people, including my father.”

Cold tilted his head in acknowledgement, “Not deliberately. I’ve got no intention of harming anyone Barry cares out, ever. Especially not his pregnant best friend.”

She gasped, a hand—still cold and sore—clapped over her stomach. “He told you?” The world felt unsteady beneath her feet and she almost sat down.

He arched an eyebrow, unrepentant. “Was it a secret?”

“No, it’s just…” just that she hadn’t realized, from what Barry had said, just how close he and Cold really might be. Barry had told her they were working on it, after a month of not talking, but personal details, things about his friends, about her... It was hard to wrap her head around, but no matter how strange it seemed, this man in front of her, all his authority and cold, hard voice and eyes, all his threats and rough anger—he really was Barry’s Soulmate.

For a moment, she wondered whether Barry talked to Cold about her in detail, and what else had he said? It didn’t seem so stupid, then, that Cold had asked her just minutes ago what Barry said about him. They were from different worlds. How on earth were they—were Barry and this man—ever going to make sense of things? Her whole world felt off kilter for that moment until Cold kept talking.

“What’ll it take to buy your silence, Iris?”
She shook her head, eyebrows drawing together, rallying, “you really think I can be bought? The Flash, the police—they need to know about this place. There’s dangerous weapons lying around everywhere, metahumans all together in one—”

“And do what? Prisons can’t hold my Rogues—Iron Heights can’t even hold me. The only thing that can hold metahumans is at STAR Labs, and that didn’t go so nicely the last time Barry decided his little team was above the law,” his voice was dripping with acid and Iris actually took a step forward to reprimand him, willing her legs not to shake as things seemed to almost rumble beneath her feet.

“What—you think you’re any better than the Flash, Cold?”

He looked distracted for a second, eyes flashing to the ground—“did you feel that?”

She followed his gaze, “feel what?”

The ground seemed to tremble again, ever so slightly, some pebbles on the dirty floor of the warehouse shaking visibly. An earthquake—in Central? It came again, harder this time, shaking the ground beneath them and she caught her chair to steady herself from falling.

“What is—”

“Not this again.”

She looked up, “what—”

“Grodd.”

And then, sharp behind her eyelids, inside her skull there was nothing but a blinding, screeching, awful pain splitting her head in two.

Chapter End Notes


This chapter wasn’t originally intended to end on this particular cliffhanger note, but it got waaaaaay too long. Like 2k words longer than usual. So, uh, I guess you have to wait to see how things are going?

For the record, I haven’t put this in the glossary yet, but a "Quiet Bleed" is just a way of referring to a bleed that isn’t very intense (because the Soulmates are close and it's easy.)

Next chapter is already written so it should be up in a day or two :)
Central City was in chaos. For once, it wasn’t the type of chaos that hid below the surface, something in the shadows and along the underbelly that Barry could deal with without the city shutting down. This was Grodd, in full daylight, tearing out a wall of the precinct—his precinct.

Central City was in chaos, and Eddie was going to die unless Barry landed this punch.

20 Minutes Prior

Barry got the call from Cisco while he was picking up groceries, ditching his cart in the middle of the store to speed to STAR Labs, and it was on every news channel already when he whipped into the lab for his Flash suit: “Giant gorilla surfaces through city street in downtown Central City”.

“Eddie,” Cisco breathed, looking at the footage, at the beeline Grodd was making for the precinct, cops rushing out with their weapons trained on the gorillas. It was mayhem, civilians screening, newscasters warning the footage wasn’t for sensitive viewers. Barry swore and sped before Cisco or Caitlin could blink, lightning and adrenaline filling his veins, blood pumping fast through his system. It was barely seconds when he zoomed around the scene to case it, heart racing, getting full view outside the precinct in the middle of the street. There were screams coming from the street, other buildings, and all the cops who’d made it outside to slow Grodd were mindless toy soldiers, weapons down at their sides, and Barry had no idea what Grodd was putting in their heads with his cowl up. A cowl he couldn’t pull down with the whole city, the media, the precinct’s eyes all on him.

He sped to a stop in front of Grodd, right amidst his soldiers, right in the doorway of the precinct, up on the few short steps. The people running in either direction on the street were safe, police creating a perimeter, and his priority was on the overgrown ape in front of him, stark shadows and red light from the setting sun casting his features into menacing relief.

“Grodd,” Barry’s voice vibrated loud over the street, all too aware of the helicopter cameras above
him, news channels, eyes on him.

The puppet police turned in unison to Barry from either side. Grodd growled at him and Barry waited for him to use his puppet dolls to speak for him like he’d seen before, but they just raised their weapons and—_shit_—

Barry sped, fast as he could push himself, pushing cops—his colleagues, coworkers, friends of friends—down as he did, out of the line of bullets heading in their direction, bullets he couldn’t catch if he wanted to keep them all safe, shooting at him from every angle, hollow-points sailing through the air and bound to hit someone sooner rather than later.

Officers all down, Barry whipped around to face Grodd, barely in time as the gorilla charged up onto the precinct stairs, three of them under one of his feet. The street was in ruins behind him, overturned cars and a gaping hole that lead to the sewers where he’d ripped his way through the ground, using the opening of a manhole cover to latch onto and shred the asphalt. He tried to meet Grodd head on and keep him back from the precinct entrance but Grodd caught him like a rag doll, faster than the gorilla should have any right to be, throwing him to the side and he skidded across the ground but didn’t stop, on his feet a second later as Grodd turned back to the entrance of the building and took a menacing step forward. Barry was in front of him in an instance, arms thrown out to the side.

_“It’s me you want, Grodd! Leave these officers out of this!”_

He heard rustling behind him, and Cisco in his ear, “Barry, cops are lining up along your six with rifles, looks like they’re ready to shoot Grodd down as soon as you’re out of the way.”

He said it even as Grodd responded to him with one of his puppets, propping up Sargent Ramirez, _“not innocent. Give me Edward Thawne.”_

_“Not happening!”_

_“Barry, get that guy out of there!”_ Cisco shouted in his ear, and Barry zipped out of there, taking the puppet-self of Ramirez with him, out of the line of fire. A second later, gunfire erupted and Grodd shouted, barreling back behind an overturned bus. Barry zipped into the precinct without Ramirez, leaving him down the block, then stopped short with his face blurred in the center of the bullpen in full view of the other officers. Joe and Captain Singh moved in his direction as soon as he became visible, Singh immediately barking questions.

_“Flash! What the hell is going on?!”_

The other detectives gave them all a wide berth, one that reminded Barry that they were intimidated by this, by him, a man with powers they couldn’t explain. The gunmen at the doors of the precinct seemed to be keeping Grodd at bay.

_He has enhanced psychic abilities, a military pet project,_ the pun almost made him cringe, a total accident. _“And super strength.”_ Although part of him wondered if that was just his natural speed and size, but he doubted it. Even a giant gorilla couldn’t be _that_ strong naturally.

_“How do we stop him?”_ that was Joe, looking at Barry with concern.

_“And what does he want with Detective Thawne, Flash?”_

There was a loud, animalistic noise, a shout of rage from outside and Barry couldn’t wait to answer questions, zipping forward as Grodd charged the front of the building, barely managing to whip some of the officers out of Grodd’s path as he careened forward with alarming speed, big fists tearing the doors off their hinges with a shrieking, grinding noise as men and women ran for cover.
His puppets were marching in surrounding him, a living shield. There were six of them in total, minus Ramirez. Barry resisted the urge to swear—he could whisk each of them away, but Grodd would and could find more. The safety of the people in the precinct was the priority right now, and thankfully other seemed to get that, Singh already having called for an evacuation out the back door, people rushing—with a little screaming—away. He could whisk everyone away, he realized with a jolt, about to do that until the puppets picked up their guns and pointed them at their own heads. Barry stilled—Grod wouldn’t—

“Where is Thawne?” the puppets chorused in unison, in the guttural monotone Barry had learned to associate with Grodd’s mind-controlled agents.

“Barry, you have got to get Grodd out of the enclosed space and back onto the street,” Caitlin sounded tense in his ear.

“Easier said that done,” he replied before zooming into the front atrium. “Grod, you do NOT want to hurt these people—”

“Firestorm is on his way, Barry—”

“Don’t! There are cameras everywhere!” he hissed to her; Ronnie’s identity would be on display if he showed up now, the entire City must be watching. The precinct was getting emptier by the second behind him and Grodd was stepping forward with a low and rumbling growl. It was lighter in here than outside now but the overhead lights just made the patches of blood in Grodd’s fur gleam and his black eyes stand out sharp and shiny.

“He has fire for eyes, he’ll be okay!” Caitlin’s voice was high and angry in his ear but—

“Where. Is. THAWNE?!” The unison of puppet voices sounded more haunting when they shouted, the sound grating on Barry and under his skin. Could he be fast enough if Grodd made them pull the trigger?

“You’re not getting Detective Thawne, Grodd. You’ll have to go through me!”

Six faces turned to him—well, more than six, half the precinct did. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eddie, crouched by an overturned desk, gun out, giving Barry a measured glance. Had Joe told him about the memory Grodd had seen? Singh was there too, talking into a radio with god knew who.

“Give Thawne or they die.”

Barry shivered and watched Eddie stand up from behind his overturn desk. There was no way, no way in hell Barry was ever going to watch Eddie walk into danger, play the hero—never again was he going to watch Eddie die because he wasn’t fast enough.

He ran, knocking guns—faster and faster as they started to pull the triggers against their foreheads—he could push himself—he could do this—faster than the sound of bullets ringing into the room—he made it to five.

Barry choked back the horror in him as he kneeled down beside the body he couldn’t reach in time. What was left of the head—the face—of a person that he knew—Morillo, Ramirez’s partner—fuck. A man was dead. A man was dead because—

Barry was flooded with anger and lightning, looking up at Grodd, standing there in the middle of the domed ceiling atrium, growling and ready to fight Barry, and all too likely to kill more people. The SWAT guys were positions at the top of the stairs and behind walls, doors, assault rifles trained on
Grodd, but their weapons were useless—Grodd looked at them and they dropped their guard and stood up—two men on the stairs first and Barry had had it—he raced forward to fight Grodd, speeding up his oversized body in an instant, going for the eyes. He landed a hit and there was blood, Grodd howled in pain, rearing back, massive fist clutching around Barry’s middle and throwing him into a marble column, denting it in, cracking ribs and marble alike and he fell to the floor, crumpled with the taste of blood in his mouth.

Without warning, everyone in the vicinity around Barry shouted out in pain and clutched their heads all at once, the remaining officers, Singh and Joe and Eddie, falling to their knees even as Barry stood, breathing heavy. Grodd’s puppets—the living ones—were rallying now, standing, the only ones seemingly not in pain, and Grodd wiped blood from his eye, squinting, a low rumble in his barrel chest. He picked up one of the younger officers, a young woman, scooping with a big fist black as night, and Barry recognized her—she was new, fresh from training, a rookie, probably rushed out in an effort to prove herself when Grodd first showed up in the street. He swallowed as Grodd held her aloft like she was weightless.

“I kill one a minute until you surrender Flash and Thawne to Grodd,” the young officer—god, Barry didn’t even know her name—called out to the crowd, all of them standing, groaning, seemingly with the pain inside their skulls abated, and for a second there was silence. And then Grodd began to squeeze and she started to scream, coming awake from her doll-like state.

Barry never expected it to turn out like this, but couldn’t spare a second to think about it, about the guilt and fear clawing away at his stomach, the indecision, wishing Cisco and Caitlin had a plan, some horrible part of him wishing for a voice in his ear that had always had a plan when all else failed, always spurred him on when nothing else worked. He felt sick as soon as the thought crossed his mind. Eddie was moving forward and Barry couldn’t stand still a microsecond longer.

“WAIT!!” He screamed, rushed ahead, panicking, forcing Grodd to fight him, to focus on him and not the officer he was slowly killing, not Eddie.

Grodd was ready for him, for Barry as red blur landing punch after punch on him, swatting at him like a fly before throwing the officer to the ground, making Barry slow to catch her and it gave Grodd an opening. He grabbed Barry up and turned too swift, whipped him outside and Barry shouted as he sailed through the air, bracing for impact. His body slammed hard into the ground, skidding and rolling, scraping the ground until his slammed into the overturned bus there, just feet from the hole of broken asphalt and concrete that Grodd had surfaced through. He screamed in pain, bones—more that one, fuck—breaking, broken. Caitlin and Cisco were yelling in his ears as Grodd barred his fists against his chest inside the building and news crews circled the ends of the street and the sky above, the noise of the choppers the only thing he could hear other than the shrieks inside the precinct. His head was fuzzy and he shook to clear it, ribs were on fire, bleeding from somewhere, clavicle aching and he could feel swelling on his face and other appendages. He ignored it all, spit out a mouthful of blood.

“Supersonic punch—how far do I go?”

There was a rumble on the street, something that didn’t sound like Grodd but Barry was focused on Caitlin’s voice.

“You’re in no shape for that, Barry! Your vital signs—”

“How far do I go?!”

“He’ll need to be distracted, Barry! He caught you last time!” At least Cisco was on board.
“How far?” he ground out, willing his body not to shake. He could hear gunfire in the precinct.

“You’re way faster than you used to be, Barry—quick calculation says if you get two-point-nine miles out you should have the juice—”

“But don’t go further than that or you’ll break—”

He ran, drowning out Caitlin’s concerns. He didn’t even notice his surroundings, ignored everything until he stopped at Cisco’s sign and then turned back, a red streak that was lightning in his veins and in the veins of the city, the streets, whipping past closed down city blocks, past rumbling vehicles he hardly registered, and when he was within sight he saw Grodd—out in the street, walking out with one arm in front of him, Eddie helped up in a massive fist by his head and shoulders, kicking, screaming, choking.

Barry pushed it hard, feeling the speed force inside him, around him, right arm raising as Grodd growled at Eddie, almost slow-motion to Barry as he raced toward them, jumping up off a piece of broken street, speed taking him up, fast, fist connecting square with Grodd’s jaw, a sickening crack ringing out as Barry resumed normal speed, falling on the ground on the other side of the now-yowling Grodd, Eddie falling to the ground a few feet away, coughing and hacking while Grodd fell and howled in pain.

Barry’s hand—his arm, multiple bones, ow fuck—definitely broken. Very broken. He could feel it—painful, swelling, red hot and not about to move, dislocated at the shoulder. He gasped and swallowed back nausea, unable to stand, to more than kneel, white hot pain all over. Right arm, too many ribs, both clavicles now—at least it wasn’t every bone in his body. He could do this. He could—

Barry heard the rumble, the ground beneath him rumbling, and looked up. It was a tank. An actual, honest to god tank on the streets of Central City, with what looked like another tank behind it and a few army truck too, and soldiers flanking out around it into the street. Barry tried to shake his head, stopped when it made him feel sick and blinked up at it. It was a smaller tank, probably designed to be small enough to fit within city roads, coming up the center of the street across a few lanes. But it was still a tank, and a tank meant military, and military meant Eiling.

Barry ran to Eddie’s side—legs still working at least—while Grodd was staring down the tanks, deciding his move. Eddie was a good fifteen feet from Grodd.

“You okay?”

Eddie groaned and started to stand, “I think I’ll survive.”

“You’ve gotta’ get out’f here,” Barry looked around. He wanted to whip Eddie to safety but his arm wasn’t healing near fast enough, dangling useless and not about to lift much of anything, let alone a grown man. He saw soldiers rushing to their side, and heard Eiling’s voice on a loudspeaker coming out of one of the military vehicles.

“Grodd, this is General Wade Eiling of the United States Military. Surrender now and we will not harm you.”

Soldiers were moving to flank Grodd and he eyed them warily, huffing and growling at them but they kept a wide distance, over thirty feet off. Barry had no doubt that some were going up into buildings and onto roofs too, and into the side streets to surround them. He hissed into his communicator. “Cailtin, make sure Ronnie and Dr. Stein do not come here.”
“They’re almost—okay. You’re right. There’s a major evacuation, I’ll—” her voice was drowned out by Eiling’s over the loud speaker

“Surrender now, Grodd.”

Grodd eyed the precinct and one of the police puppets from before came out—still under Grodd’s influence even now—and walked into the street in front of Grodd.

“Give me Flash and Thawne,” the low voice of the offer said, and Barry felt eyes on him. He wondered if Eiling was really going to shoot Grodd down in the city street where one of the officers would get gunned down too. He didn’t think Eiling cared at all about the loss of human life, but the news choppers above them might make it look bad. It was almost full dark now and their lights were shining down on the situation.

“We do not negotiate with terrorists, Grodd. This is a terror situation and we will gun you down if you do not surrender.”

Three soldiers arrived at Barry and Eddie. Barry spoke first, “Get him to safety.”

“We’re instructed to bring you both in, Mr. Flash.”

Mr. Flash. Barry could have laughed. It wasn’t the time. “I don’t fight with the military.”

“General’s orders, sir.”

“Flash, come on,” Eddie looked at him beseechingly. “You’re hurt pretty bad, I can tell.”

He no doubt looked worse for wear, and Eddie couldn’t have missed that his arm was halfway useless right now. Most of the way useless.

One soldier got an arm under Eddie and Eddie slung his arm around the man’s shoulder.

“Last warning, Grodd.” It came from the same loudspeaker, “you’re injured and we know your powers won’t work on anyone who keeps their distance. We can take you down long before you get a line of sight. It’s game over. Surrender now.”

Barry looked between the soldiers, the tanks, and Grodd. He wanted Grodd gone, and if the military really was the only way to keep the people of Central City safe, Barry didn’t have any allegiance to Grodd, not after he’d tried to kill Eddie, had hurt so many people, had killed an innocent officer that Barry had known for years.

Before he could say anything though, Grodd—jaw cracked but not unhinged—growling in his throat and—oh Barry was so not impressed with how this day was going—he raised a fist and closed it tight and one of the cars that had been lying on its side lifted off the ground and swung, slammed forward into the tank at ramming speed.

“Dude did Grodd just—”

“Since when does he have telekinetic abilities—”

Cisco and Caitlin’s voices sounded shocked in Barry’s ear. Great, just great. Barry spit out more blood, less this time. He walked alongside the soldiers and Eddie, keeping an eye on Grodd as they circled around.

“You had your chance, Grodd,” Eiling’s voice, on the other hand, didn’t seem surprised at all. “Men,
clear the street and open fire.”

The soldiers dragged Eddie to the edge of the line the soldiers had formed and Barry nodded to Eddie before he zipped around behind the line of infantry and the tank. He wanted to talk to Eiling, to put an end to this in a way that didn’t end up with half of downtown Central being turned into a goddamn warzone, and he heard an enraged growl as the infantry started shooting, and then stopped and turned in time to see Grodd running full tilt in the opposite direction which—wow that was not good.

A military barricade was set up at the end of the other street he could see but Grodd was fast and durable, knocking over one of the caravan vehicles and barreling down soldiers, roaring. Barry was just about to take off again after him when—

“Flash!”

He turned to see Eiling coming out of a vehicle. Barry detested the man, his square jaw and hard eyes, unforgiving stance.

“Eiling.”

“You mind telling me what the hell is going on here, son?”

Even exhausted, Barry wanted to punch him, still poised to run after Grodd. He could hear the gunfire. But he wasn’t Eiling’s goddamn ‘son’ and he didn’t appreciate the condescension.

“Does it matter? I’ve gotta’ go help—”

“In that condition?”

“You’ll destroy the city,” he shouted and turned, would have flung out an arm to demonstrate if it would move.

Eiling eyed him up and down, “you were doing a fine job yourself, Flash—if by fine we mean getting yourself killed. Abrams!” he shouted to a passing man. “Get a medic to reset the Flash’s shoulder.”

“Sir!”

“I’m fine,” Barry ground out.

“You heal fast, I’ll give you that, but that shoulder can’t heal unless it’s set. Now, let’s talk tactics. McIntryre—” he called to a man standing four paces behind him.

Barry glanced around at the soldiers moving, awaiting orders, organizing themselves—no doubt on orders from Eiling—and couldn’t help but appreciate that not one of them seemed to give two shits about the Flash standing in their midst. Just another asset. He tried to focus on the situation at hand, hard to deny that he wasn’t in any shape to fight without someone fixing his shoulder first.

The soldier Eiling called was there by their sides. “Deploy Kane.”

The man saluted and jogged straight to one of the military trucks. Barry narrowed his eyes. “Every second we talk is another that Grodd gets further away.”

“We’re on it.”

The medic arrived, “Sir?”
“Fix his shoulder, set his breaks.”

There was a rustling sound and then—what. The. Hell. A flying woman took off from the caravan the soldier had gone into. Actually flying, if low, in a combat suit fashioned with white and pink amidst the black, with dark hair that looked almost purple flowing behind her. She didn’t even glance back and Barry was beyond done with this day.

“What the hell was that—”

“Just sit tight and talk to me until we patch you up, Flash.”

“Was that a meta-human?” That was a stupid question. It was obviously a meta-human.

The medic moved toward Barry and Barry let him help peel off part of Barry’s jacket, exposing his right shoulder and arm tenderly for examination, only because the quicker he dealt with this, the quicker he could get back to fighting. His cowl stayed on and he ground his teeth as his shoulder was set, doubly awful with his arm bones still broken, only a few minutes since they cracked. He tried not to scream in front of Eiling, but the man seemed impassive to it all, even as the medic set Barry’s arm in a perfunct way. He must have been briefed on Barry’s healing powers and he wondered just how much the military had on him. As it was, Eiling just watched Barry and kept up his end of the conversation, between Barry’s gasps and winces and teeth grinding.

“Her name is Frances Kane. She is an asset.”

“A meta you mean, like Bette.” Fuck his arm hurt. Cisco was feeding him updates in his ear: Grodd was heading west then veered south when he hit more military. Apparently the entire downtown was under evacuation now, military personnel everywhere. The news was keeping up with Grodd for now, and there was a flying woman who seemed to bending metal.

“And she bends metal? Why she’s working with you?”

Eiling scoffed. “Don’t take that tone with me, kid. Kane is a professional, one who—”

Cisco’s voice came through his ear. “Does she have a codename yet?”

Barry swore as the medic finished setting his arm and didn’t ask Eiling. Pulling his jacket back on through the pain, he said instead, “One who what, General?”

“Let’s play ball, kid. What I want from you is to provide intel here. You know what Grodd wants here, you and Thawne—”

“You are not using Eddie as bait—” Barry felt stronger now that his arm was set, taking a step forward into Eiling’s space, doing his jacket back up. Eiling’s eyes narrowed.

“No we aren’t using a civilian, don’t be an idiot. What does Grodd want with him?”

Barry looked away, chewing the inside of his lip before answering. “He thinks Eddie killed E—Harrison. Wells.”

Eiling actually looked surprised for a second. “Did he?”

“No.” Maybe, his head supplied. But not really. “But Grodd saw a memory that made it look that way.”

“One of yours, I presume? And Grodd wants payback?”
Barry nodded, itching to go, to find Grodd. He was through the military barricade now, according to Cisco’s update in his ear. Eiling kept talking, “Okay, this is what’s gonna’ happen, we need you to provide—”

“Sir!”

“Private?”

“Status update, sir—urgent.”

“Out with it.”

Barry was getting frustrate. He could move again, tested his arm and it had full mobility even if it hurt like hell. He just wanted to be out of here and off helping stop Grodd. But the military had a plan and the weapons to do whatever was needed whereas Barry had a broken arm, so he needed to at least coordinate with Eiling if he didn’t want anyone else to get hurt.

“The beast is moving beyond the perimeter, sir. Kane is keeping the anticipated minimal safe distance to avoid psyionic intrusion—”

“Understood. Flash—”

“I’m going so don’t even try to stop me, okay? Just tell me what’s your endgame here, Eiling.”

The general’s mouth was a hard line, but Barry wasn’t backing off this and the man finally responded. “You’ve got brass, kid. I want Grodd, contained but alive. Kane has a tool that should help with that, if she can get close enough, but she’s rough around the edges and liable to go off. We didn’t want it to come to this, but since it did—if you catch up and help subdue Grodd, we’ll get close. We’ll look to your speed to get the psy-blocking tool on him.”

“And the citizens of Central—”

“We’re here to help citizens, Flash.”

Barry nodded, and cupped a hand to his communicator, cutting out the sounds of the military rushing to and fro around him.

“Cisco—where is Grodd?”

**********

Grod was moving south through the city, almost toward the warehouses and mafia territory by the time Barry caught up to him. Beyond overturned cars and military personnel, the city didn’t seem too ruined, but Barry had stopped more than once to speed into a building and get a civilian out of there, one who hadn’t been evacuated. He saw Firestorm at one point, using his powers to lift a car off a few soldiers, but Barry didn’t have time to stop if Firestorm had it under control. Mostly though, the city looked like a hasty retreat and not all out warfare, but Barry didn’t have the capacity to stop and worry about Grodd’s plight right now, not with everything at stake.

The infantry were far behind Barry by the time he pushed south, Grodd much faster. The helicopters were still up there somewhere but it was full night now, dark and this part of town was far less lit
than the downtown core, meaning some flood lights from the helicopters and street lights and businesses but visibility was way worse, though it didn’t seem to be slowly Grodd. He was making slowly for the river, Barry was sure—it branched south toward this area after Chubbuck park.

But if Grodd was heading for the river, he didn’t make it.

Barry stopped hard as soon as he spotted the colossal form of the gorilla, surrounding by a cacophony of noise and rage. He was roaring and rearing—arms ripping at the metal sheets that kept trying to trap his arms against his body, big chunks of mismatched metal wrapped around his torso and trying to hold him fast, probably tons of it. It ground and groaned, metal on metal making noises like nails on a chalkboard and abject destruction. Barry looked on for a moment, transfixed, but even that wasn’t enough to stop Grodd entirely, boxes and objects, a street signs and more being shot up into the sky at the floating woman encasing him in metal. And she was floating, more than flying, Barry could see now that he was under her, watching as she dodged out of the way of the flying objects with what looked like annoyance, like swatting at flies.

Barry swore, instantly angry, watching a street sign fly careening wildly to the ground, feet from him. There were civilians around! “KANE!”

He shouted up at her, and she looked down at Barry as if she just noticed him. She fixed her gaze on him almost immediately, holding his with a look to her eyes that unnerved him but he couldn’t place it and couldn’t worry about it, not now when she was floating over to him. She would be beautiful under any circumstance that wasn’t so fraught.

There was a loud roar and a grinding sound, Grodd was breaking free and Kane was just lobbing more metal at him.

People ran out of a nearby alley, screaming, noise adding to the chaos, Grodd’s thundering roars and sirens, screams, the smell of fire, more than one family watching from the nearby windows with wide eyes, no doubt didn’t think they needed to evacuate this far out. A post office box Kane dodged went careening toward the couple from the alley and Barry sped forward, evacuating them down the street, arm and body screaming in protest but he ignored it, evacuating anyone he saw nearby. He stopped below Kane, noticing the side of a nearby building was completely crushed in, what looked like a boulder having wrecked it with no actual boulder in sight, smoke coming from the ground level. Kane didn’t seem to care about the destruction, laughing manically as she flicked flying debris any which way, crashing near her with hard sounds of crashing and ruin.

Another chunk of something—it looked like a bumper off a car—went sailing toward her and Barry was about to shout, but she just reached out her hand and it crumpled and dropped to the ground before it could reach her. She looked down at him with an unpleasant smile.

“You’re him?” she called, lowering herself down until dangling in the air a few feet off from the ground not far from him. “The Flash?”

“And you’re Frances Kane. Look, Eiling said—”

“I don’t care what Eiling said, I—” she swooped out the way of another shot of something from Grodd—a manhole cover heavy and fast—throwing herself into the air while Barry rushed to the side to avoid it. He heard a cry of help from inside one of the building with smoke coming out the window, noticing a broken sign in a language he couldn’t make out, except for the word ‘bakery’. He moved to get whoever it was, to help, but Grodd shot a car from the opposite side of the street right in front of him and Kane threw it at the building to avoid being hit. It slammed into the upper story windows with a shrill and shattering sound before it fell to the ground right in front of him, crumpling and if he wasn’t so fast it would have landed right on him.
“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?! There are people in there!” Barry shouted.

She looked over at Barry with anger and disdain and he had no idea what he’d done to piss this woman off. “They are of no concern to me, Flash!”

“They are to me!” he moved to run but then, to his shock and anger, felt a metal binds snap around his arms, pinning them to his body. He tried to move and shouted in rage, held fast and he looked down at the bind and followed it. It was coming from a belt at Kane’s waist, what looked like a long and thin line of metal that was now a lasso around him. She snapped it off her belt and wrapped it around him a few more times.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“You’re staying put!” she looked furious, features contorted. “When the infantry gets here, you will use the tool they bring to get in range of the beast and subdue him.”

“WHY THE HELL ARE YOU TYING ME UP?!”

The shouts from inside the building were getting more alarmed and he could see fire coming out of a window. He didn’t even care right now about Kane’s apparent insanity, “I need to help those people!”

There was a grinding, piercing sound as metal tore and snapped and groaned and Barry’s stomach dropped as Grodd let out a thundering roar and broke free from the plates of metal covering him. Barry watched with increasing horror as Kane rounded up metal with her powers and Grodd sped toward them, definitely too fast for her and he hoped she would dodge up into the sky, hoped she’d take him with her, hoped he could vibrate out of this damn metal in time and—

A blast of blue light hit the street from the building with the crumpled in bakery sign, the ground turning to ice that Grodd tripped on, sliding straight at them with a warbling but loud shriek of anger and Barry felt his heart skip a beat. It couldn’t be—

“You really need to work on your team building skills, Scarlet!” Len’s voice called out the window before disappearing again. Barry’s heart almost beat out of his chest. The smoke was gone and he looked back as Kane used more of her metal lasso to bind Grodd’s arms together before lobbing all of the sheet metal down over him, cover the rest of him. She was in the sky again, overtop Grodd, overtop Barry.

He focused his energy and groaned as he vibrated his arms until he could heat his bonds enough for them to stretch, pushing out his arms until they metal fell off his body and he could step out of the ring it made. It took longer than he’d care to admit and he was hungry and exhausted and angry and scared with the taste of blood in his mouth and his hands were cold as hell and he was worried and—some of those emotions weren’t his. Len was so close and both of their adrenaline, fight and flight, all of it on overdrive. He wondered how long the bleed had been affecting him without noticing, then pushed that thought aside because he had bigger things to worry about.

He flashed to the alley alongside the building he saw Len and an older lady coming out of.

“What are you doing here?” he was so relieved. Or was Len relieved? He had an arm around an old lady, who looked injured, a cut on her forehead, cradling her arm against her side but able to walk.

“I was in the neighborhood,” Len was somehow able to still sound casual when he drawled that out, despite everything. Barry almost cried just hearing his voice.

“FLASH!” it was Kane’s voice.
“Duty calls, Scarlet.”

Barry swallowed and pushed back the mess of feelings that seeing Len was welling up inside him. He spared a glance for Len and the old lady, who was leaning into Len’s parka and looked frightened—not of Len, at least, but definitely frightened.

“Get her out of here.”

“I’m on it,” he nodded his head toward the end of the alleyway where there was a car sitting on an opposite street. Barry saw two heads in the car but didn’t stop to worry who they were, just nodded at Len and turned back toward the street.

“And Flash?”

Barry glanced back.

“Be careful.”

He nodded, heart beating hard, then sped back to the scene in front of him. Kane was up in the sky, exerting a continuous force on the sheets of metal holding Grodd prone to the ground. There was a low and steady growl coming out of him, helicopters above cane shining light right down on him and a caravan was a the mouth of the street, infantrymen pulling out a box from it.

“You’re up, Flash!”

Kane really didn’t seem to mind bossing him around from the sky. He whooshed to the box, ready to be done with all of this.

“What is this?” he asked one of the soldiers, who was using a crowbar to open the crate. The woman glanced at Barry under her army helmet, eyes darting quickly between him and Grodd like he was a foreign to her as Grodd was, and then her expression became flat again.

“Just put it on the beast, sir.”

At least ‘sir’ beat ‘Mr. Flash’. He looked down into the box, and in there saw a helmet, shiny chrome and gold, and he knew exactly what it would do. It looked like a similar design to the helmet Cisco had made him to fight off Grodd’s telepathic attacks, except this one was Grodd sized.

He picked it up out of the box and it wasn’t light. He understood why he was the one doing this, that they thought his speed could protect him from Grodd, not even knowing about Cisco’s device. He hated the sense of satisfaction it brought him, knowing he’d stop Grodd with the helmet, knowing how high the price had been. Morillo’s face flashed before his eyes and Barry walked instead of ran toward Grodd, looking into his eyes. The fight was pretty much out of him, now, huffing out breaths under tons of metal, caged to the ground, but his eyes were angry. Barry didn’t care anymore.

Spotlights from helicopters half blinded his vision and it was a relief, for a second, before he put the helmet on Grodd. There was a brief, pitiful sound, and it was done.

“Tag him and bag him, boys!”

Eiling’s voice rang out and Barry stepped back as soldiers ran in. Kane dropped to the ground. “Sir!” she called. Barry saw Eiling point to the circling helicopters above and then tilt his head toward a building, what looked like a rundown apartment a little way down the block now partway in shambles. He motioned for Barry to follow. Against his better judgment, just wanting to go home and knowing he couldn’t yet, he followed Eiling.
The lobby of the apartment smelled like carpet mold and smoke and the door hanging off its hinges didn’t do much to block the noises from outside.

“What are you gonna’ do with Grodd?” Barry asked as soon as they were indoors. At least he didn’t sound so weary as he felt.

“You did good work, Flash,” Eiling ignored his question and Kane ground her teeth.

“I did it to protect innocent lives. Something that someone here didn’t seem to care about at all,” he spit out the angry words in the direction of Kane, her purple hair falling down past her shoulders, no longer floating around. She started forward with a flare of anger distorting her face but Eiling put a cautioning hand on her shoulder. Barry couldn’t help but think of Bette Sans Souci and had to look back at the General.

“You’re not bad at what you do, Mr. Allen. We could use someone like you on our team.”

Barry actually laughed out his scoff, uncrossing his arms. The right one still hurt but he barely noticed now. “You’re serious? No, Eiling. Never.” And if that was all he had to say, Barry was definitely done here. He turned to go.

“I’m continuing your work, you know.”

What the hell did that mean?

“Your little meta-human ‘rehabilitation’ project?”

Barry turned around very slowly, looking at Frances Kane with new eyes. She just glared at him and Eiling hadn’t lifted his hand from her shoulder. Her breathing was heavy, more on edge in here than she’d been out fighting Grodd. Was Eiling doing something to her—her and other metas?

Barry kept his voice level, just by the skin of his teeth, when he asked, “What the hell are you talking about?”

Eiling actually looked pleased, in that militant and smug way of his, like he’d won something here. “What I’m talking about is me cleaning up the mess you made by letting all those freaks out. It’s a special program, not unlike ones your friends at ARGUS set up—the military takes in meta-humans and trains them, and then we turn them loose on our enemies. We can turn the tides of war, make unstoppable weapons—we’ll be indestructible.”

“Is that what she is to you—just another living weapon?”

He flung out his arm to point to Kane and she snarled and him, ready to fight but Eiling clearly held her back, fingers digging into her shoulder with a slide against the leather of her jacket, knuckles white. Barry looked between her and Eiling, for a second hearing nothing but the sounds outside, quieting now, of helicopters and military men shouting orders. His whole body was tense with rage he tried to hold back.

“Kane is a volunteer. She’s helping us spearhead the program, Allen. I’m talking about criminals like Nimbus—where do you think he’s been hiding all this time? People like him and some of the other freaks in this town are recruits to our project, and we—”

“Project?! How many people have you abducted so far for this to form into weapons, Eiling?”

“We apprehended them. They signed their lives away when they decided to be criminals and we’re putting them to good use. And we want you to help us catch the rest of the meta-humans around
Central City and turn them over to us.”

“Not on your life,” Barry’s voice was low and gravel filled, disgusted even to his own ears. He made it three steps toward the door when he got sucked back in by Eiling’s pandering—

“We’re talking about saving lives by doing this, Allen—innocent civilian lives if we can—”

“What about the lives of those meta-humans?!” he shouted back, flashing forward right into Eiling’s space, up close and livid. The man didn’t so much as blink, eyes hard and voice steady.

“Better than a life in your private little prison, Flash.”

Barry stepped back, shock and nauseated. “Better? You’re forcing them to fight for you—to die for you! Little paws in your god-awful war games, just like Bette Sans Souci, you sick son ‘f a bi—”

“How dare you?!”

Kane ripped herself out from under Eiling’s hand with a hand flung forward and Barry was slammed back against the wall of the apartment. He wasn’t wearing metal—how did she—why did everything hurt so mu—

“You KILL my Soulmate and you have the gall to speak her name in my presence!?”

Barry was choking, blood pounding in his ears, breathing but like he couldn’t get any oxygen, sharp and sudden—his blood felt like it was boiling, like it was being pulled out of him through his skin, tearing him apart. He was thrown to the ground and he gasped in a breath, choking in oxygen.

“Stop—”

“We didn’t even get to commune—” Kane’s voice didn’t even sound human anymore “—we didn’t get anything before you killed her!”

He screamed as his blood stretched and pulled inside him and then the feeling abated again, gasping in precious air, trying to think through tunnel that was clouding his vision, black dots across his eyes. His body was rolled over onto his back and they were looking down at him as he blinked up at the dim bulb in the apartment lobby, gasping in air that wouldn’t feed his blood the oxygen it needed. His heart. God his heart hurt. Eiling was impassive as ever in front of his eyes, fuzzy around the edges, not moving to stop this. Barry was in too much pain to care, the stretch in his veins too much. The woman, Kane, she was beside herself, hand curling in front of her, snarling—

“I am going to make this slow, and make it hurt, Flash.” It sounded a million miles away. He tried to focus on it. “I am going to rip your blood out of your body by the iron in it and I will do it one drop at a time—”

He gasped out the last air he had, whole body seizing, chest on fire as his blood moved outward inside his veins against all bodily reason.

The last thing he felt before passing out was ice cold.

Chapter End Notes
Gosh I cannot say how much I loved that most of the comments I got (on AO3 and Tumblr) were thinking that Grodd found the Rogues den. He did not at all find the Rogues den, he found Eddie (✿◠‿◠)*:*” ✧

Also... say hello to Magenta. She’s a DC villain (sometimes hero) from the comics, more specific to Wally West instead of Barry, but she had all the qualities I was looking for in another meta-human to include. She’s got a split personality (what we’d typically call some form of dissociative identity disorder), has sided with both good and evil in the comics (perfect for her connection to the military here) and has powers I wanted to use for this arc, and later. I’ve added a bit more to her ability to mess with iron in the blood and took some inspiration from metal-bending, taking the magnetic part of her powers a bit far, but eh. We’re going with it.

And yeah, okay, when I’ve been talking about the overarching plot I’ve been teasing at in the background, this is it. Grodd, Eiling, the military, and a few more things subtly developing throughout this. Finally we can see some of the threads here starting to weave together in earnest ☺

This action also unfolded a lot faster than I thought it would even though it took 7500 words, with some stuff happening more in the background than I anticipated (I imagined it would take two instead of one chapters), so more of what happened in the interim will be disclosed later.

Ps – Full disclosure about the song choices. The second song (by Leap Year) is actually by my fiancé’s band, and he doesn’t have a youtube page so that’s why the link takes you to bandcamp. I listened to his songs on repeat while writing this chapter for a few hours so I felt like I should include it. The other song I also listened to on repeat, but actually I listened to that whole album (Cruel Melody) on repeat as well so you should check it out. They’re amazing.

PPS - sorry about any typos, etc, I’ve read this over too many times already for right now.
Caitlin never knew what to expect in her new line of work, helping the Flash. However, the military signing on a meta-human and using that person to hurt Barry was, unfortunately, not even among the top ten most surprising things that month, let alone that year.

Cisco was beside himself with worry when Barry’s vitals spiked through the roof, opening the communication channel on their end and hearing only screams before it was abruptly cut off. Caitlin was beside herself too, if she was being honest, but she was a professional and had a lot of faith in Barry. Whatever this was was bad, even for him, but his heart was still going and that, at least, was a good sign. She’d take whatever she could get, staring at the monitors, every muscle tense.

“We have to go—we have to get him! Now!” Cisco was already halfway to the door. “CAITLIN!” he yelled when she didn’t move and she forced her jaw to move, eyes on the monitors.

“What’d you want us to do, Cisco? Fight the whole military?” her voice was loud and quiet all at once, angry and afraid.

“If we have to!”

“We'd never even make it in time!”

“We can’t just wait here!”

The screen blipped. She stared at it, at the red triangle that was the Flash suit’s GPS, and it was moving now. It was too slow to be superspeed but—

“He’s moving!”

“Shit!” Cisco was rushing back over. “The military must be moving him. Call Felicity—maybe Oliver can do something about this with his ARGUS friends? They’re friendly with the Flash, right?”

“They’re already in the air, Cisco,” she reminded him. Felicity had called from the airstrip not long ago, taking Ray’s jet. They’d seen the news, what was happening in Central being broadcast nationally, and decided it was high time for a trip to visit. Oliver wouldn’t be able to do anything as
the Arrow, with only Starling City as his ‘jurisdiction’ according to the legislation that was being set
up in Starling by the mayor and the governor, but after watching Grodd destroy the police precinct
they’d called Caitlin demanding details.

“Shit.”

Instead she called Firestorm—how she mentally referred to Ronnie when Martin was in the driving
seat—who was helping with evacuating civilians from affected buildings, and told him to get some
eyes on the situation from up high. There was that flying woman he’d have to stay away from, not to
mention the helicopters, but maybe… she couldn’t let Barry get abducted because she was afraid that
Ronnie would be too. And Firestorm was on it, rushing over to the location without hesitating, and
she loved him for it and hated the situation more.

Then she sat by Cisco, watching the blip, the news cameras, waiting. She hated this part, the waiting,
more than anything in the world. It felt like it was all she did some days—wait and watch as people
she loved dearly were hurt, left, were taken from her. Barry would come back. He had to. Even
Ronnie had come back from the worst fate possible, with a little bit extra besides. That’s what they
called it, when they joked in private, needing to find humor in the pain of their situation. Ronnie had
a little bit extra now.

She hated waiting.

But the blip on the screen wasn’t heading out of the city, wasn’t heading to the temporary military
barricade on 5th street, wasn’t—it was—

“Wait a—Cait, is that coming here?” Cisco was nervously gnawing on a pen, which fell from his lip
and they approached the screen together. Her eyes were wide and the treacherous hoping beating in
her chest was almost too much. Hope was worse than waiting, hope was—

“It is. It’s coming here!”

Cisco plopped down on a chair again and pushed off from the desk, rolling to another screen and
pulling up the security feed. She wanted to call Firestorm but he couldn’t fly and talk at the same
time, and they really needed to get him a communicator. They could see the outside of the building,
and then, as the GPS blipped on the screen toward the building and she hurried over to Cisco’s
screen to see, they saw—

“That’s not a tank.”

“It’s a… motorcycle?” she asked, almost needing the clarification to believe it.

“It looks like… is that Captain Cold?!”

Her heart roared inside her chest—hope bursting out as triumph. She didn’t know Snart was with
Barry when he was attacked, but if he was—

“Lock out everything behind him once he’s in—except for Firestorm—just keep the military out. I’ll
direct him to the medical room.”

She was out of her seat and off before Cisco could even protest. On the screen, the last glimpse she’d
catched was of Snart riding in, Barry in front of him and facing toward Snart, draped or wrapped
around him, clearly unconscious or close to it. It was obviously insane and dangerous but they’d
made it and that’s what mattered. No wonder the blip on the screen was going slowly.

She stopped thinking about it and ran down the hall, fast in her heels, almost at the entrance when
she saw Snart carrying Barry’s body bridal-style in his arm. Unconscious then.

“He’s—”

“This way!” she turned on her heel and didn’t wait for an explanation. He caught up quickly and she turned them into the main medical room—the same one they used to host Barry in for all those months.

“Put him on the bed and get him out of the suit!” she snapped, falling into focus, and Snart didn’t hesitate to comply. She dragged over a rolling med table for her equipment, latex gloves on, prepping an IV.

Snart was taking Barry’s suit off like he knew how. She couldn’t focus on that right now.

“What did they hit him with? Was it just electricity?”

She pulled over a monitor for Barry’s vitals and put in an IV in case he needed glucose—he almost always needed glucose after a fight—because anesthetic was mostly pointless.

“No, the flying woman with magnetic powers, or electromagnetic ones. Something about pulling the iron from his blood.”

Her hands shook and she steadied them. That sounded atrocious. She hoped it wasn’t deadly and pushed that thought away, putting sensors on Barry’s bare chest and the tip of his finger, getting a read on his heartbeat and vitals. Nothing different since the suit was on, and that wasn’t a great sign.

“Okay, his heartbeat is erratic, the signal is abnormal and it’s putting him in cardiac arrest again—it did once on the way over but his heart is pretty strong to that sort of—” she looked at his face and jumped forward, “I need to restart his heart.”

“We need to wha—”

“Snart, focus. I’m going to give him a shock, just like you see in movies, okay? It'll disrupt the abnormal signal. And he’s going to seize, and then I’m going to administer CPR if his heart doesn’t restart on its own.”

“What do I—”

“If he seizes off the bed, push him down. Barry’s body can seize hard enough to throw him off medical beds. Otherwise, stand clear.”

She grabbed the panels and charged them, ignoring the other man’s clearly alarmed expression, hearing Cisco rush into the room and ignoring that too. She yelled “Clear!” and pressed the AED panels to Barry’s body over his heart and right side, below his Soulmark but above his hip, watching the pulse go through him. Immediately after his whole body jerked and seized, tense and up and off, the monitors going crazy, blaring around them. Snart’s hands were on him immediately.

“What’s going on?”

“His heart is seizing—hold him—”

Snart pressed him down and Cisco rushed in to help, holding Barry’s other side. His heartbeat wasn’t stable by any means, ventricular fibrillation almost a guarantee. The men were struggling to hold him down, because of course Barry’s body would be insane enough to seize and try to fix the abnormal rhythm on it’s own, not wanting to respond to the shock.
“Clear!”

They pulled their hands back and she pressed the panels down, shocking his system and his body seized appropriately this time, arching off the bed and dropping back down. The pulse in his body cleared even as Snart pushed him back down against the mattress until his seizing stilled. She looked at the monitor. It was tachycardic now—normal for Barry—but no abnormalities were detected and his body was relaxing.

For a moment, it had felt like the first week they had him at the lab.

Barry’s body started to stabilize and she let out a breath she’d been holding, shaky.

“He’s vitals are returning more to his normal. So long as his hemoglobin wasn’t permanently impacted—which shouldn’t be the case with his healing factor—and so long as no brain or tissue damage was incurred while he was deprived of oxygen—”

“Not making this sound too great, Cait—”

She looked at Cisco for his comment then at Snart’s pale, wan face. She softened her expression, reassuring, “Barry will heal. His ability to heal is unlike anything we’ve seen. He’ll most likely wake up within a few hours.”

“Hours?!”

She huffed. Snart didn’t seem impressed but, “Based on what the suit registered for his vitals and what you described, anyone else would be dead about five times over, you realize. I think he’ll be —”

“You think or you know, Snow?” Snart growled from the other side of the medical bed and she tensed all over, arms crossing against her chest.

“So long as you’re right about what they did to him, Snart, then there is no reason to believe that Barry won’t recover.”

Cisco was edging closer to her and she found herself thankful for it. No matter their present circumstances, she was still afraid of Leonard Snart. He kidnapped her and almost killed her, along with his friend, and they hurt Cisco’s brother and kept him locked up in their little house for days. She had had nightmares for weeks about being tied to a chair with the tick tock of a bomb waiting to blow if her friends came to find her. The tick tock was imaginary, made up by her dreams, but the bomb had been so very real.

And now the man who’d given her those nightmares was sitting down on the edge of Barry’s bed, the fight seeming to go out of him, picking up Barry’s hand and holding on to his it like a lifeline (black glove discarded beside him).

The hand didn’t go unnoticed by Cisco, whose eyes shot to it, then to Snart’s face, then to Caitlin in confusion. She met his questioning look with a twinge of guilt—she felt like she should have told him weeks ago, but it wasn’t her secret to tell.

“Am I missing something here?” he finally asked to the room at large. “I mean, not that I’m not grateful that you saved Barry, but…?” Cisco looked down that the hand meaningfully, then went so far as to nod at it. She was actually a bit surprised he held himself back from all out pointing.

She looked at Snart, expecting him to answer. He gave her a flat stare and she rolled her eyes. As far as she was concerned, the cat was out of the proverbial bag. “Barry and Leonard Snart are
Cisco barked out a laugh. Then realized no one else was laughing. Then, “say whaaa—” and then the grin slid off his face, voice losing its fun quality. “Wait, are you serious?”

“What’s the status on the military?” Snart interrupted Cisco’s internal meltdown before it could start, and it really looked like it was about to start. Caitlin figured that was for the best, because if you let him get going, he was hard to derail.

“I—wha—Eiling backed down. Firestorm—”

“The guy on fire, who covered me on my way here?”

“He covered—yeah, uh, him. Guess he’s leading the military on a wild goose chase right now?”

Caitlin’s stomach dropped and Cisco immediately recognized it, hand on her arm.

“He’ll be fine, Cait—he’s way faster than them, and smarter. He’s just leading them out of the city, off the scent.”

She nodded and put her hand over his, “okay. Okay, what else?”

“Damage control—the media’s going nuts out there, how the military knew about Grodd, what he even is. They don’t look likely to come storming down on STAR Labs, especially when they already have to deal with all that, not to mention explaining their flying woman. The public is learning more and more about metas and this is gonna’ go national if it hasn’t yet.”

“The flying woman—Frances Kane, right?—apparently she’s one who did this to Barry.”

“It was her? Shiiiit. I kinda’ liked her.”

Caitlin resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “D’you think we need to call ARGUS? If Eiling tries to get Barry, or Ronnie—”

“Maybe not a bad idea, but why don’t we wait and see what Ollie has to say? He’s actually got friends with them.”

“You have friends high enough in ARGUS that can call off a General because you made a phone call?” Snart interrupted them. He was still holding Barry’s hand.

Caitlin’s eyes widened and she and Cisco exchanged a glance, then each started shaking their heads. “That’s not what he—”

“I didn’t really, I mean is that what you took out of—”

“What Cisco means to say is—”

“Cut the crap, both of you.”

Cisco’s jaw dropped and he stared at Snart. “Excuse you, Cold. We aren’t just gonna’ tell you about our friends at ARGUS or anything else. Just because you saved Barry doesn’t mean—”

“I didn’t just save him, I’m his Soulmate, and if there are friends of yours that could have prevented this—”

“Look, Leonard,” Caitlin stepped forward, in between Snart and Cisco. Cisco looked like he’d just
remembered what else was going on there, mouth dropping open, but Caitlin beat him to the punch, clasping her hands together with a frosty smile, “whatever Barry hasn’t told you yet, we aren’t going to. What we will do, is let you stay here until he wakes up. What we won’t do, is put up with you threatening anyone in this lab or acting like you own the place just because you’re Bonded to Barry. You are not the only person in this room who cares about Barry. Do you understand?”

She met his cold gaze with a hard one of her own until a slow smile and not altogether pleasant spread onto his face. “You and Lisa really would get along better than I thought.”

She rolled her eyes and scoffed, dropping her arms again because that was as close to acquiescence as she would get from a man like Snart. Then she turned on her heel and grabbed Cisco by the arm, dragged him from the room.

“We’ll be back to re-check his vitals once we’ve talked.” She called over her shoulder to Snart. She let go of Cisco’s arm and he walked in step with her, following her down the hall and to a viewing room which held the two-way mirror that looking into the medical room. Even knowing about Snart and Barry, she didn’t really feel comfortable letting the man out of her sight, not after everything he had done.

She walked up to the glass and Cisco came to stand beside her. Snart was shucking his jacket and the cold gun with its holster, dropping them into a chair that he’d pulled up before falling into it himself, sitting forward and taking hold of Barry’s hand again. Without them in the room with him, it was easier to see the lines of worry on his face, the pain. Barry had asked about the bleed being physical —could Snart feel his pain right now? He was smoothing his thumb over Barry’s knuckles when Cisco finally turned and looked at her instead.

“Did… you know about this? Before today?”

She could tell his voice was trying so hard to be carefully free of accusation, but she heard it in there anyway. Tersely, she nodded, eyes still on Snart.

“Since when?”

“Months.”

“Barry told you months ago—“

“No!” she turned to face him, lips pulling to the side, “no, Cisco. Barry didn’t tell me. He’s never told me, just—asked. About the bleed, about Bonds, about me and Ronnie—” Cisco winced and she looked down. He knew it was a sore subject in general, all the more so when Ronnie was off flying and outsmarting the military.

“I figured it out. I knew what his Mark looks like—it’s like a snowflake, of all things—and I knew he was Born Marked so his Soulmate would be older. And then a while ago he started acting strange, and he came to me with questions. It was right after the museum break it with Grodd and Captain Cold. The questions were too focused, and it was obvious he was hiding something. I couldn’t figure out why he would want to hide that he’d met his Soulmate unless…” she glanced back at Barry’s unconscious form, “unless it was someone he wouldn’t want us to know he was Bonded to,” she swallowed. “I didn’t know for sure until after the police gala.”

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah.”

“But why not just tell us, Cait? It doesn’t make sense! Did Barr think we would be mad at him? It's
not like he can control who his Soulmate is,” Cisco motioned wide and pointed to the two-way mirror.

“His Soulmate is Leonard Snart, Cisco. There’s a lot of complications that go along with that.”

“Yeah but we’re his friends—we’re a team! After everything we’ve been through, did he really think we wouldn’t stand by him?”

She sighed and looked at her friend, wishing he could understand. But Cisco was Unmarked, and even more than that, he’d never really been in love—not love that lasted, not like this. “I can’t speak for Barry, but… if I were him, I think I would be afraid of us being scared of or disappointed in his Mate. He’d feel the instinct to protect his Bond, even if it meant hiding it.”

“Protect…?”

She looked back at the men in the room through the mirror, how drawn Snart looked, at the wounded Barry, and she remembered her own personal hell. Waiting, not knowing, it was always the worst. She wished Ronnie would call.

“After what happened with Ronnie… after my Mark turned black, I started to think I was going crazy.” Her voice was quiet and a little shaky. She’d never talked to anyone but Ronnie about this. It was too much, too painful.

“I would get… feelings. Like the bleed. Not all the time but sometimes, just barely there. And they were awful—just pain and sorrow and fear. I thought I was projecting, imagining my own emotions as the bleed, and that’s why it would happen more when I was on the edge of sleep. But if that’s all it was… if it was just that, I would have gone to a grief counselor. There are many who specialize in Soulmates passing, and psychosomatic bleed sensations, but I… it was mine. It was the last little bit of Ronnie that I had left—these insane phantom feelings—and no matter how horrible they were, I didn’t want them to stop. Because part of me, some small and horrible part of me was able to hope, whenever I felt those things, painful and awful but there—I could hope some part of him was still alive.”

Her voice cracked, there were tears streaming down her cheeks and Cisco wrapped his arms around her.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t still be so emotional about this.”

“Shh, Cait, it’s okay.”

She choked out a sob and sniffed into her friend’s chest. After a minute, she pulled back and wiped her eyes, sniffed again and looked back in at Barry and Snart while she regained her composure. They hadn’t moved.

“I’m really glad, for the record, that Ronnie was actually okay and you weren’t crazy.”

She let out a laugh and had to dab her eyes again. “Me too, Cisco… But when I didn’t tell anyone about my impossible NAB experiences when I thought Ronnie died, it was my way of protecting the last part of him that I had left. And if I were Barry… I’d want to protect my Soulmate. Normally when people meet their Mate, their friends and family celebrate. Here, he knew that wouldn’t happen, that we’d all worry, that it would make everyone tense, that Joe and Eddie might try to do something stupid. So instead of telling anyone, I think he just… tried to keep it safe. To keep Snart safe. If no one knew, no one could criticize his Soulmate, no one could try to tell him it wouldn’t work, or to not trust this person that he… no one could try to keep him away from his Soulmate.”
Cisco was nodding beside her. “People would too, wouldn’t they? Ask if he was sure he could trust Cold, or at least Barry’d know we’re scared of him. And Joe probably would ban Cold from his house at the very least, and try to keep Barry and him from seeing each other. And… after everything that went down with Eobard Thawne, I guess it would be hard, is hard, y’know, trusting people again, letting them in.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. There was that. She tilted her head, growing more tired by the minute, worn out and there was still so much left to do that night, so late already. “Barry needs us right now, Cisco. At the very least, we can be there to support him and his Bond. Even if we’re not ready to trust Snart yet, we can still be in Barry’s corner.”

He nodded, still wounded, she could tell, but Cisco was strong and kind, he’d work his way around it. They were silent for a minute, and then, “So Cold and Flash… there’s gotta’ be some cool mashup name for them, right?”

She laughed. “Never change, Cisco.”

**********

After Cisco went to make some calls and get updates on the situation outside, Firestorm—because she couldn’t think of the fusion as one or the other, really—finally called her and Caitlin gushed to him because she couldn’t help it. He had a lot of intel on things he’d seen, asked her about Captain Cold saving Barry, something he’d apparently actually watched all of, and she could only give him the highlights: “it’s a long story, but to keep it simple, Cold is Barry’s Soulmate.” It surprised him, but not near so much as it had Cisco. He told her he’d be by soon and she could finally breath again.

Then she went in to check on Barry, pleasantly surprised that Leonard had found the blankets and covered him up. His vitals were stable now and mostly within (his) normal levels, something that she took to be reassuring. Snart wasn’t so sure, maybe because how outlandish some of those vitals were, but he accepted her offer of coffee (and declined her offer of food). She wasn’t too comfortable being in the same room as him, especially with Cisco back at the cortex now, but when she returned with a steaming mug of precious caffeinated heaven, he was actually the one to strike up conversation.

He was leaning forward, looking exhausted, and after she changed the drip bag for Barry’s IV, he glanced up at her. “When did he tell you?”

She stilled, then resumed movement. Snart wasn’t about to hurt her. She knew that. Logically. “He didn’t. I figured it out.”

She moved to the end of Barry’s bed and picked up his chart to write his new vital readings on it and felt eyes on her. “I’m a smart woman and I have a Soulmate of my own. Barry asked questions, I’ve seen his Mark,” her eyes flicked to his side, under the blanket, “I started to put things together.”

“How does Barry know this?”

Her hand stilled after writing some notes on Barry’s chart. “Not in as many words, but yes. We’ve skirted it.”

Snart nodded, and then uttered words she’d never really expected to hear. “Thank you. For saving him.”
She pursed her lips and lowered the chart to look at him, then at Barry. “He’s my friend. Of course I would do what I can to help him.”

He nodded. “Then thank you for understanding.”

Part of her couldn’t believe she was having a civil conversation with him, but her more rational side told her that she’d known this would happen eventually, one way or another, thanks to his connection with Barry. She’d always just imagined Barry being awake and facilitating.

“Well, my Soulmate turned into a living nuclear weapon after the particle accelerator exploded, so I don’t have too much room to judge.”

She found herself smiling at his incredulous expression. “I guess Barry never got around to mentioning that?”

“There was a test bomb, outside the city—that was him?”

“Yes, that was Ronnie, and his… well, it’s complicated, but the person he’s fused with, sometimes.” She watched as he digested that, feeling a little amused despite herself at his nebulous expression. “You saw him—they, really—up in the sky, Firestorm. It took some work, but we’ve figured it out now.”

“You and your Soulmate? Sorted out one of you being fused to another person?”

“Well, they can separate. Which we only learned after the year he spent pushing me away and hiding from me, after the explosion so I thought he was dead…”

Snart was actually sitting up straighter now, leaning toward her in curiosity, sipping his coffee. “You’d know he was alive though, your Mark, and the bleed?”

She was shaking her head, and then sighed and dropped the chart, convincing herself to over to Snart’s side of the bed. It was easier to show than tell, sometimes. She sat on the edge next to Barry’s legs and turned until he could see her back, then lifted her hair away from the back of her neck. There, she knew, was the set of two small and interwoven circles, one that looked like fire and one that looked a bit like ice. Once upon a time, they’d been luminescent white and almost tinted with red and blue in the right light, but now they were both all black—a Widow Mark.

“But how—?”

She dropped the hair again before turning to him. She almost always wore it down for this reason, to avoid the stares, the pitying glances, the questions.

“Ronnie, my Soulmate, he technically died in the night of the particle accelerator blast. But like most other people affected that night, something incredible happened, and he… he made it. Like I said, there was a year apart, but we—we found our way back to one another.”

His eyes were considering, one eyebrow raised as he worked through the possibilities, tilting his head, “and your Mark never changed back. The bleed?”

“It’s still intact. It was different, during the year he was away, but still there.” She smiled, finding it easier than she would have guessed to talk about this with him. Maybe because she didn’t know him very well, or maybe because there was no pity or morbid fascination on his face, just an academic curiosity. And after a minute he nodded, halfway to the side and seemingly satisfied. Then he turned his attention back to Barry’s prone form, and Caitlin looked down at him too.
“Barry mentioned… his questions implied that you two have a very strong NeuroAffective Bond? A physical connection?”

Snart didn’t take his eyes from Barry but he nod a single time, voice a slow drawl. “We do.”

“Do you… what do you feel, right now? Is it better than when you brought him in?”

He closed his eyes, like he was concentrating, hand recapturing Barry’s. Then he nodded. “There’s less pain. He was on fire, earlier, especially his chest—heart, I suppose. The beating doesn’t hurt so much now, hasn’t since a few minutes after you zapped it, and the taste of blood is less strong. I’d wager that his internal bleeding has stopped.”

_Heart—internal_—? It was—“That’s incredible,” she breathed, and Snart’s eyes snapped open to look at her. “I’ve read medical cases of Bonds where Soulmates can pinpoint injuries in one another, but I’ve never… even with me and Ronnie, where we get some sensory transfer, I still don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like that.”

And of all things, Snart smiled, and it was small and pleased and shy all at once, and he looked away when he did. In that second, she felt she was seeing the person that Leonard Snart might really be, instead of the person he’d forced himself to be—like she was seeing a person that Barry Allen could conceivably _be_ with. She smiled too, then stood up to give them some space when—

“Hey, guys?” Cisco was in the doorway, looking hesitant. “We have company.”

Snart stood immediately. “The military?” he was reaching for his jacket and gun and Cisco winced.

“No, it’s uhh… it’s the Arrow. And Felicity. They’re earlier than we expected—took Ray’s jet and I guess it’s fast—and Firestorm’s in the parking lot.”

“Oh _shit_, Cisco—that is not—”

“Where are they? Are they _here_ or—” Snart was standing and reaching for his weapon and she stepped away from the bed to face him.

“Oh no, no no no no no. You are _not_ about to fight—”

“Guys they are—”

“Where is he?”

Caitlin’s spine straightened at Oliver Queen’s gravelly voice and she spun on the spot, turned around and—

“—here.”

In a second Oliver’s bow and arrow and the cold gun were both raised and ready to strike.

“STOP!”

She threw herself, arms wide, between the two men before either of them could do anything totally idiotic. Her heart was racing out of her chest. Cisco spoke, quiet and off to the side, “They _may_ have seen Cold on the news—”

“Get out of my way, Dr. Snow,” Oliver commanded in his low ‘Arrow’ voice even though he wasn’t wearing the suit and she trembled and forced herself to stand tall. Behind him, she saw Felicity walk into the doorway then stop abruptly, taking in the scene.
“You don’t understand! Leonard isn’t here to hurt Barry, he’s—”

“How many soldiers had Cold killed? Oh god she was so not prepared to deal with that information.

“Snart won’t do anything to hurt Barry!”

“He has before,” his hand on his arrow notched back a hair farther and she had zero doubt he could make the shot over her shoulder without much issue.

“I’m trying to tell you—Leonard is Barry’s Soulmate!”
Len’s chest constricted tight. How dare she tell that to the Arrow?! How in the hell—

“His what?” the Arrow’s—Oliver goddamn Queen’s—voice dropped the gritty pretense, suddenly soft and confused, quieter. He didn’t drop his arms but Len saw his hand on the notched arrow relax.

Caitlin’s voice was softer, her own limbs relaxing when she repeated, “He’s Barry’s Soulmate. That’s why he’s here, and no one,” she looked over her shoulder at Len then back to the Arrow, “is hurting anyone. Got it?”

She stood up straighter like she was proud of herself. Len had to hand it to her—the woman had guts. He already knew that though, had from the first time he met her and she told him to kill her rather than to hurt the Flash. Len never would have guessed that one day she’d be defending him with the same staunchness.

The Arrow looked at him over her shoulder, voice reverting to that rasp, “is that true?”

Len tilted his head to the side by a fraction, glaring at the man, wanting to know who he was to Barry. “It is,” he drawled at last, eyes flicking between the Arrow and the others in the room.

“Why didn’t he tell us?” the Arrow directed that to Caitlin. Interesting—did Barry normally share personal secrets with Queen? The man seemed to know Barry and his friends, so was the same true in reverse?

“Barry is allowed to have his secrets,” Caitlin responded, high and reedy, and turned her head to look toward the other woman in the room. Len’s eyes flicked to her, the woman who’d followed Queen in. She was blond and vaguely familiar, and he was pretty sure they’d said her name was Felicity.

“We’ll see about that,” Queen ground out. Len was glad he hadn’t lowered the cold gun yet because lines like that made his finger itch toward the trigger. The Arrow noticed and tensed. He also hadn’t lowered his bow yet.

“I think what Caitlin and, uh, Leonard are trying to say…” the blond woman stepped forward, hands outward and placating, and with the sound of her voice, Len realized where he knew her from. She was there the night he derailed the train. “is that Soulmates are a personal thing and maybe Barry didn’t want to share this yet.”

She gave Queen some meaningful look as she spoke and he sent her some complex expression in return. Was she his Soulmate?

“Secrets like this put people in danger.”
Len almost rolled his eyes. Finally, frustrated and too tired for bullshit, he tilted his gun back toward the roof, satisfied he wasn’t about to get shot full of arrows, and addressed the man. “Whatever you think about me, I don’t care, Queen. But do not assume you have any rights to Barry’s secrets.”

The Arrow lowered his bow. Len could see both of the women in the small room relax.

“You and me need to take a walk, Snart.”

As if he would leave Barry’s side. “I’ll pass.”

“The only reason you aren’t full of arrows right now is because it would hurt Barry, but if you think I won’t drag you from this room—”

“Piss off, Queen, unless you want a fight. I’m not leaving Barry’s side.”

It was like no one in the room dared to breathe after Len said it, Cisco especially going too still. Queen’s eyes went narrow—“Everyone else, take a walk.”

The Arrow must have their respect, fear, trust, or all three. Len stiffened, and he saw each of the other members in the room exchange glances before filing out, Caitlin casting a worried glance back at Len before she left. Len wasn’t impressed. He was still tight and tense from what Barry was going through, the residual effects of that pain like phantoms in his body, worn thin. He hadn’t drummed up too many favors with the STAR Labs crew though so he supposed this was some penance. Queen was listening to something the blond woman leaned up to whisper in his ear before parting. She cast a last worried glance at Barry’s unconscious form before slipping out the door.

Then they were gone and Len was alone with the man. He made a show of leaning his bow against a tray of medical supplies and putting his quiver down. He was dressed in a black jacket and not his Arrow—Green Arrow, now—outfit, but he was physically imposing without it, a presence that came from confidence, and probably from being raised with so much money. They sized one another up. They were the same height, similar build but Len could accept that Queen had a good deal more compact muscle and was also close to a decade younger. All that was fine by him—even exhausted and in pain as he was, he’d taken out stronger and faster men by being smarter. Not that he was hoping it would come to blows.

“You gonna’ threaten to put an arrow in me if I lay a hand on him? If so, you can save it, Quiver, I’d never hurt Barry.”

The man shook his head. “I don’t need to, Snart. Unless you’re insane, you’d never purposefully hurt your Soulmate, and even if you did, Barry can stand up for himself against someone like you.”

Len was honestly surprised, then calculating. “Something tells me I’m not off the hook with you just like that.”

Instead of arguing, Queen stared at him for a long minute. Len kept himself neutral, cold, focused on the man before him. “You and Barry, you’re together?”

Len nodded tersely, and Queen didn’t look surprised, just narrowed his eyes.

"And you're still fighting him? As Captain Cold?" he looked like saying Len's monicker left a sour taste in his mouth. Again, Len nodded.

"I thought as much. Tell me, Snart, have you ever considered the damage you might do to Barry not by hurting him, but by keeping him by your side?"
Queen nodded and looked down at Barry’s unconscious form between them. There was something softer on his face then, and Len didn’t like it at all. “I don’t like you, Snart, and I wouldn’t trust you for a second. But Barry is a friend, and you seem to care, so I’ll explain this to you.” Len almost told him not to bother but Queen kept talking, casual, like he was telling a story in his living room and not like Barry was half dead on a bed between them. "When I first met Barry, he didn’t have his powers yet. He was like a kid—tripping over his own feet, rambling on, too excited and nervous. He had an energy that couldn’t be contained, even then. He was skinny—not just lean like now but almost frail, the type of person I could easily knock out with a single hit. A strong wind could’ve knocked him over. He was young and looked it, too eager to please, to eager to even focus for more than a minute at a time. I met him just a few days before the lightning strike put him in a coma.”

Queen let that sink in. Len tried not to show his surprise. He wanted to imagine what Barry might have been like, before his powers, before the Flash, but it was almost impossible. That was the only version of Barry he’d ever known, every other image would be tainted by that knowledge. He had no idea where Queen was going with this story.

“During the weekend he was in Starling, Barry helped crack an important case, got himself way in over his head, and he saved my life.”

Len blinked. He wasn't sure if his headache was his own or aching in the bleed, at this point.

“And that’s when I figured out who Barry Allen really is. Because after he saved my life, when I was yelling Felicity, who brought him in to save me, who trusted him with my identity back when it mattered, Barry didn’t say one word to defend himself.” Queen paused, and there was a smile at the memory, barely there and then gone, eyes refocused on Len and matching his curious gaze. “That’s Barry. During his entire visit in Starling, he didn’t do one selfish thing. Even his reason for being in the city was just him trying to help his father. Half the choices in his life, I think, have been about helping his father. The other half have been about helping others. So when I was yelling at Felicity about bringing Barry in, even though I would have died if she hadn’t brought him to me, I figured him out. Because Barry didn’t defend himself, but he defended her.”

The man stepped closer to the bed, and there was a something warm and sad and hard all at once in his voice when he kept talking. It made Len's hackles rise.

“Here was this scrawny kid who would get carded at a bar standing up to a known killer, knowing exactly what I was capable of and I was angry and on edge, and all he did was reprimand me, without thinking, without blinking. And he was right.”

Len didn’t need Queen to tell him that Barry was a brave idiot. He’d learned all this the first time he faced off against the Flash. “As warm and fuzzy as this is making me, Queen, why don’t you tell me the point of your little soliloquy?”

The man huffed, darkly amused. His humor didn't make him any less intimidating, the lines of his body still poised to fight at any second. “You don’t get him at all, do you? Barry is brightness. He wouldn't take an ounce of credit for helping me that first time, didn't care that I treated him like shit at first—he gave me a gift, even.” Len’s face went hard at that, but Queen kept talking. “And he did it all because he thought it was the right thing to do, and because he cared enough to. Barry cares so deep for people he gets lost in his need to help them. That’s who he was before that lightning struck him and that’s who he is after it did—the person who cares enough to try.”

He paused, expression shifting, losing any warmth it held.
“So I don’t know who you are yet, Leonard Snart, but I do know that you aren’t the person who does that. And whoever and whatever you are, I hope you understand this much. This can only go one of two ways if you keep Barry by your side. Either he’ll change you, or you’ll change him. And if you know anything about the light and the goodness inside Barry, you’ll be the one that changes. Because if you don’t, and if you try to dampen that light, or change that goodness to suit your own ways, Barry will suffer, and I don’t have to tell you what I’ll do to you if you make him suffer like that.”

“Is this you telling me to stay away from Barry for his own good, Queen? Because I’m not going to do that.” He wasn’t. He couldn’t. It didn’t matter that he knew that Queen was speaking from experience, that he’d killed more men than even Len had. It didn't matter that his words echoed thoughts Len had tried to lock far away in unlit corners of his mind, remnants of fears he held from the day he was Marked.

Queen fixed his gaze. “If you love him like you should, you won’t have to. If you are selfish and cruel to Barry though, mark my words Snart, you won’t be given the option of hurting him. I’ll make sure you won’t so much as dare to get a parking ticket, let alone have a chance to do something that could hurt—”

Len bristled, about to snap, but down between them, Barry groaned. The Arrow immediately cut off and Len moved to Barry’s side, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Barry?”

“Mmm, izzat y—m’Len?” He was struggling to sit even though he could barely keep his eyes open. Len dropped a hand onto his shoulder. The bleed between them was full of confusion and white noise, pretty much only physical sensation still as Barry’s brain came back online and Len tried his damndest to put comfort in it instead of worry, instead of the sharp nausea he felt welling up inside Barry.

“Don’t try to sit—you were hurt, bad.”

Barry mumbled some syllables then blinked his eyes open against the harsh glare of fluorescent lights, one hand moving to shadow his eyes from the light, and spoke. “Wher—’m I at STAR labs?”

“Yeah, you—”

“I—I’m gonna’ be—”

Len was—for the first time, maybe—faster. He reached across the bed without thinking and swiped a medical fluids tray off Caitlin’s stand before Barry could throw up all over his own lap. And he did throw up, suddenly bolt upright and curled forward, blood and bile coming out his stomach while Len rubbed the bare skin of his back, wrinkling his nose against the smell. This close, this much contact, his own stomach was clenching in sympathy and he swallowed around the sensation. Barry’s body trembled under his fingers.

Caitlin was back in the room almost immediately, fast enough that Len had to wonder if she’d been watching their conversation from the room through that mirror—if everyone had. It didn’t matter right now though because she was moving to the other side of the bed and swapping out the fluid tray for a clean one to dump on Barry’s lap, hands already gloved. She was checking Barry’s vitals, already talking, “your circulatory system took some serious damage, Barry—”

“Eiling—”

“We know,” Len said darkly. Barry blinked at him, still dazed, and Len picked up his hand. “He’s gone for now, Barry.”
“You’re…” he blinked, then seemed to shake off some of his disorientation, searching Len’s face, “You’re here?”

Len swallowed back the feelings that tried to bottle up in him. He’d fight any person in the world who told him he couldn’t be beside Barry’s side when he was injured. Any person except Barry. No one knew how rocky they actually were, particularly when it came to Barry’s secrets, his Flash business. No one else knew that Barry might not actually want him there, amongst his family. Len had no regrets about coming, but he wouldn’t fight if Barry tried to throw him out.

“Of course I’m here,” some of his tension leech into his voice but held his expression neutral. Until Barry kicked him out, he wasn’t going anywhere.

“I…” Barry stared at him, and Len couldn’t feel too many emotions beyond a churning mix through the bleed, still dulled due to Barry’s exhaustion, “I need a shower.”

Len almost sighed and his shoulders relaxed by a fraction. Barry wasn’t kicking him out yet.

“That can wait,” came Oliver Queen’s growl from the other side of the room and Len felt Barry tense all over, eyes shooting up.

“OLIVER?!”

Len’s back had been to the door, body facing Barry, but now he turned and became aware—they had an audience. Not just the Arrow anymore, but Cisco and Felicity too, like eager puppies in the doorway, eyes slightly wide in both their faces.

“Barry,” Queen replied.

Len felt Barry almost shake under it. He was nervous and nauseated all over again. What the hell did this asshole mean to Barry to make him react like that?

“Oliver, I can expl—”

“Not now, Barry,” his voice was quieter, mollified, coming closer to the bed. Len felt his hackles rise. “We’ve got bigger fish to fry. I can make a call if you need me to, but I need to know what’s going on around here.”

Barry let out a long breath, shook his head then nodded, and before Len could wonder who the hell Queen might call, Cisco piped up instead.

“Actually we all need to swap information pretty soon here, guys.”

“Cisco,” Barry looked up, “Felicity.”

“Hi Barry,” she actually waved.

Len tightened his grip on Barry’s hand. The emotions, the nausea—didn’t any of these people have any idea how much strain Barry was under? At least Caitlin was clucking her tongue.

“This should all wait, everyone—he’s just woken up, you need to give him some space.”

“No—no I’m fine.” Of course Barry would argue. “I mean, I feel like I got hit by a truck, but I—wait—did I get hit by a truck? How did I even get back here? Oliver, did you—”

“Not me.”

Barry shouldn’t be so surprised and Len shouldn’t be so pissed about this. So easy to accept that the Arrow would save him, and not Captain Cold?

“Len—”

“I was in the neighborhood,” his voice had too much bite, and he knew Barry could feel something coming off him. He swallowed his bitterness back. He could still taste the bile from Barry’s throat in the bleed, distracting because it wasn’t usually intense enough to transfer tastes or near so much detail as it was, but he’d focused on nothing but Barry’s pain since he’d fallen unconscious, riding waves of cardiac arrest and knitting bones, and now it was harder to shut out.

“Again, guys—information swap time,” Cisco cut in and Len found himself thankful for it. “Because I dunno’ about you but I want to know what’s going with the magnetic purple-haired lady in the blank and pink suit—Miss Magenta. Oh her name is so Miss Magenta—right not the point, okaaaay. But between her and Eiling and Grodd—”

“Eddie—” Barry gasped it out and Len felt his insides clench, “he’s with Eiling, he’s—”

“He’s safe, man. At a hospital. Joe called a while ago to check in, worried about you. He’s getting Eddie’s hospital discharge papers and they’re heading here as soon as they can. And I, uh,” Cisco’s eyes flicked to Len then back, “I didn’t tell him much except that you were out cold but on the mend.”

Barry blew out a breath, body slumping forward slightly. It was a small consolation that he hadn’t let go of Len’s hand yet. “Okay—okay, that’s good. I—” he pulled his free hand through his hair.

“That was the good news.” There was a tense collective pause in the room. “The bad news is… has anyone seen Iris?”

Fuck. Len felt his own chest constrict. Of course they’d be wondering where she was in the chaos.

“Iris? She isn’t at home?” Barry’s heart sped up and he leaned toward Cisco while Len took the second to survey the room. Queen’s eyes were on Cisco but his body was facing Len and still looking ready for a fight. He was on Cisco’s right, Felicity on Cisco’s left, closer to Len. Caitlin was on the other side of the bed from Len, near Barry still.

“No bones, man. Joe said she hasn’t answered any calls and I can’t seem to ping the GPS on her phone. Joe said that before Grodd showed up at the precinct, Eddie was trying to reach her because she was, uh…panicking.” Cisco winced when he delivered it and Len kept his own face neutral. It was stupid of him not to consider Iris’s bleed with her CCPD Soulmate, but in his defense, he’d had a few other things on the go.

“I have to go.” Barry moved as if to do just that and Len immediately moved his hand from holding Barry’s to press it instead to Barry’s shoulder, stopping him from trying to stand.

“You’re in no shape—”

“You can’t stop me—”

“Leonard’s right, Barry,” Caitlin moved with purpose to press a hand on Barry’s other shoulder, “you just threw up over a cup of blood, you’re still not at 100% and—”
“I have to—what if she’s in danger—”

“I’ll send Ronnie and Martin, they’re in the cortex and they’ll be able to see more from the sky anyway.”

“Caitlin—it’s Iris.”

She stopped trying to argue and Len felt his gut twist. Iris West, Barry’s best friend. Iris West, who Barry had loved for years, long enough that everyone in his life just took it as a given that he would go and find her if she was in any danger. Suddenly, Len didn’t want to be here anymore. Within the past hour, he was already getting a pretty good damn idea why Barry had kept him so far from his life.

Barry moved to shake off Len’s hand and he tightened it on his shoulder. “Len, I’m goi—”

“She’s safe.” Len waited for Barry’s confused expression before he pulled his hand back, looking down for a second as if considering. Really, he was just biding his time. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Queen’s fingers twitch in the direction of his bow. “Iris West is safe. She’s with Lisa.”

He felt the eyes of everyone in the room on him. It made him tense. Or maybe that was just Barry, who was looking at him with an expression that was beyond betrayed, a furrow between his eyebrows, and almost-shake of his head, the way he drew back just enough to be noticeable, stomach plummeting and anxiety spiking in a way Len couldn’t miss. And Len couldn’t help but wonder if he’d immediately jump to so many conclusions if it was Oliver Queen’s little sister that Iris had been left with.

In a far more reasonable voice than Len had expected, Barry slowly, almost quietly, almost _coldly_ asked, “why the _hell_ do you know where Iris is?”

He met Barry’s gaze, met his anger, his own nostrils flaring. He wanted to tell Barry to trust him and he wanted to ask Barry if he thought Len was an idiot and he wanted to tell everyone else watching them to fuck right off. He didn’t say any of those things though.

“She isn’t hurt,” it was much softer than he intended. He tried again, harder, “I’m not stupid enough to hurt your best friend. And I _didn’t_ kidnap her. She tailed some of my Rogues and they caught her in the act,” he said with a half-uptick of his mouth, a little pride. And then, more serious, leaning forward so that Barry got it, “I talked Mardon down from doing anything stupid, Barry. No one laid a finger on her. Iris was alone with me—_talking_—when some of those tanks rolled passed us, your little friends in the military. Turns out Grodd blasted into her brain, same as he did to me when you were playing footsie with him. I take it Thawne got the same treatment from Grodd that you did the other night?”

Barry was breathing a little too fast, pushing down a wave of nausea and if Len were anyone else, he’d feel guilty. Mostly, he felt empty. Barry’s love for Iris was too strong for him to contemplate right now. “You—I can’t deal with this right now, Len. I need to know that Iris is safe.”

Len stood up. “I’ll call Lisa and get her to drop Iris off. You can see for yourself that she’s fine.” He pulled out his phone and walked passed Cisco and out the door before Barry could come up with a reply. He needed to get out of that room (but not too far, his brain told him, not too far). He needed to supply the only thing that would assuage Barry’s concern, no matter how twisted up that concern made Len. He told himself she and Barry were just friends. Iris was Bonded. Oliver Queen was Bonded.

That didn’t mean Barry didn’t love both of them, regardless. In different ways (maybe), but he did.
Barry worried about them, cared about their opinion, bought them gifts—

Lisa answered on the second ring. “Lenny! About damn time!”

“Lisa—”

“It’s the middle of the freaking night! Would you tell me what the hell is going on and what I’m supposed to be—”

“Cool it for a second, sis. Is the West girl still with you?”

“Of course she is.” Len could almost hear the way Lisa rolled her eyes.

“You two are safe somewhere?”

“Uh huh, dropped off the old lady at a hospital too, all nice and everything, now would you just—”

“I need you to drop off West at STAR Labs.” He could worry later about getting a new warehouse when Iris spilled his secrets. For a moment, part of him hated how far he was willing to bend for Barry.

There was a palpable silence from Lisa. He could hear Iris West’s voice in the background asking what he’d said.

“Did you hear m—”

“You’re at STAR Labs?” Lisa finally asked, voice far too pleased about something. “We’ll be right over.”

“Just the girl, Lise, you don’t need to—”

“Oh no, Lenny. I’ve been playing clean up after you all day. I’m gonna’ come ‘n say hi to Cisco if you’re having a party.”

He resisted the urge to run a hand over his face. Lisa’s crush on Cisco wasn’t an issue except the part where she was already with someone else, and it was cruel to tease the kid like that. “Fine, whatever, just bring West in one piece, okay?”

“Mhmm.”

**********

By the time Len was off the phone—taking an extra minute to field texts and give directions to his Rogues while he had a second of privacy—Barry looked like he’d sped-cleaned himself, hair wet, dried blood gone, dressed in standard STAR Labs clothing and on his feet, walking back into the medical room from a side door with Queen by his side. Len tried not to let his ire make it’s way onto his face, but he saw Barry’s eyes flick to him then away, regardless. Everyone was filing out of the room, Flash and Arrow in the lead, Barry shooting Len a glance as he walked past him. “Iris?”

“On her way.”

Barry nodded and caught up with Queen, and Len moved to follow until Felicity looped Len’s arm
with hers, stopping him short with an easy smile and surprising force for someone so slight. Queen didn’t even look back at them, apparently unconcerned that his Soulmate(?)—accomplice? lover? sidekick?—was arm in arm with Len.

“Walk with me to the cortex?”

He blinked. “Sure.”

“So…”

Len glanced down at her. “So?”

“I’m Felicity,” she let go of his arm and extended her hand.

“Leonard. Snart.”

“I know,” she grinned, shaking his hand with more enthusiasm than most people. The moved out of the room and into the hall, the rest of the group ahead of them, out of sight around the bend of the curved corridor. “We’ve met before. Y’know, that time you cold-blasted a train and derailed it and Cisco pretended a vacuum cleaner was a prototype cold gun?”

“He—what—”

“Hey!” Cisco called from further up the hall and Felicity winced.

“Sorry, Cisco!”

Len would have to invite Cisco around for poker sometime—apparently he was much better at bluffing than Len would’ve given him credit for. He almost felt proud, but made sure to smother it in amusement. “This must be why Barry said you don’t have much of a filter.” That thought stuck out to him, rattling away as to why her name seemed familiar, now that they were talking.

“He said that? Probably more because I can’t go a whole conversation without making a double entendre—not that I try, it just happens—I’m kind of amazing with my mouth that way—not that I’m amazing with my mouth—I mean not that I’m not amazing with my—oh my god it’s happening right now, it’s literally happening right now—”

Len fought hard not to smile. He failed. She looked mortified and there was definitely outright laughter coming from the rest of the group up the hall.

“You do realize that a person who is ‘felicitous’ is someone who has a particularly apt way with words, I hope?”

“Oh I so do not need this kind of irony in my life, okay?”

She teased Len like they were old friends and he was trying to keep up with it. It mollified some of his tension, which might have been her goal, but he suspected it was more that she just immune to most upsets at this point, if the company she kept included the Arrow, the Flash, and he could only guess who else.

Still, settling in to the cortex, everyone else seemingly taking a familiar spot, Caitlin kissing the flaming man—Firestorm—on the cheek, another, older man standing at one of the whiteboards and nodding at Len in a way that was more polite than he’d have expected—Len knew he was out of place here. As Felicity crossed the floor to stand next to Queen, Barry taking the focal point in the room, Len realized he no longer had any idea what the hell he was even doing there. Barry was fine,
or at least out of the woods. Iris and Lisa were on their way and he could leave any moment if he wanted to. But he didn’t want to.

Len didn’t want to leave. Barry loved Iris West more than he’d ever love Len, and he placed faith and trust in Queen in an easy way that Len would never earn. But even so, he didn’t want to leave. It had been a long night so far, and it was far from over, but it might be enough for now that Barry was letting Len stay.

Chapter End Notes

This fandom needed another shovel talk. Can never have too many. Not sure if the songs totally fit the but feel to the music did, even if the lyrics are aren't quite right.

Len is really not giving himself (or Barry) enough credit here, jealous and salty and a bit self-deprecating (he's tired and worn out, to be fair). And we still don’t have that many details on what went down after Barry passed out, or what’s going on now with the military, what the plan is, etc., but there's more coming on that front (eventually).

Also, this sequence of events is sort of dragging out, but no matter how long it’s been in word count, it's literally been just since earlier that afternoon since Barry was on Len's couch getting to know Mick. They’re having a long day.
Barry felt like complete shit. Well no, that was probably an insult to shit. Beyond the residual ache in every single bone of his body, he was left wondering: how was it that his Soulmate—his goddamn Soulmate—had abducted his best friend? Every time they took a step forward, they took one (or five) back. Iris had better not be hurt. Barry had no idea what he was going to do if Iris was hurt. Just the thought made him sick.

He zipped into the side-room, a bathroom that contained a corner shower stall that was mostly supposed to be for medical purposes, and turned on the shower while Len was out on the phone, needing to get the blood and other fluids off of him. He was done before the water even had time to warm up, half-dressed already when Oliver made it into the side room behind him.

He didn’t want to talk to Oliver, or even look at him. Barry needed to get his head on straight before he talked to his friend. He was bruised and tired as hell, worried beyond belief about Iris and he had no idea what to even start to think and feel about Len right now. It was too much to contemplate Len’s side of the bleed either, all the disjointed emotions that were as exhausting as his own. His speed-clean may have washed away the blood, sweat, and whatever else was clinging to his body, but it didn’t do much to wash away his concern.

“I came as soon as I saw the news, Barry.”

He nodded, tense. “Thank you.”

“Gotta’ admit, I didn’t expect there to be a telepathic gorilla wandering around this city—or to meet your Soulmate.”

“I... yeah. me and Len are kinda a work in progress, still.”

Oliver snorted and leaned against the wall, “Did you gain a new appreciation for understatement since the last time I visited Central?”

It was Barry’s turn to laugh. “Okay, we’re a mess. But it’s…” he looked down at his hands, then grabbed a sweater off the rack. “I was gonna’ tell you, you know. I was just waiting until I... until me and Len figured things out a bit.”

“And have you? Figured things out?”

Barry wished he knew. He supposed that he did, in some way. “We’re together, Oliver—me and Len are—we’re not platonic. It’s not that kind of Bond.”

Beside him, Oliver nodded. “And you were gonna’ tell me?”
“I was, I—” Barry rubbed his temples against his headache and dragged a hand over his head. “I didn’t want anyone to have to find out like this. I barely told anyone—just Caitlin and Iris and I was gonna’ tell you too, I just…”

“Thought I would be mad?”

Barry winced. “Maybe?”

Oliver sighed. “I want to be pissed, Barry, I do. But I can’t be mad about something you don’t get to control.”

“But I… we put criminals away, Ollie, it’s what we do. And here I am, Bonded to Len, and I—I know this isn’t ideal.”

“We’re not innocent either, Barry. I might be a public-servant vigilante now, but… I won’t judge Snart for his past. Only for his future.” His features got harder then, “But that doesn’t mean I trust him for a second, Bond or no Bond. I can’t believe you lied about this for so long and it worries me—I mean, you told me the day you first used your powers to help people, and you’ve never lied to me about anything since, Barry. So I hope you know I’m going to be keeping tabs on him from now on.”

Barry nodded. He didn’t like it, but it was kind of pointless to argue with Oliver—he was going to keep an eye on things whether Barry wanted him to or not, he knew.

“He’s not who you think he is.”

“I hope you’re right, Barry. I really do. But until I know that for myself… I’ll watch and worry and give him hell if he hurts you. We’re friends, I get that much at least.”

Barry smiled, just a bit, and he wanted to express what that meant to him, but he didn’t have the words. He didn’t need to either, because Oliver understood. He clapped Barry on the back and turned to toward the main med room again.

“You know Felicity’s gonna’ have a field day with this.”

“I—” Barry actually laughed, “shit. You’re right.”

**********

They finally made it to the cortex and Barry took a spot in the room where he could see everyone, including Len, who was standing beside Dr. Stein, of all people. He was still pissed, but… Len was here, and that meant something. A lot, really. So long as Iris wasn’t hurt, well, in the meantime the least Barry could do was give him the benefit the the doubt.

“Should we compare notes?” Caitlin suggested, sitting down with Ronnie standing next to her.

Barry couldn’t help but be nervous. Ronnie gave him a friendly nod. They knew. They all knew. And they were all here, all fine, no death threats being sent Len’s way or vice versa. He could do this.

“I think everyone knows the gist of things, right? Grodd, meta-gorilla, revenge—”
“Cisco filled us in,” Felicity interrupted, pointing at her and Oliver, and Barry nodded.

“Right, good, and you all know about my history with Eiling,” Barry felt a note of confusion that stopped him for a second before realizing it wasn’t his own. Len didn’t know about Eiling. Well, they could deal with that later.

“Why’s Eiling in Central, though? And who’s that woman with him?” Oliver asked, followed by Felicity.

"Frances Kane, apparently. She’s a meta-human on Eiling's payrol."

"I think you mean, Miss Magenta," Cisco chimed in with a smile. When everyone turned to look at him, he withered a bit, "like, because the magnetic powers? Magnet, magenta? Her suit is kinda pink —"

“For real, Cisco?”

“You don’t like it?”

Len spoke up, “better without the ‘Miss’. It makes her seem too young.”

“I second Leonard’s suggestion,” Dr. Stein offered, to Barry’s bemusement.

Cisco pointed at Len with a pleased expression. “I like this, someone else who appreciates how to make a good name.” Then he pointed to himself and Dr. Stein, “our ranks are growing.”

Len snorted and Barry couldn’t decide how that made him feel. Cisco and Len, Len and Stein, and even Caitlin. Everyone just... accepting this.

“Yeah well whatever we’re calling her, we’ve got a problem,” Barry brought the conversation back around, stepping forward off the table he was leaning against. “She’s unstable, and Eiling has her convinced I’m the reason she’s a Spoiled Ballot.”

Caitlin and Felicity gasped and Cisco’s mouth dropped open; Oliver didn’t do more than tilt in his head in what could have been a polite way, and Barry didn’t have a chance to look around at anyone else’s reactions before Caitlin was asking questions.

“What on earth do you mean, Barry? How could something like that be your fault? How would she even know?”

“Her Soulmate died before they had a chance to commune—guess she found out who it was post-mortem.” Barry was stalling for time and he knew it from Cisco’s impatient ‘get on with it’ gesture. “Her Soulmate was Bette.”

“Oh Barry—”

“That mother-fu—”

“Who’s Bette?” Oliver cut off Caitlin and Cisco, Caitlin half-standing.

Barry glared at the floor. “She was a friend. Eiling killed her. And now—now he wants to weaponize other meta-humans.”

“Weaponize them how?” Oliver directed his full attention to Barry.

“Capture them, militarize them, and unleash them on his enemies.”
“Like the Suicide Squad!” Felicity snapped. At everyone’s confusion, she elaborated, “that’s what ARGUS does with its, ah, more ‘unique’ criminals.”

Oliver stepped off the wall and titled his head, “ARGUS can handle its Assets, clearly the military can’t. Amanda Waller must be furious that Eiling got the go-ahead with this program.”

Barry nodded, ignoring the weird surprised and calculated emotions coming off Len. “With Bette she was already a soldier. With Kane… I don’t know. But he wants to round up criminal metas in Central too—he’s already picked up Nimbus. And he wanted me to help him.” For a second, he could taste blood stronger in his mouth at the memory, and he felt Len’s whole body tense. “I wouldn’t do it. After what he’s done,” Barry looked at Dr. Stein, then at Caitlin and Ronnie, “and after he killed Bette, I’d never help him do to other people what he did to her. What he’s doing to Kane.”

“Kane isn’t your concern, Barry,” Len drawled, causing Barry to stop up short and turn to him. “She tried to pull the blood out of your body.”

“I—look, I know. I’m not saying that we go easy on her. But Eiling’s the real threat, okay? He only gave her the all-clear to attack me after I refused to help him.”

A high, female voice came from the entrance of the room, “refused to help him with what?”

“IRIS!” Barry whipped around and saw her, standing there with a curious expression that turned to a smile when their eyes met and he was in front of her in a blink, hands on her face, her shoulders—

“Are you okay?”

She laughed, tinkling and unafraid and he felt his heart loosen like someone had turned a valve to release the pressure. “I’m fine, Barry—and from what I just heard, I can’t say the same about you. What I saw on the news, I was so worried—”

She reached up and took his hands and he shook his head, “I was fine—Len and Firestorm made sure of it and I—your wrists—” he looked down at their hands then snatched up her arms, dark bruises along the skin and his whole body clenched—whole body except his hands, which were gentle on her wrists.

“I said I’m fine, Barry—I got a little tied up, hazard of the job, and some of us don’t heal the way you do,” she tilted her head to catch his eye, to make sure he got that she was fine, he knew, but she wasn’t fine. She was hurt, she was bruised and he was aching with that knowledge.

He turned his gaze to Len, “you tied her up?”

Len didn’t say anything and Barry felt his anger grow. He didn’t care that he was making a scene, that they were in a cortex full of people awkwardly shifting behind him, because this was going to be resolved and it was going to be resolved n—

“It wasn’t him, Barry!” Iris pulled his attention back to her, shaking her head at him, pulling her wrists away with an earnest expression. “It was Mardon, okay? The first thing Leonard did when he saw me was untie me. I’m fine.”

“I…” he nodded, swallowed. He needed a thousand hours of sleep. Iris was hurt. Iris was fine. Len hadn’t hurt her. But indirectly, he had. He’d also saved her. And she was vouching for him. Len was also pissed, in the bleed, but Barry couldn’t worry about that right now. “Okay. I’m sorry, Iris, that you got wrapped up into…” he didn’t quite know, exactly.
“Barry, I was chasing a lead, a story—this had nothing to do with you.”

“I—”

“Now that’s that’s all cleared up,” Lisa Snart’s voice was confident and annoyed all at once as she moved into the center of the room, breezing past Barry with a slight glare before she was all smiles. Barry hadn’t even noticed her enter with Iris but turned to watch her, “why don’t we hear more about how the military wants the Flash’s help, hmm?”

She smiled at Barry prettily and moved to stand by Cisco instead of Len. Cisco shifted closer, slightly, and Barry almost scowled at her. Wasn’t she dating some guy named Ross?

"Hello, Cisco,” she practically purred.

“Wait a second,” said Iris, moving to look at everyone in the room, eyes stopping with eyebrows raised at Oliver for a moment before looking back at Barry, “where’s my dad? And Eddie?”

“They’re okay—Eddie’s at a hospital and they’re on their way right—”

“Now,” came the smiling voice of Joe West just turning into the cortex. “Wow it’s like a party in he —”

“Iris!”

“Eddie!”

Iris launched herself into Eddie’s arms without hesitation and they hugged each other so tight that Barry had to look away. He could hear them murmuring about how worried they’d been about one another and he shared his typical put-on glance with Joe that they reserved for whenever Iris and Eddie were being affectionate to the point of discomfort. But then Joe was looking around, taking in the room, the plethora of people there and Barry was tensing because Len was tensing, and he could almost feel the moment that Joe’s eyes landed on Len, then flicked to Lisa, then to Oliver and Felicity again then back to Len.

Iris and Eddie were letting go of one another with smiles that turned Barry’s stomach to a lead weight. Joe was already talking.

“Is someone gonna’ explain to me what the hell is going on here. Why is the Arrow—”

“Green Arrow—” Felicity cut in, and Joe gave her a quelling looking. “Right, sorry.” She stepped back.

“Why is the Green Arrow here and what the hell are Leonard and Lisa Snart doing in this room?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Barry saw Cisco step away from Lisa’s side, slightly, looking guilty. No one else moved. Barry could feel every eye on him. The second dragged on too long. He swallowed, stared at Joe, who stared at him, waiting. And then he felt, in the bleed, that Len was about to lie. He couldn’t even say exactly what that felt like, except that it felt like a momentary uptick in his heartbeat, a half-second of determination but too calculated, not anxious enough but some, and—

“Joe,” Barry was done lying. “Can we talk in private?”

Joe’s eyebrows shot up and he glanced before nodding, “uh huh.”

“Len—ah,” Barry almost tripped over his name, here in front of Joe. It all felt surreal and too real at
“Out with it, Barr—I’m sure there’s a reason you invited this criminal to chat with us.”

They were in the loading bay—the first place Barry could think of without cameras. He look at Joe—his adoptive father, the man who raised him and who he hadn’t successfully kept a secret from in fourteen years, until now—and felt his stomach sink. He had to get through the next few minutes, no matter how painful he knew they were going to be.

“Joe… I—there’s something I haven’t—there’s… look I don’t even know how to say this, it’s kind of a mess and I know I should’ve told you but—” he drew in a deep breath, going for broke, heart beating too hard “—Len is my Soulmate.”

A pin could drop in the silence that followed. It was only seconds long but it felt like an hour to Barry. He forced his brain to slow down, to suppress his fight and flight response, his urge to speed up and run.

“Come again?”

“Len—he—we’re Soulmates.”

Len moved closer, to stand at his side. “It’s true, Detective.”

Joe’s face was more shocked than Barry had maybe ever seen it, except for when he’d revealed he had super powers. Shocked didn’t really cut it. Horrified. Alarmed. Slack and disbelieving. “There is no way—that’s not—you two cannot be Soulmates.”

“There is and we are.”

“Shut up, Snart. Barry—”

“Don’t—look, Joe,” Barry stepped forward, hoping against hope that Joe wasn’t going to overreact. “Me and Len are Soulmates.”

“Son, tell me this is some kind of joke.” He looked almost hopeful for a second, eyes on Barry like this was all some awful joke and he’d happily accept the bad punch line if it was.

“No, Joe, this is—I know it’s hard to believe, okay—when I Bonded with him I barely believed it myself, but it’s true—”

“And when was that?”

“What?”

“When did you Bond with him?” Joe ground out each word like they were forced from him, like he needed something to hold on to. He looked shaky and Barry didn't really blame him.

He swallowed. “The day of his museum heist.”

Barry watched Joe put the pieces together in his mind, things clicking into place about that day, that
afternoon—“we couldn’t get a hold of you, and that’s why he came here, why you wanted to talk in private—”

“Yes—yes, and look, I can explain—”

“Oh you’re gonna’ explain alright—explain why the HELL you didn’t tell me that Leonard Snart is your SOULMATE for MONTHS??!”

“Joe, I—”

Len practically growled at Barry’s side, “He doesn’t owe you anything, West. Maybe if you spent more time communicating with your kids instead of trying to control them—”

“What did you just say to me?” Joe’s voice was a sharp and angry snap and he raised a finger toward Len that Barry was only happy wasn’t a gun instead, painfully reminded of the last time these two were at STAR Labs together.

“Len, please, just please stay out of this?”

“How dare you try’n tell me how to raise my kids, Snart. I don’t give a damn if you are Bonded to him—so help me I will put a bullet in your—”

“JOE! That’s my Soulmate, okay? You won’t be putting a bullet anywhere—” so much for no guns or death threats.

“You tell him that? Because last I remember he’s the one who froze my leg so bad I was off it for weeks—”

“You shot first, West,” Len snarled and Barry’s head started to pound.

“GUYS! Come on!” Barry sped between them, shaking his head, “no one is shooting anyone. Len, stop antagonizing Joe. Joe,” he faced his adoptive father, throat tight. “Look, I know you’re mad; I get that. But this…I needed time.”

“Time? Time? For what, Barry—we are family!” He looked between Barry and Len, confused and hurt, and then zeroed in on Barry, “can we talk in private, at least?”

“Anything you have to say to me about this you can say in front of Len.” It came out braver than he felt. He’d been rehearsing it in his head on the walk down the corridor for this exact reason.

“Oh you sure about that? Because there’s things I wanna’ know, Barry, like how he convinced you to lie to your family about being Bonded and whether or n—”

“Len didn’t ask me to lie about this—” Barry had to interrupt and Len was practically growling again beside him, except he didn't really growl, he just got very still and ready for action and it was almost worse.

“Oh he just manipulated you to lie about it instead.”

“No—no, God, if anything he pushed me to come clean!”

Joe raised his eyebrows like he didn’t believe it for a second and then his face screwed up like he was in pain, whole body moving as he shook his head, arm pointing at Len, “Don’t you see what he’s doing to you, Barry? Why else would you lie to us?”

“Because I needed to figure it out for myself, Joe!” Barry stepped back and pulled a hand over his
face, exhausted and restless at once, “I had no idea what to think when we first Bonded and I didn’t want anyone else telling me what to think or feel.”

“To think or feel? Barry that man—” he pointed straight at Len, who was bristling but silent, “—is a criminal! You should know exactly how to feel! He’s tried to kill you, kidnapped and hurt your friends, hurt your family and endangered your colleagues and some of that is since you Bonded with him! Please tell me you know well enough not to actually trust this guy again?”

“It’s not that simple, Joe,” Barry fought against the tears, arms out imploringly. “You know it’s not that simple.”

“Barry, oh no no no, Barry don’t tell you ‘n Snart are…” he took a step back and looked between Barry and Len, head shaking in renewed disbelief, “you two aren’t together?”

Barry’s hands shook and he balled them into fists. Len stepped forward put a hand on the small of his back, either as support or an answer to Joe, he wasn’t sure.

“Yes,” his own voice sounded shaky, “we are.”

“That’s insane!”

“It’s not—”

“He’s a killer!”

“I kn—”

“Barry you’re not even—” Barry’s head snapped up and Joe changed mid-sentence, “Son, Snart is almost my age!”

He almost was, it was only four or five years out.

“He’s not—”

“Barry he is using you—”

“Joe—”

“—manipulating you and he will hurt you and abuse y—”

Len’s anger was blinding. He stepped past Barry before he registered it as Joe was still speaking, getting straight into Joe’s face, hands on his jacket to haul him close, voice like cracking ice, angrier than Barry had ever heard him, loud and restrained at once—“Do not ever accuse me of doing that to my Soulmate, West.”

Chills went down Barry’s spine and he reached forward but Joe was already responding, “GET YOUR HANDS OFF ‘F ME, SNART!” He was reaching forward to do maximum damage and Barry whipped between them, pulling them off one another and putting them ten feet apart, stopping between them, panting only because he was on edge and terrified and pissed.

“STOP IT! BOTH OF YOU!”

They both did. Barry could feel Len’s simmering rage and it was choking up his own throat, and could see the same emotions on Joe’s face.

“Do not accuse me of hurting Barry, West. You should know that I would never.”
“Oh I should now, huh? And why should I know that? These things have cycles, Snart!”

Barry shook. Joe was a cop, had been a cop in Central for years—Joe had probably known Len’s father. Joe knew.

“I would never—”

“Len would never hurt me, Joe.” He turned to Joe when he said it, face on, resisting the urge to look back at Len, to comfort him.

“Oh, you mean like he hasn’t hurt you before? Like he hasn’t hurt every person you care about?” Barry swallowed. “Not—not like you’re talking about. Len isn’t like that.”

Joe shook his head, “Do you hear yourself? That man is a monster—he is not supposed to be your lover!” Out of the corner of his eye, Barry saw Len take a threatening half step forward and he put out his arm to stop him from doing something stupid.

“You wanna’ know why I lied about this Joe? Because I knew you’d react like this—I knew you’d hate this no matter what I said or did.”

Joe was shaking his head, swallowing back some of the anger from his response, beseeching and concerned, “Of course I’d react like this! He’s Leonard Snart for chrissakes! Do you have any idea what the hell you’re doin’? This is your life, Barry.”

“Joe…”

Joe looked like he was forcing himself to calm down, stepped back, breathed deep. “You taking up with this criminal is gonna’ have consequences, Barry, and not the kind you can just zip away from when you want to. You need to seriously consider if this is the kind of relationship you want to be in.”

“Len is my Soulmate, Joe.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to be with him!”

“I’m Bonded to him! We’re not gonna’ live our lives as enemies just because we got off on the wrong foot!”

“More like a hundred wrong feet!”

“That doesn’t make him evil!”

“You know he’s a criminal, and a killer. And he will kill again. And what then, Barry?”

“Joe… we’ve killed people too. We don’t mean to, or we do it in self-defense, but none of us—not you or me or Caitlin or Cisco—no one I know has perfectly clean hands anymore. We've imprisoned people and put them in danger and we—we just do the best that we can do. I can’t ask for more than that from Len—he won’t kill any innocent people now, and I—”

“How can you set the bar so low, Barry? Not murdering people innocent people? How can you be so blind? Just because he’s your Soulmate doesn't mean that he’s a good person!”

“He’s a good person because he’s a good person, not because he’s my Soulmate.”

“Did you actually just call Leonard Snart a good person? Because Barr, this is dangerous, he’s got
you wrapped around his little finger like—"

Len’s anger was quick but Barry was quicker. “Don’t, Joe. Don’t finish that sentence. I trust Len, okay? And I know him a lot better than you so don’t tell me that I—“

“How can you trust this man—him, of all people!—after everything he’s done!!”

Barry erupted, he needed Joe to understand— “because I HAVE TO! I don’t even get a choice in trusting him, Joe! There is a bleed, a Bond—a connection that I don’t get to fight. And I have had to trust him countless times since we Bonded—I had to trust him not to use our Bond against me, trust him not reveal my identity, not to—" he bit his tongue. Hurt Iris. Barry had had to trust that Len hadn’t hurt Iris. Joe did not need that fuel right now. But fuck, lying about that, Barry couldn’t do that, not about this. He was suddenly torn, tense, but Joe took his struggle as an opening.

“Barry, tell me and tell me now, do you love him?”

Barry felt himself go cold, shocked, brain temporarily paralyzed as he tried to force words out his throat, but they were stuck. “I—” The silence dragged a second too long.

Beside him, Len spoke up, voice an almost odd kind of calm considering what Barry could feel coming through the bleed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“The hell it doesn’t!”

“If Barry loves me or doesn’t, nothing changes that we’re Soulmates—”

“Soulmate Bonds come in all shapes and sizes, Snart—it ain’t one size fits all. Right now Barry’s forcing himself to try and make this happy romantic story because that’s what he thinks he wants from his Soulmate—”

“Joe!”

“—but mark my words, he is not meant to be with some criminal killer who wouldn’t give a damn if he lived or died.”

“That is the last time—” Len was stepping forward heedless of Barry’s outstretched arm, eerie “—that you insinuate that I do not care about Barry’s wellbeing because in case you haven’t heard, I was the one who dragged his body out of the hands of that twisted General.”

“I don’t care if you save him a hundred times over, Snart—the only reason Barry’s by your side right now is because he thinks he has to be.”

“That’s not true, Joe,” Barry’s voice sounded hollow to his own ears, affected by Joe’s words but Joe was wrong. “You’re wrong. I’m not with Len out of some sick sense of obligation to my Bond.” He shook his head, “You honestly think I would do that—that I could do that? I know Len has a spotty history—I know better than anyone—but it’s my choice to be with him and I’m not,” he tried not to let the tears escape, “I’m not gonna’ let you talk me down from this.”

Joe looked lost, hurt, scared, eyebrows strained and shaking his head, stepped around Len and ignoring him entirely. “Barry listen to the way you are talking, son. ‘Talk you down’ like it’s some challenge or some type of—I don’t even—dare, maybe. Like you dared yourself or pushed yourself into trying to make it work with Snart. Son, you don’t have to do this.”

Barry ached, and shook, but he couldn’t—he couldn’t—“Joe I’m… I’m with Len, okay? That’s not changing. We’re together.”
Joe shook his head and Barry didn’t even know how to read his expression anymore. Disgusted, maybe. “Then I’m outta’ here. I’m not gonna’ stand around and watch my kid get wrapped up in some monster. **He,** Joe pointed a finger at Len, “is not welcome under my roof. Ever.”

Barry nodded, stone in his throat, and Joe left the room without a glance back.

As soon as he was gone, Barry’s attempt at a collected front broke down, tears rolling down his cheeks. “**Fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK**—” He pulled his hair and tried to choke back the sobs and Len’s arms were around him in and instant. It was all Barry could do to clutch to him, fists tight in Len’s sweater along his back. “I d-don’t, I c-can’t f-fix this—I can’t f-fix—”

“Ssshh, it’s okay,” Len was rubbing circles in his back, soothing as Barry trembled. “It’s okay.”

“H-he’s g-gonna’ h-hate—”

“He’d never hate you, Barry,” Len’s voice was soothing and close to his ear, arms warm. “Me, yes. But never you.”

Barry swallowed back another sob, too exhausted to be embarrassed, hiding his face in Len’s shoulder. They stayed for that way for minutes at least, Barry reigning in his emotions quick but still soaking up Len’s comfort. After he was calm again, he couldn’t help but notice that Len smelled like smoke and Barry almost choked on a wry laugh. He was still worn out, and Len was worn out, and it was almost hard to believe that just hours ago they’d been on the streets facing off against Grodd and Kane and Eiling, news cameras overhead and sirens blaring, fires and people screaming. It felt a world away.

They stayed embraced for another minute until Barry’s breathing was even again and he pulled back, stomach tight as he replayed the conversation with Joe in his head. “I’m sorry.”

Len’s palm cupped his cheek and he thumbed over the dried tear tracks. “No need to apologize, kid. Nothing wrong with crying.”

“No, I mean, about…” he exhaled a breath that trembled.

“About West?”

“About what I couldn’t say.” He looked down at Len’s chest. Instead of responding, Len tilted Barry’s chin back up and Barry closed his eyes almost on instinct, letting Len kiss him gently, softly.

“I meant it, Barry,” he pulled back to murmur. “It doesn’t matter.”

Barry shook his head, pulling back. “Don’t lie to me, Len. I can feel it.”

“I’m not lying.” He was.

“Do you…” Barry swallowed. It wasn’t right to ask. He didn’t even want to know.

Len paused, was slow to respond. “When I was still a kid, one lesson I learned was to never tell people I loved them, to love them at all, because that was a sign of weakness. And I almost believed it. So when I left my home, I told myself there would only be two people in the world I ever let matter to me—my sister, and my Soulmate.”

Barry shook. It sounded… fuck, it sounded awful. The hollow tone to Len’s voice made it sound awful.
“I love you, Barry.”

Barry’s stomach twisted harder, tighter. Len had said as much in Initial Communion—that he would love Barry. He just hadn’t brought it up since then, and Barry now understood why—all the emotional guards dropped during something like IC. Then, it was a promise. But now, after everything he’d done, they’d both done… how could this really be love? It wasn’t—it was nothing like what Barry had pictured, had known love to be. Love wasn't supposed to hurt.

“Guess that’s enough of an answer.”

“I’m sorry.” It sounded so cheap.

He wished he had the words to explain, but something behind Len’s eyes got colder, something in his chest got harder. “Don’t be. You don’t love me, not even sure you like me.” Barry felt his stomach drop. And Len stepped forward into his space again, “But here’s the thing—it doesn’t matter. Because no matter how much you love Iris West, or Oliver Queen, and no matter how right West might be and even if this bleed is the only thing that keeps you by my side—one of that changes the simple fact. You belong to me.”

A second later he was kissing Barry, so much harder than a few minutes ago, pulling him in by the jaw, both hands framing his face and Barry’s heart hammered in his chest. A fierce few seconds later, Barry’s brain still trying to catch up to what Len had said, to the kiss, Len pulled back by an inch, eyes dark and angry, possessive and raw. “You belong to me, Barry Allen.”

He kissed Barry deeply and Barry shuddered, body and brain conflicted, aching. He couldn’t deny the way the words sent heat pooling inside him, whole system overloaded from everything the evening had thrown at him. His sense seemed to short-circuit, letting Len’s emotions fill him instead, kissing back, hands instinctively moving to Len’s waist, unable to stop himself from chasing skin, up and under Len’s shirts, fingers skirting his sides, his Mark. Barry could feel Len’s fear, his jealousy and anger tight and hard. He wanted to quench it, he wanted…

“Barry…” Len pulled back enough to breathe and Barry couldn’t handle the loss, wanting to chase his lips. He didn’t know how to feel, brain like cotton balls but his whole body buzzing.

“Len, please, I—”

“I don’t need lies, Barry,” Len whispered against his lips. “This is enough,” he stole a kiss, and his lips were so soft, and Barry had no idea what lies Len thought he was going to tell.

“I belong to you.” Barry swallowed after the words, suppressing a tremor until it turned into a shiver. Len’s hands convulsed on Barry’s jaw and Barry pressed his advantage, leaning forward to bridge the space between them, another kiss, whispering into it. “I belong to you.” He felt the hot tight sensations deep in Len’s gut, low and primordial, the flair inside his chest. Len kissed him back, tongue pressing into his mouth, bringing up a hand to card into Barry’s hair and he gasped into the kiss when Len pulled on it, more aggression now and Barry was almost drunk on it, on Len.

“To me,” Len pressed their bodies together.

“I’m yours, Len,” he let Len kiss him, tongues sliding together, feeling charged all over. They were too tired to go beyond this but this was enough. Len’s kisses were fathomless, the hand in his hair tight, the hand moving down to the side and back of his neck to hold him close, thumb on Barry’s jaw, and Barry felt his body stir, a deep part of him aching to wonder what it might feel like if Len’s hand was in a different position on his neck, wrapped around it, what it would feel like to trust Len with his life, his pleasure, for Len to know it, to feel it, to squeeze if it pleased him, to hold and to
“Fuck, Barry.”

Len’s voice was raw and Barry understood. He knew—not the time, not the place, not enough energy for this shit, for the heat coursing through him, he knew. But he also didn’t have energy to suppress those thoughts, wanting to kiss, to be claimed, but Len pulled back again, pressed their foreheads together and his breathing was ragged when he said, “fuck, Barry, you—you almost died.”

And suddenly it clicked, why he could feel fear coursing through Len since the moment he’d woken up, why he was so on edge, a live wire. “I didn’t,” Barry whispered, and freed one of his hands from Len’s shirt to take his hand from Barry’s hair and press it over his heart, “still beating.”

Len nodded with his forehead against Barry’s, hand still holding the back of his neck, and they both brought in a shaky breath. He couldn’t help but lean forward and whisper “yours” again before kissing Len, slower now but no less deep, hands wrapping around and up Len’s back again. He needed this. They needed this, alive and affirming it, alive and—the past few hours had been hell and Barry had almost died and Len had saved him and Len thought Barry didn’t even like him and he needed to prove, needed to show—

“Oh! Ahh!”

Barry and Len broke apart, Barry with the back of his hand covering his mouth on instinct, feeling his cheeks flare with heat. “Felicity!”

Her eyes were like saucers and then she laughed, “you know, for all the time people spend shirtless at the Arrow Foundry, it’s actually amazing this is the first time I’ve walked in on people actively making out. Gotta’ say, I’m not complaining.”

Barry choked on air.

“I mean! About the not walking in on people, not about the walking in on this—not that this wasn’t—okay I am going to stop while I’m ahead.”

Len just looked faintly amused and suddenly cool as a cucumber. Barry resisted the urge to kick his shin in spite, still flustered. “What were you saying about Joe?”

“Oh! Ah, he left a few minutes ago. Taking it that things didn’t go so well? Eddie and Iris are ready to head out too, but Iris said she wanted to talk to you before she leaves.”

Barry stepped away from Len, trying to keep the heat from his cheeks. “Sure, uh, where is she?”

“Oh,” Felicity pushed her two index fingers together, “I actually meant Leonard. Iris wants to talk to Leonard. But they’re waiting for you back in the cortex—the military released a statement, and Eiling’ll be on the six am news.”

Barry blinked, surprised, and he saw Len’s eyebrows go up, the feeling shared by him. But Len recovered faster, nodding, “lead the way.”

He followed Felicity out and Barry had a moment alone to wonder how this was honestly his life. Then, fingers touching his lips for just a second, pushing aside his worry about Joe and about Iris and Len because there wasn’t much else he could do, he headed back to the cortex.
I had originally written this as them going home and crashing for a few hours, but ehhhhhh, why let ‘em sleep? No rest for the wicked.

Also... in Joe's defense (words I never thought I would write), he's terrified for his son. If you've seen 2x03 and know his own romantic past, he's worried about his son in a toxic relationship, and he's worried and scared that Barry's being manipulated (especially after what happened with Eobard). He's not reacting well and what he's doing is counter-productive to his goals if he wants to make sure Barry is okay, but... he hasn't slept and his partner almost died (again), and he didn't know where his daughter was until a few minutes ago and his adopted son almost died and now this... he's had a long night.

No but seriously, it was a goal of mine from a writing standpoint to have Barry and Len together with an authentic sense of commitment and trust (even if Barry is still a bit frustrated at himself for trusting Len, having that trust be real) before they got to this scene. Because in this scene, Joe is reflecting back so many of the same fears that Barry had during Initial Communion, and now he's able to tell Joe (tell his fears) that no, this is okay, this is good, he wants this. And he's able to mean it.

Also with respect to IC parallels (this chapter is full of them, I won't list them all), Barry was afraid of being seen as an object or a possession by Len in the beginning, and yet here when Len says "you belong to me", Barry welcomes the sentiment, understanding better now who Len is and what that means to him. It scares him a bit, that he welcomes it, that he responds to it, but the statement itself doesn't scare him.

So yeah... sorry not-sorry for the angst.
Len leaned against the wall while Barry and his friends watched the video Felicity had apparently made of Len rescuing Barry from the military. He’d wondered about that, sure it hadn’t been in view of any news cameras, but now it made sense—she’d hacked the military feed directly, getting their on-the-ground footage. It didn’t paint a particularly pretty picture, but Len was happy not to have to recount any of the details verbally.

He could still remember the feel of his whole body set to flame, feeling Barry’s screams in his own throat as the bleed flared to life, nabbing through to him like a broadband connection. He was on his bike anyway, not far away, seconds to speed back through the alley system, to burst through a line of confused soldiers and drop his bike, whipping in with cold gun blazing. He knew it had happened fast, but the time on the video told him that from the moment he appeared to when he was carting Barry out of that building was seconds. He’d blasted Kane on sight, pretty sure her suit absorbed most of it, not even knowing who the General was but she fell back into him and then Barry was in his arms. Len may have had to ice a few soldiers on his retreat, getting Barry situated on his bike, but Firestorm showed up right after that and blasted fire at anyone trying to pursue Len and he hadn’t looked back.

They watched the footage three times. Len stayed back, leaning against one of the consoles, and tried to ignore the glances being shot his way. Instead, his mind kept replaying his conversation with Iris, looking for a loophole and not finding one. I’m not gonna’ tell Barry, or my dad, about your Rogues’ Den.

It seemed too good to be true, but at the same time, he knew it for what it was. Gratitude, an olive branch. She’d thanked him for saving Barry, for helping so many people in his neighborhood steer clear of Grodd and Kane before the military rolled in to help, for keeping her safe and shielding her from flying debris that had broken through the windows of his bar.

He’d told her not to mention it—really, don’t. I don’t need anyone getting the wrong idea about me.

He wasn’t a hero, and the last thing he wanted was Cisco trying to change his alias to Citizen Cold or something. All he did was protect his own, and called in a few Rogues to help make it happen. Hartley and Shawna didn’t mind evacuating people and Bivolo had no issue keeping an eye on the warehouse and making sure no soldiers started to snoop too much. Mick was over in Keystone and Len let Shawna boss Mark around.

“Coffee?”

Len glanced to the side at the man—Martin Stein—who he’d met earlier. Apparently, he was the other half of the weird fusion that was Caitlin’s Soulmate, which meant it was really him who covered Len’s ass across the city on his way back to the lab. For that alone, Len decided he didn’t
mind the guy.

“I’d love one.”

Stein nodded and poured Len a mug from the pot of coffee he was carrying around. “I’m not as used to all-nighters as I was when I was a grad student.”

Len mmm’d and sipped the heavenly liquid. The conversation between the others was more focused on Kane’s powers, Grodd, and the General than it was on Len and he made small talk with Martin to stay out of it. The other man was a bit on the outskirts of this group too, it seemed, though admittedly more welcome than Len and Lisa, who was paying rapt attention to the discussions across the room.

When a siren blipped from one of the computers a few minutes later, Len wasn’t really surprised, at this point. Felicity whipped over to it before Cisco got a chance, half a grin on her face as she sat in front of the terminal, though it slid off when she pulled up a security alert to the main screen.

“Ah—oh—it looks like General Eiling wasn’t content with just poaching great apes so far tonight.”

The air went out of the room. On the security feed, General Eiling was coming up the elevator. No sign of his crazy sidekick. Maybe she was dead. Len could always hope.

“You need better security for this place,” Queen growled, and for once Len was inclined to agree. He knew first hand how easy it was to get in here. Beside him, he noticed that Stein had gone white as a sheet, and Ronnie had taken a step closer to him.

Barry was already walking toward the entrance, “I’ll take care of this.”

“Don’t you dare, kid,” Len dropped his coffee onto one of the desks, “I’ve already peeled you off pavement enough for one night.”

“Snart’s right, Barry. We can see what Eiling wants.”

Len decided that being in agreement with Queen was already overrated; it agitated him. He didn’t have much time to ponder about it.

“Mr. Allen.”

He also decided that he didn’t like the sound of General Eiling’s voice. He hadn’t actually had a chance to hear it, earlier. The General came into the room with a rigid posture and swagger both—an impressive combination that set Len’s teeth on edge—arm in a sling and the rest of his frost bite covered up under fresh military-issue clothing.

“General Eiling.” Barry called, standing in the center of the room, “How’s Private Kane doing?”

Len wasn’t really used to this. He was used to being the one in charge, in control. But the attention of everyone in the room, the deference—even Queen’s—was on Barry. The attention of everyone except Eiling, who glanced around at each of them in turn before looking back at the speedster.

“Staff Sargent Kane, actually.”

The General’s eyes flicked to Len then back to Barry, and Len’s fingers itched toward his gun. He’d brought it back to the cortex with him after talking with Iris but didn’t have his holster on.

“Sorry, I’m not used to asking about rank from the people who try to murder me.”

Len didn’t bother to hide his smirk at Barry’s sass, eyes narrowing on the General.
“Sargent Kane got carried away. I hope you’re aware that your life wasn’t in any actual danger. You and I have an understanding, Allen.”

Barry scoffed and crossed his arms. “Oh do we? Is that why you let her almost kill me for something that you did?”

“Kane’s aware of the full circumstances surrounding Bette Sans Souci’s death—”

Barry uncrossed his arms and stepped forward, and Len could feel tight anger coursing through him, “somehow I doubt that.”

At some point, Len was going to have to ask Barry about his prior run-ins with the military, as there were a few pages—more like books—full of information he felt he was still missing.

“Both of us are and always have been on the same page, Allen, you proved that tonight by helping us recapture Grodd. We all want what’s best for the citizens of Central City.”

“No, we don’t. You just want an army of superhuman soldiers at your beck and call, Eiling.”

Eiling’s eyes flicked around the room again and he shifted his posture, leaning forward ever so slightly.

“And you’ve gathered yourself a little army of your own I see, Flash. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you about jurisdictions in matters such as these. We can still be on friendly terms though, Allen. Join me this morning in our press conference as the Flash. We’re going to address this city and the problems its facing. It would give citizens some comfort if the first metahumans they see on TV is a ‘hero’ like yourself.”

“You think I’ll join on you the news? Are you for real, Eiling?” Barry was shaking his head, incredulous. “No. No. I can’t believe you’d even ask.”

“This isn’t about you or me, Mr. Allen—it’s about the citizens of this city—”

“I’m not pretending the Flash agrees with what you’re doing when I don’t!”

Eiling breathed in deep and Len readied himself for a fight. But the man just nodded. “I hope you realize your little reindeer games with your friends and this lab can’t last, Allen. This lab belongs to the military by the end of this week if I have a say in it. With metahumans in the public eye and my task force as the first point of contacts for these freaks, the days of the Flash as a solo operation in Central City are numbered.”

“We’ll see about that, Eiling.”

“We will, Flash. Have a good rest of your morning; I have a press conference to get to.” He glanced around and nodded at everyone, gaze lingering on a few people before he left.

Beside him, Stein’s body seemed to deflate. He let out a long breath and slumped against the wall.

“You okay?” Ronnie came over immediately, and Len felt like he was infringing just by being there, Caitlin coming closer, concern written on her features.

“Fine, I’m fine,” Stein started to wave them off, “I won’t let Eiling and his goons scare me.”

“Being triggered isn’t just being scared, Martin,” Caitlin started, and Len’s curiosity grew alongside his discomfort.
“Yes yes, I’m aware, Caitlin, but I’m fine. If it’s all the same to you, we’ll just, ah, focus on the task at hand, shall we?”

“We can’t let Eiling get his way,” Barry’s voice was… strong. Len looked at him, and couldn’t help the way his chest felt tight. Just a few hours ago Barry was half-dead and unconscious and now he was standing like… well, like some kind of actual hero, if such a thing could really even exist.

“I’ll call Laurel,” Queen stepped up beside him, and the image in Len’s mind withered. “See if there’s any legal recourse we can use to slow them from getting this lab.”

“Who’s Laurel?” Lisa asked, and Len was a little glad for it. It was getting hard to keep up with all the new names and faces—Barry’s operation was a lot broader than he’d ever calculated.

“Just a friend, a badass—lawyer friend,” Cisco’s voice changed quick at a sharp glance from Queen, even as Felicity pulled out her phone and Barry just sighed and shook his head. Len frowned. Somehow, working with the good guys was going to make him more tense than working alongside criminals ever had.

**********

“You need to sleep.”

“What I need is a decent shower.”

They were back at Len’s place and the exhaustion was weighing on them both. Lisa had given them a ride—Len was in no mood to ride his bike by this time of the morning—after she’d said a warm goodbye to Cisco. There may have been cheek-kissing involved. Len resolved not to butt in to her business on that front.

“You’ll pass out on your feet in the shower.”

At least Len didn’t have to worry about feeding him too, since they’d had breakfast watching Eiling on the news—Eiling telling the whole goddamn world about meta-humans. And that might’ve been okay, considering the world was catching on anyway, with the Flash and the news stories over the last year, but it wasn’t just meta-humans. Flash or no Flash present, the General had been all too happy to field questions saying that the Flash had worked with the military on this operation and was expected to work with them in the future, and had been invited to join the meta-human task force the military was creating to help catch "security risks". Barry had yelled at the screen at that, seething, but there wasn’t much he could do. It didn’t help that Eiling highlighted that the acquisition of STAR Labs was to research meta-humans. Barry had almost gagged at the screen and that’s when it had been time to go.

“Then shower with me. You need one too, you smell like smoke still.”

Len blinked. They were in his house now—walking over the bloody patch on the carpet in the living room, from cracked skin over knuckles and broken glass. It felt a million years ago that Grodd was in his head, that Barry was bandaging him, but was only the night before this one. It was only the previous morning, not twenty four hours ago, that he woke up with Barry plastered to his side, had stroked him and watched his mouth drop open as he came in Len's hand. So much had happened, from Mick and lunch to Iris and then Barry’s injury. It hurt his head just to try and think it all through.
“You want me to shower with you?”

“I—” Barry paused, looking at him like his brain was waking up, his previous comment like auto-pilot. “Sure? Yeah. Why not? But, uh, you don’t have to say yes, if you're not cool with that?”

“Let’s go,” he nodded to the bathroom.

“I’ve never showered with anyone before.”

Len had sort of figured that out. “It’s not much different, there’s water, you wash.”

Barry snorted but walked into the bathroom. The light seemed dimmer without the mirror in there, and Barry started to undress while Len turned his back to take off his bandages from his knuckles, barely hissing when they pulled at the tender flesh. Still red, less swollen, scabbed over now.

Barry was already under the spray of the water by the time Len undressed and stepped in. As soon as he was behind the curtain, he couldn’t help but drink in the sight, the long lines of Barry’s body, on display in a way he hadn’t been this time yesterday, even while Len had a hand on his cock. Here, now, he could look, really look, at the way the water slid down Barry’s body, hair pushed back so it wouldn’t fall down his face, at the fading bruises on his shoulder, his body, his leg, at the hollow of his hips that funnelled into a ‘v’ with neatly trimmed pubic hair, and all his flawless skin.

He couldn’t help it, he met Barry’s gaze then stepped forward, under the spray with him, water too hot for his tastes but it didn’t matter. He put his hands into the wet strands of Barry’s hair, marveling at how pliant Barry was in his arms, tilting forward, mouth waiting for Len’s kiss. He could feel the same bone deep exhaustion in Barry, the mess of feelings, the water on his back and the faint taste of blood that still lingered. After a moment, Barry pulled back and blinked droplets from his eyelashes, Len swallowing hard at the feel of Barry’s fingers along his own naked sides.

“Len…”

“Let’s get cleaned up, hm?”

Barry let Len wash his back, mostly an excuse to touch as much skin as he could get his hands on, but it seemed to relax him. His back had bruises still, green and fading, and Len's fingers were soft around them, feeling how Barry's muscles knotted around those points, soap bubbles sliding down his skin as he breathed slowly under Len's fingers. Len ran his fingers through Barry's hair again, after, standing close behind him, and Barry offered to return the favor but Len declined, kissing Barry’s shoulder instead, and Barry turned around and put his head in the crook of Len’s neck.

There was a part of him that wasn’t used to this, and might never be. Touches on his skin that were designed for comfort instead of pain. He was used to touching others by now, but it was typically him making that move into their space, controlling the contact. Being touched was different, and seemed to come so easily to Barry. He embraced Len, hands gentle as they pressed over his skin, down his shoulders and in between his shoulder blades, down his spine and almost to his tail bone, exploring before they smoothed back up, catching and sliding on scars and ridges along their path. Len might have cause to feel self-conscious about his body, the scars and the ink, the way his tummy was softer than Barry’s, the marks of age he couldn't deny. But Barry seemed enthralled with his skin, as much as he was with Barry's, and he pressed a kiss to the side of Len’s neck and stepped back. “Let’s go get some sleep.”
Sleeping curled around Barry was something he could get used to, Len decided. The kid was warm and fit snug beside him, smelled amazing, and with how exhausted he was, he dropped right off. Which was why he felt like it was way too soon when he woke up only a few hours later, taking a moment to figure out what roused him. Not much sunlight made it past his dark window shades, but in the lowlight he could see Barry sitting up, his naked back stretched as he leaned forward over himself.

“Y’okay?” Len murmured, his own voice still thick with sleep, even though he was always quick to wake. He rolled onto his side and leaned up on his elbow even as Barry started and looked over his shoulder.

“Ah—yeah. Just thinking I should go help with the city clean up. No work today, the precinct’s closed and our duties are taken over by other precincts nearby. Got the call about that last night.”

“Clean up? After the night you had? The city won’t get any worse if you sleep a few more hours.”

Barry was already shaking his head, “I can extend my sleep with my powers, I’m fine.”

Nifty. Len tried not to be jealous of that little ability, his own restless sleeping habits leaving him with just a few hours most nights.

“Either way, I couldn’t really sleep. My brain wouldn’t let me.”

Len registered the tremulous feelings in the bleed then, and sat up beside Barry. “Nightmares?”

He shook his head, glancing back at Len then forward. “No... no, just... I’m so tired of watching people die. Of watching them and not being able to do anything. Of not being fast enough.”

“That person, Bette Sans Souci?” It seemed like she had been a friend to him.

“Yeah, but not just... Officer Morillo died last night, right in front of me, because of me. Because I wasn’t able to stop Grodd. Another face to see, another person I-I failed,” he choked on the words, and a second later he was bringing his knees up, curling in on himself, fingers in his hair.

“That’s not your fault, Barry.” It wasn’t.

“But it is, Len! The people I can’t save, the people who die because of me, because I made the wrong choice, or because they’re too close—people that have been murdered just to hurt me, to push me, to stop me. I can’t—” he choked back whatever he was going to say, swallowing.

Len wondered for a second who had been killed just to hurt Barry and realized, with a sharp drop in his gut, that he had killed and hurt people in an attempt to get to Barry. He had murdered a man as a test run for the Flash’s speed, had watched Barry kneel next to his corpse and then made a plan that would endanger dozens of others just to distract Barry.

That Barry didn’t, couldn’t love him, it was something he’d already accepted, could live with. But now he wondered how he ever could have thought this would be something different. And for a moment, all Len could do was ache. He wanted to reach out and touch Barry, but couldn’t imagine it would be welcome, couldn’t form an apology. All he’d ever been was part of the problem, and he couldn’t even fathom how to make himself part of the solution, except to take responsibility for the messes he’d made.

"Barry... the blame rests with the killer, and no one else."
Barry dragged in a breath that was shaky and wet, a counterpoint to the heat of anger in his stomach and voice, “You don’t get it! I had to watch my mother die twice, just because someone wanted to kill me instead. I had to let her die when I could’ve stopped it, and one day I’ll have to watch it again and I can’t—god, I can’t go through that—I can’t keep watching innocent people, people I care about, die. Not because of me.”

Len was having a hard time following, realizing this wasn’t about him at all, but confused because, “you were a kid when she died, Barry.”

“I had a chance to stop him,” Barry shook, swallowed, dragged his hands through his hair. “If I had, all of this… none of this would… Eobard killed so many people, twisted so many lives—lives like Bette, like Mason Bridge, like Tony Woodward. My mother, father. More. And I had the chance to end this, and instead I almost got everyone I love killed—I had to watch him kill my mother and I had to watch Eddie die and I had to watch this city burn and I can’t do that again!” his voice was loud and raw and then he stopped, breathing heavy, reigning it in.

Len had no idea what the hell Barry was even talking about anymore, who Eobard was, how Barry could have witnessed anything again, how Eddie was dead when they’d just seen him hours before. He reached forward and smoothed a hand down Barry’s back, over the too-tense muscles, no bruises in sight but knotted still, and his fingers landed finally on Barry’s shoulder. His voice was quieter when he started talking again.

“Every time I see a storm over Central I think about the black hole that I caused. And last night, when Grodd had Eddie, all I could think that was I couldn’t watch him die again, not when it was my fault again. I can’t live with myself anyway, knowing my dad’s in jail, knowing I failed him, I failed everyone, and the only reason Eobard didn’t win was because I got sucked into the singularity and got a second chance at fixing it. The only reason Eobard didn’t win at all was because Eddie sacrificed himself.”

He was quieter, talking mostly to himself now, and Len was fighting the urge to tremble, tightening his gut, feeling the hollowness to Barry, the deep pit inside him, threatening to consume.

“Sometimes, I think he won, after all. That I’m not a hero, not the one I was supposed to be.”

“You’ve saved this city more times than anyone else, Barry. Count your heroics in the people you help.”

Barry pulled in a breath, leaning back and to the side, into Len, and from this angle he could see the tear tracks on his cheeks. “Sometimes I wonder if it was worth it… the price of all this is so high. Eobard ruined all our lives—and countless others, in the particle accelerator blast. He did it all just for me, because of me, pretending to be my friend, just to make me into this. And now he’s gone and his ghost just… lingers.”

Barry shuddered against him, Len’s arm wrapping around his shoulder, and he couldn’t hold back the question anymore. “Barry, who is this guy?” he had to ask, he had to make sense of this, of the man who apparently murdered Barry’s mother, who meant so much to the kid in such a convoluted way, and yet Len had never seen or heard of him, And he wasn’t expecting Barry to laugh, sharp but loud, then to dislodge Len and turn, looking at him with a screwed up expression, like he was ready to laugh and cry, relieved and pained all in one.

“Fuck, I—I haven’t even told you,” he sighed, dropping his head forward, dragging a hand over his face. He was livelier, at least, despair abating, distracted for the moment. “Harrison Wells. Eobard Thawne was Harrison Wells.”
That... that was messy. "You might have to give me some more details on that one," he offered finally, tilting his head to the side to read Barry, watching a range of emotions flit across his face, a quick skim of feelings in the bleed that felt more like a flowing brook than any one emotion. It all seemed to settle on resignation.

“It’s a long story. It starts… a hundred and thirty six years in the future, give or take, though I don’t know that part of it.”

Len blinked.

“I’ll hold off on cleaning up the city for a bit. We’re gonna’ need some bacon and coffee for this, Len.”

**********

Len stood up and stretched. His brain was exhausted. Time travel. Revenge. Black holes. Time travel.

“I can’t believe you thought it was a good idea to run straight into a black hole.”

Barry laughed. He was dressed in some of Len’s clothes again, mid afternoon now, and seemed more blasé about all the crazy things in his tale than anyone had any right to be.

“Yeah, well—it turned out to be a good idea.”

Len couldn’t argue that. According to Barry, he’d gone so fast against the singularity that he’d run back in time—the same as he apparently had against a tsunami Mardon never had a chance to create in this timeline. And like the time with the tsunami (apparently), from there he’d found himself busting back out of the wormhole that had caused the singularity in the first place, coming back out and stopping Eobard, holding him at the right time for Eddie to shoot the man before throwing him into the wormhole and watching it close behind him.

Good riddance.

“Time travel.”

“Keep comin’ back to that one, huh?” Barry actually chuckled, looking a little cocky. It was a good look on him. “Crazy, I know.”

“Not just crazy—Barry, it’s—” there was no word for it. It was enough to give him a headache. But at the same time, “phenomenal.”

Barry’s smile was shy but still there. “I need to go help with the clean up around the city, but later… I know I’ve been spending a lot of time here, but—”

“You’re always welcome here, Barry.”

He nodded, and then stood up and came to hug Len, tight and warm, and stole a kiss before he disappeared in a lightning blur. Well, Len could get used to that.

And, truth be told, looking around his house, thinking of Central, he probably had some cleaning up to do too. Time to call his Rogues for some updates.
“This place is a mess.”

Len arched an eyebrow at Hartley. “You don’t say.”

“Why, exactly, do we have to clean it?” He was prodding at an overturned and broken plate of food with his foot.

Len didn’t waste the energy it would take to sigh, “because you’re on my payroll, Piper. And that means you do what I say.”

“You mean I create advanced technologies for you and your team. This is,” he frowned at the mess, “degrading.”

Shawna appeared beside him with a broom. “Stop being a priss, Hart, and at least help sweep. You realize you don’t have to pick up food with your hands, right?”

“Why doesn’t Mark have to help?”

Len poured himself a shot from one of the unharmed whiskey bottles behind the bar. Damned silver-spoon brats. “Because I don’t pay Weather Wizard—he makes a cut of what he steals with me or keeps whatever he takes on his own. Which is why Mark and Bivolo get to choose how they spend their time while you get to help clean the bar.”

Hartley took the broom with a heatless glare at the smirking Shawna and finally put himself to work. The bar was definitely a mess, broken in windows and upturned tables, the face of the building dented in from a flying car. Still, it wouldn’t be too much to fix, especially compared to some of the buildings that had more or less gone up in flames. Couldn’t even blame Mick for that—he was off in Keystone the entire time. Grodd throwing shit around until it ricocheted off power boxes or into buildings and set of chain reactions was the issue.

As he cleaned up the bar area, Len wondered how many buildings in the area had insurance to cover that type of damage, idly considering if he should shakedown their insurers to pay up. Was that going too far into mob territory, or was that just how things were? It was the type of thing he’d helped with back in his 20’s and early 30’s alongside the Darbynian family while he was still friendly with them, he knew the drill, but he wasn’t actually trying to be some type of godfather around here regardless of what he’d implied to the Santinis. He just wanted his little piece of the pie, and was willing to fight for it.

“You kids look like you’re having fun in here.”

Len’s head snapped up. Speak of the devil. Hartley and Shawna turned to Len to follow his lead but he ignored them and stepped around the bar. No cold gun on him—it was in the back—but he didn’t need it to talk to these punks.

“Freddie Santini, they finally let you go out without a chaperone? Or is that kid there in charge?” Len nodded to the kid who trailed in after Freddie, a little whip with a mean face. Freddie himself wasn’t too bad, the kind of guy Len had a modicum of respect for if only because he wasn’t cruel, just cutthroat, and not young at all, which was why Len’s comment could be taken in the friendlier tone it was intended. Santini had sent someone Len could get along with, at least.

“Har har, Snart. This is Michael,” the kid didn’t say anything and Len could tell Freddie was
resisting the urge to smack him upside the head. He’d seen that look often enough. “Mikey, for
godsakes kid, say hello.”

“Snart.”

Len gave him a lopsided smile, head tilted to the side, “Michael.”

“See you’re dragging around some young ones yourself, these days,” Freddie glanced at Shawna
and Hartley and Len made sure not to tense, just shrugged his shoulders.

“You know how it goes—young blood, lots of energy. Keeps things... interesting.”

Freddie laughed but zeroed in on Shawna and out the corner of his eye, Len saw Shawna tense.
“Still though Snart, pretty unique company around here, if the rumors are true. Guess you know a
thing or two about what they’re saying on the news.”

Ah, right, meta-humans. It wasn’t exactly a secret that Len was surrounding himself with powered
people, the opposite of a secret in fact, but Eiling’s little broadcast was going to impact him too. He
titled his head with an icy smile.

“Jealous, Fred?”

“Not really, Lenny. You wanna’ take up with freaks and weirdos, be my guest. I’m a little more old
school ‘n that. Though I’m guessing that’s not th’ only reason you’ve got yourself a few pretty
young things.” He raised his eyebrows at Hartley when he said it and Len watched Hartley bristle.
Most of the crime world knew about Len’s proclivities, mostly because he refused to closet himself
after striking his own path—though the years before that had been hell. Freddie had known him
before and after that little transition.

Len didn’t bother to deny it, just kept on a pleased little smirk for a second and glanced at Hartley
before letting his face drop to something more neutral when he glanced back at both Santini men. It
was in his favor to play it up just enough to let them think they were right, after all. “Something tells
me you didn’t come all the way down here to ask about who I’m making time with, so why don’t we
cut past the chit chat?”

“Ah right, and let you get back to your Cinderella routine in your own bar?”

Len’s eyes narrowed, “the hand that feeds not been petting his dogs enough recently? I know your
cousin doesn’t take the time to actually work alongside the people he orders around so let me give
you a piece of advice for doing business: no one’s above doing the grunt work.”

“Keep tellin’ yourself that.”

Len stepped forward with a smile. “I will, and it’ll keep me on my toes while Frank gets lazy behind
a desk like his brother did.” His smile was cold and Freddie’s face dropped into an angry mask.
Beside him, the kid’s whole body twitched in anger, a slightly apoplectic turn to his face. Len’s eyes
tracked his hands but he didn’t go for a gun. Nothing like reminding some thugs that you killed their
old boss to turn a conversation.

“We done here, or was there something more you wanted to say, Freddie?”

“Just one thing, Snart.” His voice gained a more formal quality, “Mr. Santini would like for me to
remind your sorry ass that this part of the city is a bit ‘f a beacon for trouble, and if you ever need
assistance with it, he has so graciously offered to meet with you, should the need arise.”
Len’s voice was short when he replied, “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“See that you do.” He turned, “Let’s go, Mikey.”

Leaning in the doorway with a patented smirk was Lisa. She’d been there for a few minutes but Len had been careful not to glance over and ruin her fun.

“Such a shame to see you go so soon, Freddie. It’s been too long.”

“Lisa,” he growled. None of Len’s former colleagues liked his sister too much, mostly because not a single one of their drivers had ever been able to keep up with her when there was infighting between the different families, and men in this business didn’t like being showed up so thoroughly by a woman. Her brief stint with the Darbynians had made the whole damn Santini family look bad. Well, that and she’d helped Len rob their casino last year and gold-encrusted one of Freddie’s friends. It was a toss-up which one pissed him off more.

She smiled and stepped just to the side of the door, “well, don’t let me keep you.” Her gold gun was at her hip in its holster. Good girl.

When they were gone and out of sight, she rolled her eyes at Len. “Really, Lenny?”

“Don’t look at me,” he cricked his neck.

“What did they want?” Shawna looked a little unsetled and he remembered she’d actually had some unfortunate contact with organized crime before the Flash team had got a hold of her.

“To verify their suspicions about me working with meta-humans, look around at the damage, and ruffle my feathers if I let them. Nothing new.”

Hartley was eyeing him, “I mean, I know you’re kind of a… boss around this neighborhood, but are you actually a Don?”

Len didn’t dignify that with a response. Lisa just snickered. “For the record, I brought you guys some dinner, and the night staff is gonna’ come help clean up the place.”

Hartley dropped into a booth with a ‘hallelujah’ and Len couldn’t help but agree, just a little. He really did have better things to be doing than cleaning up his bar, now that he thought about it. There was a lot more to do in the neighborhood, and he motioned for Lisa to come talk.

She’d been out surveying, and gave him a status update and some suggestions for how to handle the various tensions and questions. Much as he was a bit loath to admit it at times, she was the only one he trusted to make a decent plan besides himself, or to handle situations in a way that didn’t need micromanaging. Lisa had an eye for these sorts of things—complex social hierarchies, when to be kind and when to use a firm hand, when to shoot first, even.

“About the damage,” he asked after most of her report was through. “Do we let the apartments and businesses sort it out for themselves?”

She leaned against the desk in the small office, eating some pad thai while she considered. “For now. If they need help, they come to you to put heat on their insurance companies. That’s how it works.”

“No need for a preemptive strike?”

She tilted her head and her curls tumbled down, eyes like lasers. “Your first instinct is always to protect, you realize that, right Lenny?” She sighed and put down the food. “No, we don’t need to
take the initiative. We keep an eye on things but they don't need hand-holding. We aren’t the Darbynians—we don’t want everyone around here to constantly feel like they owe us unless they have to. And we aren’t the Santinis either—keeping everyone afraid all the time. We’re Rogues, Lenny.”

He nodded. “New territory.”

“Definitely. But all ours, so let’s enjoy it.”

Chapter End Notes

Needing to update that glossary again, but Exsomnis is (one of) the Latin word(s) for not sleeping, and an exsomnis night refers to when a person doesn’t sleep because their Soulmate can't sleep. It doesn't typically happen unless the Soulmate is really restless or anxious or disturbing, or having a nightmare.

Also, I know, this chapter took forever. It originally had Barry and Len going straight home at the start of the chapter and coming back and Iris being there and Lisa not and them discussing the news broadcasting, but then I decided to have Eiling there, and originally had Kane show up with him (which doesn't even make sense because she's injured), and then had a nightmare then edited that out because it wasn't exactly what i wanted, and my original plan never had the rogues stuff at the end at all, that just sort of wrote itself. and changing what happened in this chapter (taking out a particular discussion) actually made a marked difference on the timeline of a future event, so i had to dither back and forth on whether this was really what i wanted to go with.

so all i'm saying is, this chapter was a frickin' *process*. some of them are, it happens. while i let it percolate away in the back of my brain i focused on other stuff (and there was plenty else to focus on), but i'm aiming to make so that the next few chapters don't have such a long break in between them.

but if its any consolation, the next chapter will have more smut. y'all deserve it. ;)}
“Good morning, Mr. Allen.”

Barry had spent the previous night with Len after being out all day and most of the night helping people before briefly meeting up with Oliver, Felicity, Caitlin, and Cisco to give them some actual details about him and Len. Barry hadn’t really wanted to broach the topic, but they were all curious for some explanation, and he felt it was time. Then he’d crashed at Len’s, got up early to speed to Joe’s in the morning to grab clothes, knowing Joe would already be over at the precinct taking over his cases until their own re-opened.

“Just Barry, please. You’re Laurel Lance?”

They shook hands and her smile was tight. Barry wondered how he’d honestly never met the Black Canary before this. Cisco sure waxed poetic enough about her.

“I am. Pleased to finally meet you.”

He nodded, a little nervous, moving to sit at a table. They were upstairs in Jitters with Oliver, while Felicity was apparently at STAR Labs with Cisco. “I don’t know how you manage to find time to be a lawyer and do what you do.”

Her smile was a little warmer when she replied, “we all do our best. You seem to manage okay, working with the CCPD?”

“Yeah, but I’ve got a bit of an advantage when it comes to time management,” he laughed.

“And yet,” Oliver cut in with a smile, “you still manage to always be late.”

Barry shook his head, but he was glad Ollie was here. He couldn’t do too much in Central as the Green Arrow thanks to the reminders of jurisdiction, but his team could definitely help Barry, especially with…

“So what’s this about Eobard’s will?”

Laurel’s business face came out. “Harrison Wells’ last will and testament have never been opened. He had no kids or spouse, wasn’t Bonded so there was no one to claim Bond Rights, and right now, his estate is still in limbo. And it might just be the key to you saving STAR labs.” She was definitely smiling again at the end, and Barry decided she had a really nice smile. He could see why Cisco had been a little mesmerized.

“So why is his will so important?”
“Because he was the majority shareholder in STAR Labs, Barry. If his will says anything other than dissolving those shares to the other board members—if his estate has been willed to anyone else—then we can stop this sale, at least for a little while. And in the meantime, we can at least delay it.”

“But if that's the case, how could they’ve even agreed to sell in the first place?”

“They couldn’t—or shouldn’t have, at least,” Laurel looked satisfied, like she was about to do some serious damage and was pleased for the opportunity. “The board members must’ve been suppressing Wells’ lawyers, or at least his will. We probably won’t be able to chase them on that without evidence, but the threat at least should be enough to scare them, and in either case we halt the sale until the will is opened. What they’ve been up to is seriously illegal.”

“But why take those risks? Just to make money off the sale?” Oliver took the words right out of Barry’s mouth.

“STAR Labs has a seriously damaged reputation. The board has probably wanted to cut their losses for ages, but weren’t able to. No one would want to buy their shares without a majority power, and Wells would never have sold. With him out of the way, they probably jumped at the first chance they got to unload all this. The military probably approached them with this months ago, maybe as soon as Wells was announced missing.”

Barry sighed, not ready to get his hopes up. “Okay, so we can delay the sale, at least for a little while. We get Wells’ will opened. But what then? He doesn’t have an heir, he might not’ve done anything with the lab in his Will.”

“A man like Harrison Wells wouldn’t leave his estate and his life’s work up to the vicissitudes of fate, from what I’ve heard about him, not to mention no CEO would. We can figure out your next move after we see what his will has to say. Until then, this is our best shot."

Barry nodded, “Thanks, Laurel. Seriously.”

She smiled and Barry tried to return it, but just felt uncomfortable. He wondered if he’d ever be free of this particular phantom.

**********

“Sorry I’m kind of invading your house.”

“I told you—”

“I’m always welcome, I know. I just don’t want you to think I’m taking over.”

“What’s mine is yours.” Len said it sort of sardonically, a half smile from the couch up at Barry, but at the same time he could tell it was serious too. He didn’t quite know what to make of that, still unsure of Len’s life and properties and basically anything outside this house, so he finished hanging up his jacket in the entryway and didn’t comment.

Instead, he came into the room and blinked at Len.

“Are you wearing glasses?”
The other man pulled them off immediately. “For reading only.”

“They look nice,” Barry smiled and came around the couch to drop himself on it, exhausted. He’d spent his day learning how to fix things, able to retain a lot of information in his short term memory for short periods of time, using the knowledge to try and reset his precinct to a condition where it would be functional again. Other than that, he’d sent out a group text about the STAR labs and will developments after talking to Laurel, sharing the update with Cisco and Caitlin, Iris and Joe, and also Len, another new layer for them.

Len dropped his book and glasses before his hand reached over and landed on Barry’s shoulder, gentling smoothing over it. “Long day?”

He kicked up his feet onto the coffee table. “The longest. But the precinct should be functional again soon. I cleaned up enough of the mess and rubble that they can reopen soon, maybe the day after tomorrow if someone comes by to check that it’s up to code. The entrance will be under construction and the elevator is down, but it’ll feel good to get back to normal.”

“I meant with the will?”

“Ah… I don’t really feel like talking about that.” Len nodded, but Barry found himself continuing, “it’s just—I mean he’s a murderer, a monster, and now we’re relying on something of his, even after he’s gone? I finally thought he was out of our lives for good and here he is again, cropping up—it’s like he’s haunting me.” He leaned forward and pressed his fingers to his temples, sighing in frustration. “Sorry. I’m just… tired of it.”

“Using Wells is different than relying on him.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.”

He felt a tug in the bleed before a second of hesitation. Then Len moved closer, hand moving across to the inside of Barry’s other shoulder, his other hand matching it, and they began to massage Barry, gently at first and he let out a pleased sound, shifting so his back was easier for Len to reach, hanging his head forward. His hands were digging in in the best way possible and Barry let out a groan.

“Feel good?”

“Understatement.”

“Come on, Barry. Stand up, you need a proper massage.”

Barry was confused for a second and then elated, unsure when the last time he’d gotten anything close to a massage was, readily following Len as he stood and made his way down the hall.

“And what exactly does a ‘proper massage’ entail?” he hedged, laughing just a little at the way Len worded things.

“You out of those layers so I can reach your muscles.”

“So this is just an excuse to get me naked and grope me?” Barry teased, already toeing off his shoes and pulling off his sweater at the same time, partway glad he was more coordinated now than he used to be.

“Mm, doesn’t hurt. If only I had massage oils on hand.”

Barry could see Len’s own smirk, the little arch to his eyebrow, and felt himself start to flush even as
he started pulling off his shirt under Len’s gaze. “Does this mean I’m going to get a happy ending?”

“Gonna’ have to strip out of those pants if you want that,” Len’s eyes raked him and Barry could feel parts of him stirring to life under the gaze.

“I just realized—wow, I haven’t even—the last time I got off was with you the other morning.” That was kind of a feat, though he felt embarrassed as soon as he’d said the words. He’d been so busy and so exhausted that his body just hadn’t made it a priority, but suddenly it was reminding him that his libido did in fact exist.

“Happy ending it is, Barry.” Len’s voice was hot and Barry was halfway tempted to ask Len if they could just skip to that, having more than enjoyed the last time, but Len kept talking, “massage first though. You need it.”

He shot Len a look he hoped was a little devious at least, and thumbed the button on his jeans. He watched Len track the movement then flick his eyes back to up Barry’s and decided he wasn’t quite ready to do any form of sexy strip tease for Len, zipping out the pants at lightning speed and whipping right next to Len to stop and see him start, only to kiss the other man on the cheek. “Done and done.”

Then he dropped on the bed so he wouldn’t have to see Len’s reaction, laying on his front and resting his head on his forearms.

“Has anyone ever told you how good you look naked?”

He still had his underwear on, but even so, Barry was glad that Len couldn’t see him preen at the words, though no doubt he’d feel it, that and—“mostly people tell me I’m too skinny.”

“You’re gorgeous.”

He was going to reply, unsure what he was even going to say, but then Barry felt the bed dip when Len moved on to it, moving until he had a knee on either side of Barry but not settling any weight on him, while his fingers found Barry’s shoulders again.

“Ow.”

Len’s fingers pressed in and it actually hurt.

“You’ll thank me later.”

It shouldn’t be possible for him to have so many knots. Over the next several minutes he found himself groaning and aching. Len’s movements deft and sure, digging in with pressure over all the right spots, thumbs rubbing circles along his shoulders, his neck, underneath his shoulder blades and along each vertebrae of his spine. His hands warmed as he worked, and he was quiet and focused except for the occasional comment on Barry’s tension, or to remind him not to squirm when Len’s fingers pressed along his sides and found his ticklish ribs.

Beyond the initial pain, it felt amazing. His tension was slowly being worked out, making him hiss when Len’s fingers pressed along a tender spot, but the hands on his back and muscles were relaxing him bit by bit. And as he relaxed, part of him reminded him that he was naked, under Len’s hands, the other man partway on top of him and the attention was starting to blossom warmth inside him, coiling in his abdomen, body sensitized to Len’s touch and his hands dipped and pressed and smoothed. He focused on those fingers, on what else they could do, remembering the other morning. He felt his body start to react as the hands lowered to the base of his spine and out to his hips, overtop the cotton of his underwear and—
“Ah, god, why are my hips so tense?”

“Just wait ‘til I get to your legs, Barry.”

He groaned and Len reminded him to relax, thumbs pressing in to the muscle, and when he was finally done with Barry’s hips, they moved to press into the flesh of his glutes. Barry would’ve made a comment about Len just wanting to grab his ass, except apparently the muscles in his ass were a lot more tense than he’d ever had cause to notice.

“D’you need me to take off my boxers?” he offered before he could hesitate, so Len’s thumbs wouldn’t slide over the fabric.

“It’d help.”

Len moved off his legs while Barry fought the urge to blush and reached down to strip them off, peeling them away and bending his knees to slide them down and off. He tried to not to be too distracted by the feeling of arousal curling low inside Len.

“’m surprised you’re not making a joke about how tense my ass is.”

“Want me to? I have three ready and waiting.”

Barry laughed, relaxing again, leaning forward again into the mattress, properly naked now, turning his head to the side to look over his shoulder at Len. “I’ll pass.”

“Mm.”

Len’s hands were back, then, rubbing circles into the hard muscles, a kind of pleasurable pain that he tried not to squirm under or react to too strongly. The bedspread was soft under the skin along his front and his dick didn’t seem to mind the smooth fabric. Instead of worrying about it though, Barry let himself sink in and enjoy it before Len moved down to his legs. That was painful to start, but before long, like the rest of him, each of his thighs and calves—god, his calves—started to relax by degrees. By the time Len’s hands were moving back up his legs, along the back of his legs, it all just felt good, warm and gentle and when Len’s hands pressed along the inside of his thighs and the underside of his ass, he let out a quiet groan for an entirely different reason.

“Ready for that happy ending, Barry?” Len sounded smug and Barry’s flushed while heat went south, tight in his abdomen. Len’s fingers were rubbing circles into the muscles of his ass again, only now it was making his hips want to grind forward and back of their own accord, something he was trying to stop himself from doing. It didn’t help that his thoughts had been almost exclusively focused on Len’s hands since the massage had started, on his fingers, which were now very close to…

“Want to roll over?”

He swallowed, licked his dry lips. He wanted that, a handjob, but with Len’s fingers right there, feeling adventurous, he decided he could ask for what he wanted even more, right now. “You uh, if you want, you could finger me?”

He felt the tight, heated reaction that had in Len, and couldn’t help but shift his hips up slightly.

“From handjobs to fingering so fast? Aren’t we eager?” As if Len wasn’t the one already reaching toward the bedside table for the lube.

“Heh, it’s still just hands, things I’ve done to myself, and uh…”
“Hmm?”

Barry was looking over his shoulder to watch Len strip off his sweater and shirt, and for a moment he was lost in the old scars and the lines of ink, skulls and snowflakes. Len caught his eye with an arched eyebrow and Barry swallowed hard.

“ ‘And uh’, Barry?”

“Huh—oh, ah,” he looked forward again, up on his elbows, shifting his legs slightly to give Len space, “it was kind of all I could think about, for the last little while.”

“That makes two of us, then.”

Barry bit his lip when Len’s hands returned to his backside, only now their movements were more tantalizing, spreading his cheeks and he wondered if he was ready for the sensations after all, nervous and embarrassed and turned on all the more for it, warm down to his chest. And Len hadn’t even done anything yet, other than continue to massage him, but then the other man was leaning over Barry’s back, hands sliding along his sides, kissing his shoulder and then his ear before sucking the lobe gently, pulling at it with his teeth. Barry swallowed and shivered, cock starting to ache where it was pressed to the mattress under him. He felt the same ache in Len, the same steady and pleasant tension, less nervous, more determined.

Len moved closer to capture Barry’s lips and he gasped, returning it, letting Len suck on his lower lip, getting lost in the feeling for a minute, feeling anchored by the gentle scrape of teeth, by the steady feeling pulsing between them, aligning. Then Len pulled away slowly, meeting Barry’s eyes before kissing his cheek, jaw, Barry tilting his head to the side for Len to kiss his neck, sucking on it gently, enough to make him whimper and roll his hips ineffectually. Only then did his hands slip down again, more targeted.

Len leaned back and moved until he was between Barry’s legs, nudging Barry to spread them wider, to tilt his hips up. One of Len’s palms gripped his asscheek and gently pulled and kneaded it; the other, Barry could hear popping the lid off the lube, and seconds later he felt the swipe of a slick finger against his entrance. He couldn’t help but gasp, just slightly, and arch his back a little more, spreading his legs a little wider. He heard Len make a satisfied noise, felt something pleased and just as turned on as Barry course through the other, and then the single digit pressed in, past the tight ring of muscle and inside him.

It was so much different than when it was his own fingers. He was fighting the urge to rock his hips back and fuck himself on the finger, the slow press of it, in and out, unable to stop the micro-thrusts of his hips. It wasn’t even going deep and he wanted so much more than this. Barry was breathing heavy in seconds, already wanting more.

"Okay?"

"Better than okay."

“Fuck, Barry,” Len whispered from somewhere behind him, and after another few minutes that felt like sweet torture, Barry felt him pull the finger out, and a moment later a second digit pressed at his entrance along with it, a gentle stretch that made him groan and drop his head further down between his shoulders, hands fisting the bedspread beneath him.

“Feels—ah—really good,” his voice was shaky and the fingers pressed inside him, finally sliding in further, along his prostate and he shuddered, an embarrassing noise escaping him.
“Right there?” Len didn’t wait for an answer, rubbing over that spot again, and again, and—Barry was starting to pant—again, rhythmic.

“Len,” he moaned, whining. He was getting close—it had been too long and he was aching for this, caught up in the feel of Len’s fingers in him.

“Can you come from just this, Barry?” Len’s voice sounded low and raw and it went straight to Barry’s cock. He must be able to feel it building inside Barry. His other hand was moving up Barry’s back, his weight shifting, and he scissored his fingers inside Barry, making him keen.

“Y—I think—ah—yes.”

Len was leaning over him, a third finger pressing and then crooking alongside the others inside him, stretching him and making him gasp, swallowing around his hitched breaths. Len’s free hand pressed down on Barry’s shoulder and he groaned and lowered his shoulders obligingly, arching his back up, hands vibrating where they gripped the bedspread, on edge from the steady thrusting of Len’s fingers inside him, over his prostate again and again, and from the possessive, intense gesture. He was gasping, grinding his hips back, sensitive all over, feeling every millimeter of Len’s fingers, the way his body stretched to accommodate them. And Len’s hand moved from his shoulder to the back of his neck, into the short hairs there, over his scalp and it was so sensitive, he was gasping, vibrating, cock aching and—

“Ooohhhhh,” he felt his body spasm around Len’s fingers, cock throbbing as his climax hit him, untouched and it pulsed as he shuddered, world going white.

Len pumped his fingers gently into Barry until his aftershocks abated, and then he was breathing deep to slow his heartbeat, body melting down onto the bed only to wrinkle his nose and push back up.

“I came all over the bed.” It was messy and cooling on his stomach and the blankets now and Len laughed.

“Worth it.”

Len moved out from behind Barry and Barry rolled over, glancing at the mess now smeared on his stomach, a little embarrassed as Len grabbed tissues and handed some to Barry for himself, using a few to mop up the mess on the bedspread.

“Think it’ll stain?”

“Don’t care.”

Barry found he was too relaxed to worry any more about it, dropping on his back on a clean spot, “okay.”

Len was sitting on the side of the bed, half naked and Barry’s eyes couldn’t help but zero in on the bulge in his pants, the heat and arousal still in the bleed. He felt hot all over, grinning at Len, “So ah, time for your happy ending too?”

************
The precinct reopened on Wednesday. Barry hadn’t spent every night at Len’s. He’d slept at his own place Monday night, slipping home after patrols when he knew it would be way too late for Joe to be up, craving the normalcy that home provided, though he might’ve cased the house first just to be sure. Barry knew he was being a jackass by this level of avoidance, but he wasn’t sure what else to do about it, and had more important things to worry about.

Things like the meta-human search that Eiling was kicking up. The military had released more information about it, and Barry and his friends had cooked up a general idea that the best way to fight Eiling right now would be to stay one step ahead of him. To that end, they were going to do double-time searching for new metas or potential metas, hoping to find and help them before the military did. Iris had a lot of experience with that from reporting and blogging, STAR labs were basically experts on it, and Barry was planning to go through old CCPD files to see if anything looked out of place.

He was just in his lab—which Thankfully had been spared from any of Grodd’s destruction—cleaning up and organizing when Joe came in.

“So uh, I hear the Flash has been pretty busy, helping out around the city pretty much every night.”

Barry glanced up at him standing in the doorway, before returning his attention back to the piles he was organizing, seeing Joe step more into the lab in his peripheral vision.

“I just got out ‘f a meeting with Singh. Turns out this new task force that Eiling’s making? He wants a CCPD liaison. Singh put my name forward.”

Barry tensed, looking at Joe properly, “Eiling had to have known that would happen.”

Joe nodded, leaning against one of the other tables and crossing his arms. “Oh, I bet he did. Specifically asked for any detectives who’ve worked on meta-human cases before. Looks like I’m the no-brainer for that one.”

“Did you accept the position?” Barry dropped another file into the box with a frown.

“Sure did.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause if they wanna’ use me to keep our team on edge, we might as well use me too. I’m pretty sure I can get a lot of information from watching these guys, find out more ‘f what we’re up against.”

“You know how dangerous that is?”

Joe shrugged, “the way I see, no more dangerous than running into a sewer after a telepathic gorilla with nothing but a banana, but that didn’t stop me.”

Barry knew Joe was trying to make him smile, but it wasn’t helping. After a minute of silence where Barry pretended to read the front page of a report to decide where to put it, Joe kept talking.

“Captain also told me that Iron Heights’s starting construction to open a meta-human wing.”

Barry dropped the report and looked at Joe. “Like the pipeline?”

“More above board ‘n that. Governors of Missouri and Kansas’ve already agreed to split the upgrade with the federal government. I guess the military wanted to fast-track through all that historical mess of housing our prisoners in their state so they volunteered some serious coin. Construction starts next
“How do they even plan to make a prison that can hold metas without technology like the stuff we got from Eobard’s chair?”

“We managed.”

Barry bit the inside of his lip to avoid responding to that, eyebrows together. They managed. Barely. And not always in a good way. “Right,” he said finally.

“Look, Barry, I—”

“Is that all, Joe? I’m kinda’ busy.”

“Barry, I’m sorry.”

Barry’s throat felt tight.

“What I said the other night, the position I put you in, after everything that happened—I never should’a done that. I wasn’t thinkin’. I was tired and blindsided ‘n angry and it wasn’t okay for me to force you to defend your Soulmate like that.”

Barry swallowed, looking Joe in the eyes and willing himself not to tear up. Joe’s words sounded prepared, rehearsed and a little rushed, but genuine, and Barry wondered—hoped—if Joe had been stewing, maybe for days.

“And I know, Barry,” he continued, “that Snart’s not evil. I need you to know that I know that. And I get that I’m the last person you’re gonna’ wanna’ talk to ‘bout any of this now, but I’m always here for you, son, no matter what. About this or anything.”

“I know that, Joe, I just…”

“It’s okay, Barr, you don’t have to say anything. I got an earful from Iris yesterday, let me tell you,” he laughed a little, then sighed, dragging a hand over his face in a gesture so familiar Barry almost did smile, for a second. “I felt… agh, I felt like you were choosing Snart over your family by standing up for him, ‘n it was stupid of me. Iris, well, she pointed out that ‘the only one making Barry choose anything’ was me.” He nodded at Barry, earnest, “‘n I’m sorry for that too.”

Barry found himself blinking back tears and huffed out a little laugh, swiping at them. “Remind me to get Iris some of her favorite brownies sometime, would you?”

Joe laughed too, finally uncrossing his arms and coming closer. Barry gave up and moved around the desk to hug him, brief but so needed when Joe hugged him back. “Thanks, Joe.”

They each stepped back before Joe clapping him on the arms, looking as pained as Barry felt before letting him go. Barry sank into a lean against his desk, suddenly tired all over again.

“Nothing to thank me for, kiddo. I’m just doing what any parent’s supposed to do. We all know I can be a little overprotective sometimes… but you know it’s just ‘cause I love you kids so much, right?”

He nodded, resigning for a moment and then shook his head, “yeah, I know that. But you’ve gotta understand that this isn’t something I want you to try and protect me from, Joe. This is... Len is, we’re kind of a package deal now.”
“I get that, I do. I’m still—it’ll take wrappin’ my head around still. Hell, it was hard with just Iris ‘n Eddie at first, things never turning out like I expect. But if he’s your Soulmate, I get that you’ll want to be with him. Or at least give it an honest shot.”

Barry nodded, shoulders starting to slump with relief. “For what it’s worth, Joe, he’s really—he’s not like he seems. Not like I thought he would be. I fought it, all of it, at first, and it was stupid of me because…” he looked to the side. “I mean, maybe not that stupid. You were right—we got off on a hundred wrong feet, to start. But Len has done nothing but try since we Bonded, even if he doesn’t always get it right and… I wanna’ try too. He makes me feel…” he looked down, lips twitching, because it was so ridiculous, but—“safe.”

There was a moment of silence while Joe digested that, a quiet sigh. “Y’know, what I said, ’bout him under my roof, I shouldn’t’a—”

Barry was already waving his hand. “It’s fine, Joe, I get it. He’s a criminal, I know that. I don’t expect you to open your home to him. Really.”

“… does that mean you’re gonna’ come home sometime soon?”

Barry’s chest felt tight for all of a second, and then he couldn’t help but bark out a laugh. “Did you think I was moving in with him?! Joe, no! Of course not,” he was still laughing, “his house is nice but it’s not home. Of course I’m coming home. I slept there on Monday, and I’ve been sneaking by for clothes each day.”

Joe relaxed by a mile, finally smiling. “Thank god—I wasn’t sure if I was ready to have you move out the same week the precinct caved in and you almost died.”

Joe clapped him on the shoulder and Barry smiled too, lighter now. “Thanks, Joe, really.”

It wasn’t perfect, but it was good enough, for now.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case you don't know, a ‘happy ending’ is a colloquial term for a handjob at the end of a massage. I could’ve written more smut here, but you’ll get more in a lot of the upcoming chapters so I didn’t feel the need to write out more handjobs (of which there was a few because Barry needed more than one orgasm after that break haha).

Also, I did promise Joe wasn’t gonna’ be a total dick when he got his head on straight. Thanks to the format of this fic (one person’s perspective per chapter), I wasn’t able to jump over and showcase the dressing down that Iris gave him, but you can believe it was fierce. I mean, they clearly need to have more conversations than just the one, but Joe and Barry are really close, and can communicate a lot in a few phrases (we’ve seen in this on the show). So just knowing that he has some support from Joe is really important to Barry, and can act as a launching point for a lot more connection.

Next chapter will come much sooner, not 3 weeks like this one :) Hope you guys liked
it!
The next week passed in a busy blur for Len, and he wondered if this was what Barry’s life was like all of the time.

Barry was in and out of his home more casually now, his emotions more level after his conversation with Joe West, after coming clean to his friends and family about this. He was becoming bolder around Len too, which was a relief because Len didn’t have to suppress his urge to reach out and touch quite so often, to tease. He was working to hold himself in check still, but it was getting easier to know where the boundary was with Barry.

But it was all… strange, to say the least. He suddenly had many new contacts in his phone, since apparently the STAR Labs team and Felicity Smoak wouldn’t be satisfied otherwise. None of them had reached out to talk to him except Cisco, though, who’d texted in a way that was almost hilarious.

    Hey man.
    Cold.
    Cap.
    Leoanrd.
    Wait, what do I call you, dude?

    Len is fine, Cisco.

    Cool
    Shit no pun intended
    Lol. But wait so hear me out k?

    Ok...

    okay so your gun, the cold gun? How did you mod it like that? With the cold field? It’s a neat trick, I’m just saying, like…

    Len hadn’t been able to resist the urge to roll his eyes at the screen. Not telling.

    Come on, man! I’m bff’s with your SM, that’s got to get me something

    Amplification.
Obvsly. I’m looking for REAL INFO here

Unless you’re volunteering to upgrade it...

Cold, dude.

Len wasn’t sure if he was being called cold, or if he was being called Cold. Actually, even if Cisco had volunteered, he might’ve declined because Hartley would likely find some awful means of revenge if Len let Cisco get his hands on the cold gun again.

Talk to me about time travel and I’ll tell you about my cold field.

DEAL!!!!! :D:D:D

They actually grabbed a beer that week, Barry chaperoning, and it was strange but not awful. Once he relaxed a bit, Cisco’s sense of humor sat well with Len. Barry was curious about the cold field as well, and chimed in to talk about time travel. Apparently Cisco was the only one besides Len who Barry had told about the singularity, as the explanation of Eddie’s (temporary) death was something he wanted to shield others from and Cisco had explicitly asked Barry about whether something more had happened. He didn’t explain how he knew that there had been a timeline change, not really, and Len peered at him over his beer but let it drop; everyone was entitled to their secrets. He was more curious about what was and wasn’t possible with time travel than figuring Cisco out at the moment.

The conversation strayed to other topics, invariably to Flash work that made Barry tense up but Cisco didn’t notice, just snapped his fingers like he was remembering something.

“Hey, so, remember how I’m keeping an eye out for meta-humans on our radar, more now than ever? Plans to warn them about Eiling if we can stay a step ahead of him?”

“Did you find one?” Barry asked, a quick glance at Len before leaning forward.

“Yes actually, one that might be in town for just a limited time. Apparently some lady at the circus can talk to reptiles. And I know, dude, I know it sounds crazy, but we also got reports of a half-man-half-shark so I feel like it’s at least worth looking into.” He said this while a smile and looked at Len for support. “Right?”

“I don’t see what this has to do with me?”

“Well Barry hates clowns—”

“You hate clowns?” he couldn’t help but lilt his voice into something droll at that. “Don’t tell me—all that speed and that’s your biggest fear?”

“They’re creepy,” Barry shrugged but Len could tell he was indignant and smirked.

Cisco was in agreement, “Yeah, man, I hear you. I’ve seen It, I know how that ends. But okay, this circus, hopefully light on the clowns. It’s a travelling one that’s only in town for a short while so sooner is better, and I mean, it’s for recon, but I thought it might be more fun if you two made it into a date?”

“You want me to go to the circus… with Barry… to help with Flash recon?” He arched an eyebrow.

Cisco shrugged. “Why not?”

Barry’s scowl was probably a good reason why not. “You realize Len’s just as likely to recruit the
Cisco laughed, then frowned, “wait, are you serious? How does that work—you two being Mated and Cold still recruiting for the Rogues and gettin’ up to being a big bad villain ‘n all that?”

“Let’s change the subject.” Len suggested, going for light enough not to freak Cisco out, but he was sure he’d failed by the hesitant expression he got in return. Barry picked up the thread instead.

“Right. Cisco, you can come with me to the circus.”

“Oh no,” Len interjected because he couldn't help it, smirking at Barry as he took a sip of his beer, “I fully intend to come and watch you scowl at clowns now.” Len also hated the circus, but in this instance, he could easily make an exception. “Consider it a date.”

Barry opened his mouth and closed it, sighed out through his nose and nodded.

**********

There were also things making everyone testy over the week. For one, Barry was now in the process of actually acquiring Eobard Thawne’s will, and any mention of it made him tense beyond belief, though Len didn't mind helping him unwind when the opportunity arose. Apparently, there had been an unpleasant conversation between the Green Arrow’s lawyer friend and the board of STAR Labs from what Len had gathered. He was pretty sure an ugly legal battle might’ve been brewing, but Thawne’s—Wells's—lawyer had dropped dead some months ago, apparently the reason the estate was never handled properly, so they could cover their asses that way. The death was obviously less of an accident than it seemed.

In either case, the firm was transferring the estate over to Miss Lance to deal with, and Barry was increasingly anxious about it. Len couldn’t really blame him, considering the fate of the lab and all that went with it was maybe in that will, but it was still wearing him thin. It didn’t really help that Caitlin's research position at the university would start in a few short weeks, and apparently Cisco was down to deciding between Rathaway Industries and Mercury labs unless the sale was stopped for good. At least he wouldn’t be moving to Starling anytime soon.

Then there was the issue of meta-humans. The city was rallying behind the Flash now that they knew what he was, calling for an actual holiday dedicated to him, which was amazing but sent Barry’s stomach into knots. Why Barry didn’t think he deserved the praise was beyond Len—he was a goddamn hero.

And all of that was just the issues that come from being in Barry’s orbit, caring about his life. Len had never envied the Flash, but he did so less now than ever.

But Len had his own issues to be tense over. One was the matter of Barry’s birthday. Which was coming up, and soon. Len had originally hoped, months ago now, that he’d be able to do something special for Barry, for his Soulmate, on the first birthday of Barry’s that they would spend together. It was a special day for both of them, after all—the day they were Marked. But Barry’s refusal to accept any form of gift (except a meal) hadn’t wavered, and Len was fairly certain his original plan wasn’t going to pan out too well.

The other stressor was the upcoming dinner with Barry and Lisa. Barry had commented on how strange it was that he hadn’t met her, and Len hadn’t wanted to admit it was by design. It probably
was time, really, loath as he was to admit it, so he suggested dinner out. At least in public, Lisa wouldn’t be able to do anything too worrisome. So the weekend rolled around and all Len had to do was survive one meal.

**********

“You look nice, Sis.”

“Lenny,” she smiled. The blouse was a dark, rusty golden hue with enough brown in it to compliment her nicely. “Flattery will get you everywhere in life, brother.”

She smiled at Len then Barry, and it might be a little razor sharp but she had promised not to eviscerate him and make Len’s life any harder than it needed to be, so he’d take it.

“So did you run here, or do you let Lenny drive you around?” she asked as they started to sit and Barry rolled his eyes.

“I’m not allergic to motor vehicles. Len drove.”

“Hmm, doesn’t make you impatient?”

“Everything makes me impatient. Nothing’s as bad as lineups though. The rest I can handle.”

Len filed that knowledge away and ordered a round of drinks while they made small talk. He spent most of the time while they ordered and waited for their meals making sure they kept to safe topics, but he couldn’t stop Lisa from asking about Flash-related things, a lot of questions he himself had had at first, and then about Cisco and even Caitlin, and Iris—

“How’s she doing? Not too shaken up?”

“Wh—oh, no. She’s tough, and,” Barry winced, “that’s not even the first time she was kidnapped. Someone targeted her when she first started a blog about the Flash and I had to do some heroics.”

“She was blogging about you? Why on Earth?”

Len remembered reading that blog about ‘the Streak’, but was curious when he felt Barry’s guilt, and looked over to see his lips pulling to the side before he sighed.

“I didn’t tell her I was the Flash… she didn’t actually know until right around the time you and Len ‘helped’ with the meta transport, actually.”

Oh great, a reminder of that night. Len sipped his drink and tapped his fingers on the table.

“You didn’t tell your best friend?” Lisa’s voice held some genuine surprise and Len was about to run interference but she kept talking. “She even seems pretty trustworthy to me; we had a nice chat and everything while we spent time at a safehouse waiting for you boys to call.”

She smiled graciously and Len rather wished she wasn’t reminding Barry of all this. “It wasn’t about —wait, how many hours were you two together?”

“Just a few.”
“What did you—”

“Now now, girl talk is sacred Barry,” she smirked and Len resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Let’s talk about something other than kidnapping Barry’s friends, hm?”

“Oh yes, why don’t we talk about you two instead. Has Lenny told you I’m Unmarked? So do tell me, Barry, how are you adjusting to life with a Soulmate? I’m oh so curious to how things must be working out for you, now that you’re finally together?”

Barry looked at Len for help and he took another drink again, more a gulp this time, wishing it were stronger before he replied, “no need to gossip, Lisa.”

“Ah, Lenny’s a spoil sport, he never tells me anything,” she didn’t even glance at him as she pouted, resting her chin on her clasped hands, elegant curls falling over her shoulder.

“Things with Len are… good? Different, now that everyone knows about us, but… better? I don’t know what he told you so far, but we’re definitely getting better.”

“Oh good,” she actually did seem to relax by a fraction, but maybe it was just a ruse because the next words out of her mouth were: “so he’s stopped trying to trip over himself to make you happy, then?”

“That’s enough, Lise.”

Barry looked at Len in confusion, thick eyebrows down, then back to Lisa. Len wasn’t sure what his own emotions were doing in the bleed, trying to clamp down on his sharp frustration.

“I’m not sure when he was tripping over himself,” Barry dropped his head to the side with a bit of a flat look, “but I’m just saying it’s going okay, since you asked.”

“All I’m saying is that Lenny’s been working overtime trying to give you what you want, and I’d hate to think you weren’t putting in the same effort.”

He felt Barry getting angry but the food and more drinks came then, interrupting whatever he’d been about to say and giving Len a chance to intervene.

“Barry’s had plenty to deal with, Sis. I’m sure you understand that relationships are two way streets, since you’re in one.”

She smiled, sharp. “Me and Ross are hardly in a relationship, Lenny. I’m just saying, what with you hiding half of who you are from Barry, I figured it would be making more tension, not less.”

He stilled, eyes hard on her; Barry filled the silence before he was able. “Hiding what?”

She looked like victory, taking a small bite of her steak with a glance at Barry. “When was the last time Lenny pulled a heist, Barry? The last time he pushed you for something he wants instead of just offering any and ever—”

“Lisa, you push this and dinner is over.”

She looked at him then, appraised him and her smile dropped, any pretense at amusement gone. “Fine, Lenny. I’m more than sure Barry can handle himself, but if you insist, we’ll have a nice family meal.”

He let himself relax by a fraction, turning his attention to his food, not really tasting it. Barry was dubious he could tell, but food was the best distraction for him anyway and he was devouring it and
relaxing as well. Len let his leg knock against Barry’s under the table, just enough contact to help relax them both.

It was going okay again, easier topics, more about Lisa herself and what she was doing for fun these days, until the conversation rolled around to birthdays. Lisa had been telling Barry about years ago when she’d considered trying out for the Olympics, and he was teasing her.

“You make it sound like you’re an old lady at this point. You can’t even be thirty yet.”

“That’s sweet, Barry. You do realize I’m closer in age to my brother than that, I hope. But I did just have a birthday, so don’t expect me to tell you exactly how old. And you have a birthday coming up too, don’t you? Your twenty sixth?”

“Yeah, how did you know?”

She laughed, “darling, you realize I’ve been celebrating that day for literally years, don’t you? I remember the year you turned eighteen—ah, we threw such a party when you stopped being jailbait.” Her voice got a little wistful and Len shot her an annoyed look, finishing his drink.

“I—you—huh. I mean, I guess it makes sense.” Len was motioning to their server for another drink and didn’t need to look at Barry to know that he was shifting in his chair, rolling that thought around in his head. “I just never thought about it.”

“Mmm, someone’s Marking Day is special too. But then I suppose Lenny hasn’t told you any of his plans for your day?”

“Don’t, Lise.”

“Plans?”

Trust Lisa to bring this up before Len had made up his mind on it. Even playing by his rules, she still ended up finding sore spots. Barry was looking him expectantly and Len put down his fork and leaned forward on his elbows to twiddle his thumbs for a moment while he thought, looking to the side and arching an eyebrow at nothing as he finally spoke. “Birthday gifts—gift, to be precise, an out of town trip if I can convince you to take a weekend off from heroics.”

Len glanced at Barry for a moment before watching the bartender finish making his drink. He could feel the surprise alongside the alarm in Barry, pretty much what he’d expected. “I—but—why?”

Len dropped his hands and sighed, leaning back in his chair. He really didn’t want to get in an argument with Barry in front of Lisa and fuel her concern. “Because as much as I love this city, its nice to get away once in a while, hm?”

The other’s mouth stretch into a frown. “You know I don’t like gifts. Why were you trying to hide this?”

“Because I already know you’ll say no, Barry.” His voice was cold, falling into a voice he tried to bite back, but he was done talking to Barry about gifts at this point.

“Then why make a plan you know I won’t like?”

Len didn’t answer and Lisa cocked her head to the side. “You do have a tendency to make Len do whatever you’d like for him to, don’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? It’s my birthday!”
Oh no, this was even worse—Barry and Lisa fighting was going to be a disaster. Len’s drink was dropped off and he raised it to the others in a mock cheers, “let’s all agree to disagree, shall we? Lisa, stop instigating. Barry, we can negotiate.”

Lisa smirked and Barry bristled. “Don’t see why we’re negotiating about my birthday.”

“We’ll talk about it some other time,” Len moved to place a hand over Barry’s. If nothing else, he knew that gesture might calm Barry; contact could ground him in a way that not much else would if he started to get frustrated. If he was too frustrated, he wouldn’t let anyone near, but otherwise he was tactile, and Len could work with that.

Now if only Lisa didn’t smile like she’d won something throughout the rest of their evening together, Len might actually have managed to breathe easier.

**********

Barry stayed the night after their dinner, something for which Len was pleased. His mood was a little less pleasing, frowning on the drive back, checking his phone and sighing at no word from Cisco on any criminals to go foil.

“You wanna’ go so bad, Barry, then go. You don’t have to come over.”

He shook his head, following Len into the house. “I want to stay, I just… what did Lisa mean, about you hiding things from me? Or tripping over yourself?”

Len kicked off his shoes and shrugged out of his thick jacket and the lighter one he’d worn inside the restaurant. “Beer?”

“I mean it, Len.”

“Me too. I’m having one.”

Barry sighed and followed him to the kitchen, but crossed his arms while Len opened the beer and he could feel the frustration coming off both of them. Barry wasn't budging though, that stubborn set to his jaw, and Len arched an eyebrow at Barry. He didn't want to talk about this but was pretty sure that snapping at Barry or marching off wasn't going to win him any favors, instead coming over to set the beer on the counter next to him, stopping right in front of him. Len had been on edge all night, but made sure not to drop his voice into a colder register again, not to rile Barry up with complaints about him pouting. Instead, he went for something that could be called diplomatic.

“She was just instigating, Barry. Let it go.”

“Sure seemed like it was more than just instigating to you.”

Len frowned and trailed his eyes down Barry, taking in his stubborn pose. “Unless you plan on explaining to my why you hate gifts so much, don’t expect me to explain this.”

“I don’t hate gifts? What is your deal with them, anyway?”

“Oh—so you’ll let me get you something for your birthday, then?” he couldn’t help but smile coldly, because he already knew the answer.
“I don’t want anything.”

“Uh huh,” he leaned back and grabbed his beer to take another swig before dropping it back on the counter, feeling angry, remembering a comment from before about the comfort of his touch, one that had Barry tensing up and angry, an easy wound to poke. He fought the urge to say it now and be done with this conversation.

“What was that?”

“What?”

“That feeling? That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Gonna’ have to be more specific, Barry.” Len was glaring now and didn’t want to talk about this.

“You’re holding yourself back, aren’t you? Hiding something. You have been for a while, haven’t you?”

Len sighed and turned toward the hall, “we’re not talking about it.”

Barry was on his heels, “you’re what—suppressing something? What is it?”

Len felt his frustration flare and ground his teeth. He could control his actions, but not always what his initial response was, what Barry would be able to pick up off him. “You don’t need to deal with it.”

“Deal with—what? Your anger? Because newsflash: I’ve been dealing with that since before we even Bonded.”

He was in his room now and turned to glare at Barry, too close, and his voice was lower and angrier now, “why does it matter, Barry?”

“Because there sides of you I don’t see, or that you’re trying to make sure I don’t see, and I wanna’ know why.”

“Because you don’t like every side of me and its not hard to get why.”

“Len you’re my Soulmate—I don’t want some idealized version of you. It’s not like I don’t know what you’re capable of, or how you feel.”

“Doesn’t mean I want to deal with you on edge because I can’t hold myself in check.”

“You think I can’t handle you? Are you for real?”

Len felt something angry stirring inside him, coming toward the surface. He let it, let his face slip into something harder, felt a churning in the bleed in response, some recoil and—“right there. That response? Not interested in that.”

There wasn’t really a word for the feeling, not one that he knew, but he knew what it reminded him of: rejection. Len could push aside any of the parts of himself that Barry was going to reject. But Barry looked at him, shades of hurt and confusion, and shook his head.

“That’s just because I don’t understand.” He leaned forward to touch him but Len moved back and caught himself glaring, forced himself to relax. Barry reached out again, too gently.

“Len…”
“Don’t push it, kid.”

Barry recoiled. “Kid? Really? I thought we were past that.”

Len looked to the side, an arched eyebrow. “You said you wanted to see more sides of me.” His smile was unkind. “Welcome to me.”

Barry shook his head and sighed. “You’re right—if all I’m missing out on is the asshole side of you, I guess I can live without it.”

Len moved to leave the room—he’d been planning to change, to grab a sweater—but suddenly Barry was there, blocking his exit—“hey, whoa, c’mon.”

“What?” his voice was cold and emphatic and just done.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you like that.”

Len opened his mouth and closed it. He hadn’t even noticed, and not for the first time, he wondered about what Barry felt in the bleed, and whether he could feel things that were inside Len that he didn’t even let himself feel. He curled his hands into fists and uncurled them, forcing down the instinct to push, to run.

“Don’t worry about it,” he finally said, trying to let his frustration with Barry go.

“But Len, I—” Barry stepped back and dragged a hand through his hair. “that’s not all it is, I don’t believe it. You acting like a dick to push me away? Sure that’s part of you, fine, I’ve seen it before, the night you busted up your knuckles. But it’s only part, and a small part. And it’s not the part I meant you were hiding.”

Len couldn’t describe why that pissed him off, but it did. He shifted the angle of his body and stepped forward and didn’t stop, into Barry’s space, until the other was trapped between Len and the edge of the bed and Len leaned in close, wrapping a hand in Barry’s shirt. “You want to see more of me? Fine then, here’s the truth. I’ve been playing nice, Barry, because you want to believe there’s things in me that don’t exist and I was going to let you. But you had me figured out from day one—what you see is what you get.”

“You know what, Len? You’re so full of shit!” Barry snapped back, and both of them breathed heavy for a second, angry, “I can feel you, I know when you’re lying, when you’re saying things to piss me off.” His hands reached down, one to pull up Len’s shirt and the other to press to his mark, glaring and Len’s throat constricted.

“What do you think it is then, Barry?” He reached forward and slid his free hand up Barry’s shirt, knowing the connection he was about to force, hand to Mark, both of them inhaling at the feeling, but Len’s fingers kept moving up until his fingers were skimming up to Barry’s ribs and higher, hand stilling over his too-fast heart. “If not all my anger, what is it that you think I’m hiding?”

They were inches apart, and with the strength of the connection, the feel of Barry’s hands on his skin, the phantom of his own on Barry, the not-there feel of nerves and tension that didn’t belong to him, of biting a lip though he wasn’t doing that himself, it was only seconds before they both leaned together, kissing, breathing in as one. It didn’t last long, too sharp, but his fingers convulsed on Barry’s skin nonetheless before they broke apart.

Barry swallowed and pulled back enough to shake his head, just minutely, not backing down though Len could feel his anxiety. If anything, he raised his chin higher. “There’s good in you, Len.”
He half-snorted. “So, what—you think I’ll be some kind of hero, Barry? You know what I am and what I do.”

He was surprised for a moment when Barry’s hands moved to push up Len’s shirt, forcing him to move his hands off Barry but not refuting the gesture, letting Barry slide his shirt off. Then the fingers traced his tattoos, Lisa’s name, his snowflakes, the Celtic knot, fluttering but gaining confidence as they touched his skin, stroking gently. Len glared but didn’t comment, and Barry felt angry but a static on top of that, apprehension etched on his face, but something gentler inside him.

“Why are you so determined to see the worst in yourself? I know you, or enough of you. You hide the best parts of yourself from the world.”

Len’s laugh was scathing, “like what? My pancakes, my garden, my home? Pointless results of therapy that was wasted effort? This is the first time I’ve lived in one place for this long in my adult life, Barry, and it’s only because you erased my records. Before I betrayed you, remember?”

He pressed Barry forward, forcing him to trip back on the bed, catching himself on his elbows and looking up at Len. Len followed him, on his knees over Barry, framing him, faces close but Len was higher up now, looking down. “I’m not the good guy. And how much you hate hearing that is precisely why I’ve been keeping these sides of me on a back shelf out of reach ever since you let me in. You want nice, domestic Leonard Snart? I can give you that—but only if you. Don’t. Push it.”

Barry’s face was set and angry and he shook his head, just once. “I don’t want ‘nice domestic you’ and I didn’t Bond with ‘nice domestic you’. If this version of you is a lie then at least have the courage to show me who you really are.”

Len mm’d and nodded, eyes narrow before he leaned close, wondering if all he should do was repeat everything he’d said at Ferris Air, but he might as well go for honest, now. “Who I am is a person who spent my entire life making a ruthless reputation, Barry, doing things that would make you sick and you know it. Who I am is someone who showed you all the worst of me and drove you so far away I was sure I’d never get you back. And who I am right now is a possessive bastard who sees your smooth skin and wants to mark it up just to prove that you’re mine, that I have you and don’t plan to let you go again.”

To his surprise, instead of recoiling back again, instead of disgust, something in Barry shifted at his words, tense but without fear and anger, more steely than anything, and at the end there was something that Len could only figure it was a dark amusement, wry from the look that crossed Barry’s face. “You really think you’re gonna’ scare me away from wanting to see who you really are, don’t you? With telling me there’s something in you that’s what—violent? Dark? Possessive? Wants to mark me?” He let out a half-broken laugh. “Good luck with that last one—mark me up for days and watch it fade, I can’t even scar.”

Len was momentarily derailed, because “you can’t scar?”

Barry’s smile was definitely wry then. “Not even a little.”

Len leaned back at that, curious despite himself, and Barry leaned up until he was able to pull his own shirt overhead, dropping back to his elbows again under Len, body on display. And there it was, Len’s eyes skimming and searching in a way they hadn’t specifically done before, taking in every inch of Barry’s unblemished—truly, wholly unblemished—skin. The only mark on him was the Mark.

“Well, would you look at that?” he drawled.
Barry sat up and leaned on one of his hands behind him, obstinate but something in the air had already shifted, cut through some of the tension. Barry bought his free hand up to trace over an old scar on Len’s chest, eyes flicking up between Len’s gaze and his body. “I break bones and they heal in hours, get cuts that smooth over, bruises that fade fast. My skin won’t even hold ink for more than a day—we tried. We tried everything. Cisco burned me and froze my skin and tried everything he could think of, but my body takes it like a challenge and ‘heals’ it, giving me new skin, pushing the ink out. The longest I had one last was 52 hours and it bled the whole time.”

“Surely you have scars from before, at least?”

Barry’s eyes flicked up to him for a half second and then down, fingers dropping too, down to Len's arm and his tattoo sleeve, skimming its lines and the feel of it on his forearm almost made Len shiver. “I did. They’re… gone, now. My body renews too fast, and almost all scars normally fade with time. They started to disappear after I woke up from my coma. By the time I noticed, half of them were gone already. I took pictures of all the ones that were left.” He hesitated, then brought his fingers to his own body instead, leaning back, drawing a pattern on to his stomach as he spoke, “I had a lightning scar—called an Lichtenberg figure—running up my front and sides, surrounding the Mark. It was there when I first woke up from the coma but it’s gone too now.”

Len looked at the spot his fingers were tracing, trying to picture a lightning fern there. His upcoming art heist in Keystone had involved a particular set of photographs by Sugimoto, seascapes, but now Len was considering picking out some of the artist's lightning series as well. He could consider the addition to his plan in the morning though. For now, his eyes flicked to Barry’s face, feeling the loss there, in the bleed.

“It all fades.”

Len wondered what that must be like, but he didn’t have to wonder hard because he could feel it, and it felt like loss. He was a person who hated his own scars, hated the past they represented, enough to cover them in ink and layers of clothes. But his scars were part of him. They told a story of his survival and they were his memories etched in permanence on his skin. Barry didn’t get that kind of permanence. For someone who travelled through time, who had scars on his heart if not the rest of him, Len could feel that ache it drove into Barry.

“There’s sides of you too,” Len said quietly, more than a whisper, gentler than before. “ones you haven’t shown me.”

Barry nodded, looking down between them and Len brought a hand to his cheek, thumbing over it. Barry Allen. His Barry Allen. Who’d survived hell and more, a hell altogether different than Len’s own but painful in its own way. Who took responsibility for more than just one or two, but decided to save the whole goddamn world while he was at it. Who Len didn’t deserve for a second, because no matter how much pain and darkness Barry had endured, he was still good in a way Len never would be.

But in this space, quiet and charged at once, feeling no revulsion from Barry, Len could almost convince himself that Joe West had been wrong, that Barry was with Len because he was with Len, and not because of the bleed, the Bond. He knew better, knew the only reason Barry was pliant with Len’s body framing his, had been complicit all week in his hands and under his kisses, had ever agreed that he belonged to Len—that all of it was because fate had forced him there. But Len was selfish enough to take it, to let himself pretend.

Len felt his own decision made, his instincts flaring to life with it. He kissed Barry, hotter and slower, and then pulled back just enough to whisper against Barry’s lips, “you want to see what I’ve really wanted to do to you, Barry? Been aching to since the first time we were on this bed?”
"Yes."

Len kissed him harder in response, disbelieving but wanting it anyway, part of him needing to press and prove Barry wrong and part aching to prove him right if Len could. His hands cupped Barry’s face, moving back to his hair, pressing his back to the mattress again, catching himself on his elbows so he didn’t have to let go. Barry kissed in kind, arching his body along Len’s and Len didn’t hold himself in check for once, letting himself get caught up in the feeling of kissing Barry, in his own desire. He could feel it matched, tension coiling into desire instead, tongues sliding together and Barry’s hands sliding along his torso. He moved between Barry’s legs and shifted until he could grind himself down, holding enough of his weight up so he wouldn’t smother the other but making sure each inch of them was touching from thigh to lips.

He moved his mouth to Barry’s jaw, to his neck, to the spots he’d memorized that would make Barry gasp and whine, make him buck himself up into Len and the other did, hands clutching at Len’s back and Len growled against the junction of his neck and shoulder, sucked hard enough to leave a mark if only for the minutes it would last. He left more than one, each darker than the last. He took one arm to reach behind himself and clasp Barry’s wrist, pressing it over his head and against the mattress, shoving pillows out the way until Barry’s fingers were wrapping around the wrought iron headboard.

He gasped near Len’s ear and Len didn’t let up, grinding his hips into Barry’s and moving to the other side of his body to repeat the gesture there, mouthing the fresh side of his neck and positioning him until Barry was stretched out for him and shivering under his touches, under his lips. He sucked Barry’s nipples to make him whine and replaced his mouth with his thumbs to suck a hickey to his ribs, tracing moles with his tongue until Barry’s breathing was panted and he was rocking and thrusting up against Len—“please, god, fuck, Len—”

Len moved back up, hands grabbing Barry’s thighs still clad in his jeans and wrapping them around his own waist, rocking his hips down to make Barry groan, pressing their erections to one another. Then he kissed Barry harder, tongue insistent and angry as he was, demanding as he dislodged a hand from Barry’s thigh to reach up and grab his hair, tight enough to pull his head back. Barry choked out a gasp and started to vibrate and Len could feel it, what he was chasing, so close, so hard as he pressed up against Len.

“Len!” he whined and Len rolled his hips and sucked Barry’s neck and felt it build, felt him buzz with electric energy, moaning loud like a half-sob and Len bit the sensitive skin, rolling his hips until Barry let out a broken sound, crying out as he came, the headboard groaning as he arched himself against Len and shuddered. Len rocked him through it, thrusting his hips enough, mouthing over each of the bruises he’d left on Barry’s neck.

Finally, he pulled back to examine Barry’s flushed face, eyes blissed out still, completely and utterly gorgeous. He wondered, couldn’t help but be sure he’d pressed too far, moving away from the circle of Barry’s legs and left the other to relax and melt against the bed, bringing his hands back down from the headboard.

“I can feel you feeling guilty from all the way over here.” Barry sat up and wrinkled his nose, looking down at the wet patch on his crotch. In a blur, he was naked and Len’s eyes widened when Barry was suddenly there, straddling his lap, looking beautiful and righteous. “But don’t. ‘Cause you’re sitting here thinking you shouldn’t have let whatever that was out and I’m telling you that was probably the hottest thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“You think you can read my mind, Barry?” he smirked a little, hands moving to Barry’s hips, because it was hard not to relax a little at his words, hard not to enjoy the view. Hard.
“That’s better,” Barry smiled, and he looked a little shy for a second, then moved down to kiss Len, no less deep but far more gentle than Len had kissed him. “I wanna’ get you off,” he whispered against Len’s lips. “How do you want that?”

He wondered for a second just what exactly was on offer. Neither of them had broached the subject of blowjobs yet and it was no secret why. And tempting as it would be to ask, tempted as he was to see Barry on his knees, there was something else that seemed more appropriate for this particular night. “Why don’t you finger me, Barry?”

He felt the swoop of heat he’d expected at that suggestion, his own voice low as he kept talking. “Only seems fair to let you take me apart like I did you—and you’ve been itching for it for days, don’t think I couldn’t tell.” He could, each time Barry had had his hands on him that week he’d felt a longing, sure there was something more he was craving but not asking for.

Barry let out a strained chuckle, then swore and kissed Len hard. Len smiled into it, a little smug at getting the desired reaction from Barry. He planned on letting himself enjoy what was coming and was sure Barry would as well, that he’d get himself worked up enough for Len to similarly take him apart again after, making Barry cry his name at least once more before the night was out.

He stroked his fingers gently up Barry’s back, down his sides, over his Mark, feeling the nervous fluttering of his heartbeat when he stopped to focus, the intense connection still there, if quieter now than it used to be. Then he laid back and smirked up at Barry, “you know where the lube is.”

Barry nodded, eyes dark and skimming every inch of Len before he stood to grab it while Len undressed, sliding off his pants, naked by the time Barry turned to look at him, hands tucked under his head like he was feeling lazy and not achingly hard. He watched the adam’s apple in Barry’s supple neck bob when he swallowed, eyes zeroing in on Len’s cock. “You’re gonna’ have to spread your legs.”

His voice was deliciously hoarse, but he didn’t even look back up at Len’s face as he spread his thighs and pressed his legs up so his feet were planted on the mattress. He typically did this—the rare times he had a partner he let have this type of position over him—on his knees, so whoever it was wouldn’t be able to see the flush on his cheeks or catalogue the openness of his face. But he could give Barry that, at least this time, especially after the other’s wanton display with him.

Barry moved between his legs and finally looked Len in the eye, gaining more confidence again, grinning, one hand on Len’s thigh, fingers skimming. “Anything particular you like that I should know?”

Len let himself shift up onto his elbows, thighs crowding tighter against Barry’s. “Why don’t you experiment and see?”

The heat in the bleed intensified and Len was tired of the hesitating. He shifted to lay back, eyes still on Barry, and watched with rapt attention as the other slicked his fingers with more lube than was strictly necessary before tentatively dropping them between Len’s legs, cupping his balls for a moment and rolling them in his palm in a way he definitely knew Len enjoyed, earning him a hitched breath as slick fingers pressed against Len’s perineum behind. Then the fingers were sliding further back, Barry’s breath matching Len’s, both of them inhaling together when they found their mark, pressing gently against the tight ring of muscle.

“I can assure you, Barry, I’m not breakable. If you don’t hurry up though, I might break something.”

Barry laughed, a low chuckle, and Len wasn’t really serious because Barry wasn’t even teasing really, hadn’t learned that fine art yet, but Len felt like he’d waited an eternity for this already so
Barry might as well have been the biggest goddamn tease there was. It didn’t matter though, because a second later he was sliding in a digit, pressing it past the muscle and inside. God, there was a second of relief, an exhale as the finger explored, pushed in and out, curious and tentative and bold at once.

Len let his eyes close and tried not to think about his own hands starting to grip the sheets, letting out a little gasp a minute later when Barry pressed in a second finger, tight but not too tight, Len enjoying himself too much for that. He swallowed and breathed deep, rocking his hips minutely down, eyebrows creasing as the fingers thrust in deeper, again, then again, and found his prostate finally, forcing him to let out a noise he tried to bite back.

“There?”

As if Barry needed the confirmation, pressing the digits over it, practically massaging but gentle. After a few minutes of thrusting that had him swallowed back moans, Len huffed out a breath and forced his eyes to open, looking up at Barry and god he looked good, on his knees with his fingers inside Len, hand pumping, cheeks flushed as Len knew his own must be, part of the reason he often hid face when he was on the receiving end. Barry’s eyes flicked up to Len’s face, pupils dark as they met Len’s and there, holding his gaze, Barry started to smirk and—

“FUCK!” Len’s back arched involuntarily as Barry’s fingers started to vibrate inside of him. His breath felt punched out of him, his own hands clenched so tight in the sheets they might rip, gasping and god Barry’s other hand finally decided to find Len’s cock, slick with lube, the only hint that it would start vibrating too before it started to do just that. Len swore again, softer and breathier, willing himself not to all-out keen but his breathing was just this side of a whine as Barry worked him, the sensations too good not to be totally captivated. It wasn’t just the tips of the fingers—it was the whole digits, hot inside him from his prostate to the tight ring of muscle clenching around the buzzing fingers, and the whole hand wrapped around his cock that slid up and down, the dual movements sending vibrations through Len and god it was too much, Barry stretched his fingers inside and it was too damn much and Len swore, a choked-off broken sound, eyes screwed shut as his whole body tensed and he was arching again, just enough, coming hard, spilling onto his own stomach.

Their breathing was the only sound in the room for a moment, Barry pulling his hands away, sighing, and Len let some of the flush recede from his cheeks before he opened his eyes again.

“How long have you been planning that?” he croaked, amused despite himself and Barry huffed out a laugh, wiping his fingers clean on some tissues.

“Uh… probably since the first time you suggested that you’d consider bottoming?” he made it into a question, a cheeky grin on his face and Len wished he had it in him to glare but just smiled instead.

“Just waiting for the day you can vibrate your dick inside me?” he was leaning up on his elbows again, smirking, but it slid off his face when Barry started to blush. “You’re serious?”

“I, umm, may have tried it and it’s apparently possible so,” he shrugged with an embarrassed smile, “there’s that?”

He was tempted to ask for it this second; Barry was hard as a rock and Len was already loosened up. But he was also pretty damn sure that considering how intense the rest of the night had been already, jumping to that would be too much and he could be patient. And Len wasn’t about to forget what a gift it was that Barry was sharing all of his firsts with Len, and he wanted to savor each one, to make each special for Barry—he wasn’t all hard edges and anger. No, however much of himself he’d been trying to hold back from Barry, to not fight, none of what he’d shown him had really been a lie,
either. And somehow, moving in to kiss the other gently, that was comforting.

Chapter End Notes

So, guess who’s PoV we finally get next chapter?????? :D

And lol, the first draft outline for this chapter was actually much shorter and happy and I couldn’t have that much ease, had to bring in angst about Len hiding himself (in more ways than one), the scars, and Len’s insecurities about Barry being with him. Because all the things Henry and Joe (and at times, Barry) have said has now insinuated itself inside him. He knows he loves Barry, and while he knows that he only got to know Barry as he did because they’re Soulmates, he was always intrigued, and he feels in love with Barry as Barry.

But Barry (in Len’s mind), has only pushed himself to be with Len because he had to. Len’s done his damn best to back off and let Barry dictate the speed of their relationship, has tried hard not to push, but while Barry might be increasingly okay with it, Len is certain that Barry could/would never love him for who he is, and has only and will only come to care about him because of their Bond and how it brought them to where they are now. Without that, Barry would never have seen Len as anything but “Snart” or “Cold”. (he’s wrong, obvly, but how the hell do you convince someone you love them for them, in a situation like the one they’re in, especially when you don’t even know that person is having these kinds of thoughts???? :3)

Yes, I’m an asshole, I know. And next chapter, you’ll get to see someone who’s been an even bigger asshole than me!! :D

ps - shout out to dragdragdragon for some awesome help with art stuff! (as in, Sugimoto’s art and art suggestions, not me actually drawing) and also a shoutout to all of the people who send me song recs!!! i legit forget who sends what song because they all end up on the same playlist, but i really appreciate it!
“LADIES AND GENTLEMAN! BOYS AND GHOULS OF ALL AGES! MISTERS AND MADAMS AND BEARDED WOMEN!”

“Never gets less offensive,” Chandra sighed, peeking out between the curtains.

“Lighten up, doll,” James grinned, a flower appearing in his hand, “he’s just givin’ ‘em what they want.”

She snorted, “you do realize you’re an acrobat, right? Not a magician?”

“That’s no fun—can’t I be both? A few tricks up your sleeve never hurt anyone.”

Chandra snagged the flower and rolled her eyes at him. “You know, instead of flowers and tricks, you could always just swing by with a bottle of wine.”

He swallowed then smiled, “why Channie, I thought you’d never ask.”

She mmm’d and he liked the way her lips looked, red and confident. This wasn’t the first time they’d flirted and he should really take her up on her offer—the woman was gorgeous: all leg, and that lion-tamer costume did things to him like you wouldn’t believe. He resolved to pick up some wine next time he ventured into the city.

“Stop staring and get that overshirt off, Jamesy, or you’ll miss your cue.”

He grinned and winked as he pulled his outer shirt off, the one with all the extra pockets for his toys. Out performing, his clothes were very form-fitting, and Chandra didn’t seem to mind. It wasn’t really done for people in the community to ogle one another, but he didn’t mind inviting her to do so.

Anything for a beautiful woman.
“Jesse!” a stage hand, one of the new kids, hissed at him to get his attention and he rolled his eyes.

“Duty calls.”

He felt Chandra’s gaze follow him as he headed toward his entrance, shivering for a moment under her appraisal.

**********

James loved performing. Lights, action. Loved it. Performing in the ring, performing on the tight rope, performing a con, it was all the same to him. He loved the attention. Loved the rush. To be the center of people’s entire worlds for a full few minutes, to captivate them, to make them hold their breaths and follow where he moved, having them ooh and aah while he held all the cards.

Truthfully, he didn’t mind adding a little pizzazz beyond his actual acrobatics, which alone were impressive. His family had never never been for it, thought the art should be enough, but if you can shoot off fireworks in the middle of your performance and still balance on the line, why not go for it? Give the people what they want. Give yourself what you want. James didn’t really believe in denying himself from things he enjoyed.

So in the group he was with now, he made a point to pull out all the stops when he could. He did a little work with a partner on the trapeze, a muscled woman whose body was harder than his own, he was sure, blond and severe. She had no showmanship. But she walked an amazing line, and James and the ringmaster here saw eye to eye, so halfway through her set when she moved into solo work, James got to take the floor, the microphone.

This part, too, he lived for. It was just like running a con. He got to dazzle the audience with nothing but his words, keep them on the edge of their seats, directing them, running cues, playing games with their attention, getting them, as a group, to acquiesce by virtue of their attention.

Nothing better than having a bunch of schmucks eat up every word and pay with cash. Not that he didn’t respect his audience—no audience, no trick, no fun. But they were too easy sometimes.

“How about that, ladies and gentleman, Marietta is going to wow you with her next move—now don’t you peel your peepers from her b-e-a-utiful body—” and don’t look too close at her feet “—and watch as she moves into a—can you believe—she is doing a flip on the tightrope!”

James was pretty sure he’d have made an excellent radio broadcaster in another life. Maybe an auctioneer. Probably both. Why limit himself? But he almost missed being on the line himself, now that he was down. Talking was only half the fun, and he was pretty sure he could have done Marietta’s set blindfolded. Hell, maybe he should try that sometime.

He let the crowd gasp as she landed it perfectly and clapped along with them, then couldn’t help but sing her praises, “and isn’t she gorgeous, gentleman? Ladies, hold on to your husbands because our girl here is one of a kind. Of course, for all you ladies who came alone tonight to see the show, I hope you know that I am single and just as flexible as the lovely Marietta.”

There was laughter and titters of giggles in the audience and he put on his most rakish grin, winking at a pretty woman in the second row. Her short brown curls bounced around her head and wondered if wine with Chandra was really worth it, or if he should try to find a girl from the audience to help end his dry spell. Really, no strings attached was probably better than sleeping with another
He finished the show, more than one more flirtatious comment directed to the audience before he had to give up the mic and perform a final few tricks: where his firecrackers finally got to come in handy. The rest of his concerns washed away as he did, getting into the familiar motions, the movement of his body through practiced routines, stretching his muscles and pushing them, straining for the performance because it felt better that way.

In these moments where the rest of the world fell away and he hit pure flow, James felt in tune with his Bond, his NAB. It felt like music, like humming, like a tune that would get stuck in his ear. A phantom he pushed away until the times when he couldn’t, when it was there and alive in every fiber as he stretched and turned, like fast flowing water, like listening to an aria that only he could hear. It went on and on, a steady heartbeat, the smell of lavender, an ache in his gut.

The applause broke the spell like a bucket of ice over him and he grinned, relieved. Getting caught in that spell was the worst, like you wouldn’t believe.

**********

Backstage was always hectic. James liked to avoid it when he could. He’d go back after the rest of the show was done to meet some of the gals, flirt a bit, but in the meantime he liked to keep himself out from underfoot when he wasn’t on stage. It was more fun to work on his tricks, scooping up his many-pocketed shirt—he should get a cape, but what acrobat needed a cape?—and maybe find some kids out back who’d actually appreciate his yo-yo abilities. They were hard earned skills, after all.

Chandra was on stage and he should really get a girl on his arm if he could. Easier than having an awkward conversation if she dropped another hint.

He was almost back at his trailer to reorganize when he heard a “HEY!” and turned his head up. Two men were making their way in his direction and he wondered who they were after and—yep nope, it was him. What’d he do now? He didn’t remember conning them but hey, it could’ve been some girl’s angry husband? Brother?… Father?

"Do I know you, gentlemen?"

“What the hell are you doing?” hissed the smaller man to the larger one. He was tall but still small and cute if you went for that kind of thing, which James definitely did not.

The older guy ignored the pretty one. “You’re James?”

“And who might be asking?” he grinned because he could, and turned to face the guy head on as the man finally stopped, and, huh. He definitely was the type of guy who meant business. Older than James, hair going silver, looked like he knew how to throw a punch or seven. You learned how to read people if you spent your time conning them, and James figured this was a fight he’d rather win with words than fists, trying to figure why the guy looked so familiar. At the same time, he was distracted by the harsh anger lining the guy’s face.

“I’ve got something that belongs to you that it’s high time I deliver.”

James’ eyebrows shot up as the guy took a step forward. Even his companion looked alarmed, like he was ready to physically hold him back if needed. Good luck, kid.
“I can give you a P.O. Box number if you like?” James cricked his head to the side and resisted the urge to wink; that worked better on women.

“I’ve got it right here.” He brought up a hand and James readied himself to take a blow and fight back—he didn’t even know this asshole’s name!—but the guy didn’t try to punch him. Instead he just held up his arm and pulled down his sleeve and there was a tattoo but—oh.

Oh hell no.

“My grandfather’s watch,” there was no humor left in James's voice. He knew who took that watch, knew the last time he’d seen it, seen him—

“Oh is it? He just said it was your’s, you know, when he gave it to me.” This asshole sounded way too smug all the sudden, cold but like a cat with the cream, pleased he was under James’ skin. The glare and the smirk said it all.

“So that’s it, huh? You’re some faggot that Hartley chose to make time with, thinking you can come here and—”

“HARTLEY?!” the brunet looked so pissed now that James almost cackled, seeing the older guy suddenly sweat, turn to look at his companion for the first time, obviously worried. A couple of fags together then, even if the older guy looked too tough to be a fairy.

“Barry—”

“Hartley Rathaway is the tramp you slept with?!”

The smile slid off James’ face. “What did you just call him?” Whatever else he wasn’t to Hartley, he wasn’t about to let this guy trash-talk his Soulmate.

“I’ll explain later, I promise. Give me a minute.”

“Yeah kid—you ever call my Soulmate that again and I’ll kick your skinny little a—”

“Don’t you dare—” the older guy turned back to him with a tight fury, a step forward, “threaten my Soulmate.”

James held his ground. They were in between some tents and mostly away from prying eyes, but if he needed to take this guy down he was fairly sure he could. He had enough stuff up various sleeves to help him if he needed.

“So what—you gets your rocks off with Hartley and he gives you a present? A gold star? Is pretty-boy over there not good enough for you? Doesn’t put out enou—”

The older guy moved pretty damn fast, as it turned out. Fast enough that he punched James square across the jaw, hard—dio dannato that hurt—knocking him flat on his ass—a true tumbler knew how to fall with grace—before he fully even registered that the man had moved. James was moving to stand and kick the guy’s ass when he was grabbed by the front of his shirt in both hands, being hauled forward. James was this close to headbutting this asshole, snarling but the guy started talking.

“Listen up and listen well, you homophobic prick. You don’t deserve the air that Hartley breathes, okay? I oughtta’ ice you and save him the trouble of spending the rest of his life Bonded to someone who’d rather kick him onto the floor at night than risk getting cooties from touching him—who’d rather fuck him like a whore than hold him.”
And James would have headbutted him for that, would’ve killed this carogna for that, but he was busy having his stomach turn to lead. “He told you that?” his voice was scratchy as hell, the punch got him worse than he realized.

“He told me more, James. But for some godforsaken reason, he still wasn’t ready to let you go until he gave up this watch.” The guy threw him back onto the ground and he didn’t even try to fight it, falling back again. “So here, it’s yours again.” The watch dropped onto James’ chest with a hollow thud.

”C’mon, Len, let’s go.” The smaller one was hunched and tense, the older guy hard and angry still, starting to turn. Oh hell no. They were not just leaving it at that. James launched himself to his feet.

“Who the hell do you think you are, you bastardo—figlio di puttana, some old finocchio who comes to my circus and thinks you can tell me anything,” he marched forward and got right into this asshole’s space, close and tight, almost surprised at the vehemence of his own language, the hard undertone to his normally booming voice. “You’re just an ugly succhiacazzi—you think you know anything about Hart? He spent almost a year with me and what—a week with you? I know he works through his lovers fast. Is that it—you sad he up and left your old and ugly ass for someone new? Or d’you just feel guilty because you tossed him to the side like old news after you got your little boy toy here?”

The man was a scary kind of calm mad, the type that always meant trouble. James was an over-the-top mad kind of guy, because why keep that shit bottled up when you could let it out? But this guy was trouble. He drew himself up and his face twisted as he uttered the next words.

“Listen up James because I really will only say this once. I’m letting you live as a courtesy to both my Soulmate and yours, and nothing more. If I thought you were worth the time of day I’d tell you to clean up your act and apologize to Hartley but you’re obviously too far gone to bother. What I know about Hartley is that he is a friend and I protect my own. And yes, James,” his lips curled into a nasty smirk, “I had Hartley on his knees for me but you know what—unlike you I appreciated him enough to return the favor and get him off after, and you know he makes the sweetest noises. And also unlike you, I’ve actually kissed your Soulmate.”

There was a pounding in his ears, the one with his Mark felt hot. They—the two men—were ten paces away by the time James collected himself enough to speak, not thinking. “Hey!”

They paused, but didn’t turn.

“Just—tell me one thing?” he looked down at the watch in his hand, then up at the guy’s waiting back. “Is… is he happy?”

**********

The month after Hartley left, James’ trailer had never felt emptier. It got better, slowly, as he started to get used to being alone again, didn’t come home with a joke on his lips or an anecdote to share with the air anymore, once he got used to it. Heading back to it now felt like those first days again, the hollow that Hartley left.

James wasn’t a man to dwell on things. He was a man of action, goddammit.

But he couldn’t help sitting on the side of the bed and staring at his watch, cheeks growing wet.
Hartley took a helluva lot more than just this hunk of metal when he left.

James hurled it against the wall and folded his hands into his hair, curling in on himself and trying to stifle the sounds of sobbing, even alone as he was.

Sometimes, when he had a bad day, he’d reach out for his bleed. He spent so much time suppressing it at first, feeling Hart do the same, dampening it down. So much time ignoring it. Wishing it wasn’t there. But when he was alone, it felt like someone else beside him, their emotions nestled next to his own. Someone to worry about, to ask if they were having a bad day, a good one, to celebrate their triumphs. To stew jealously about when he could feel them with another person, disgusted with himself for not wanting to tune that out, for wanting to feel it, to be part of it, however disconnected he might be.

He probably just needed to get laid. He’d been alone for too long, a cold bed since Hartley had left. No one caught his eye, and doe-eyed brunettes that he used to take home now reminded him too much of someone else, someone he’d rather never think about when he was having sex. So he just… hadn’t. He should have bought that bottle of wine. He should’ve found the girl in the second row and got her number. He should be doing anything but wallowing in his misery and reaching out for his bleed.

James was never one to worry too much about ‘should’ and ‘ought’, so he let himself have this.

It was like… home. Addicting, too. He close his eyes and laid back on his little bed and held a pillow in his arms and pulled it tight to his chest the way he always wanted to with Hart, with no one around to see or judge him for it. He felt… comfort. Like a lullaby. Hartley was… okay. He was good. He wasn’t scared or tense like he sometimes felt, not sore or sad. And James found himself smiling just a little, through the tears.

That was okay though. He was allowed to be happy his Soulmate was happy. He was allowed to wish Hartley well, wherever he was.

James swallowed thick. He was okay.

**********

In the middle of the night, James woke with his arms around a pillow and memories of blue eyes swimming behind his eyelids, irrationally angry.

He woke from a dream that always ended the same way—with Hartley, there in front of him, James reaching out to hold him.

“I’m sorry, Hartley, come home.”

“You don’t mean it, James.”

“I do. I miss you.”

“You only miss me in my dreams.”

James hated that dream more than anything. It felt like having to relive Hart leaving whenever it happened, and it was no surprise that it happened this particular night.
That guy—the asshole who’d socked him in the jaw for no damn good reason (and he really should’ve iced it because wow did it hurt now)—that old prune had slept with Hartley, had kissed him, and rubbed James’s face in it? That guy thought he knew more about Hartley than his own Soulmate did?

To hell with that.

James got out his old laptop. He didn’t really expect this to work—James didn’t know much about social media, didn’t bother with things like Facebook or the rest of it, was more interested in the real world than the online one, even if he did know his way around a computer by necessity. But he finally broke down and did one thing that seemed ridiculous but also seemed to work for everyone else these days. He googled Hart’s name.

He did not expect so many hits.

Maybe Hartley Rathaway was a more common name than he’d thought? Or someone famous had the name? He scrolled up and down over titles and headlines, wondering where to start.

“What do we have here?” he asked the air, directing the question to one of his hand-puppets, the one with the white polka dots on the green outfit. It had always been Hart’s favorite. The link on the screen read *Prodigal Son Returns to Wreak Havoc: Hartley Rathaway Attacks Rathaway Company Premises, Apprehended by the Flash*.

There was no way that was his Hartley, but it sounded interesting enough to distract James for a moment.

It was a good thing he wasn’t drinking because he would’ve spit it right back out. Apparently, it was his Hartley.

“*Blue Eyes*?! What the hell are you wearing?!”

The puppet didn’t answer. Tough crowd.

The picture looked ridiculous. Well, no. It looked off. Hart was wearing some hooded cape and those weird gloves he used to tinker with, standing dramatically in the photo with his arms out and aimed at something out of the picture, like some renaissance artist pose, wearing boots that were frankly the gayest thing James had ever seen him in.

“You incorrigible little shit, what did you…” his eyes scanned the page, and by the time he reached the end of the article, he had to go back up and read it a second time.

*At 10:40am Wednesday morning, Hartley Rathaway was apprehended by the Flash after vandalizing the outer face of the Rathaway Industries corporate tower in downtown Central City. Police report that Rathaway was using some handheld device to wreak his destruction on the building before the arrival of Central City’s own Flash.*

*Eyewitnesses report that Rathaway arrived at the company premises and began to destroy the windows and side of the building before turning his attention to surrounding vehicles and the police cruisers that arrived on the scene. A solitary police car and several surrounding vehicles were ruined due to Rathaway’s device before the Flash arrived, at which point eyewitnesses claim that the police allowed the vigilante to take over the scene.*

*“The Flash just showed up like that,” reports Alex Stadnicki, a 22-year employee of Rathaway Industries who was on the scene Wednesday morning. “The police just waited and watched while the Flash had a little chit chat with him [Rathaway] before being blasted into the building*
Stadnicki is referring to the 6-feet tall solid glass emblem that marks the building premises that was destroyed in the squirmish between the Flash and Rathaway. The Scarlet Speedster was hit by Rathaway’s device, something that Picture News’ Science Correspondent posits is a weapon that uses localized sonic blasts, and then zoomed away with Rathaway in custody. The police report that neither have been heard from since.

“It’s clear that Rathaway Industries isn’t looking to press charges, but Mr. Rathaway is wanted with a warrant out for charges such as the destruction of police property and aggravated assault, and assault with a deadly weapon. Any person who has information regarding his whereabouts should contact the police immediately,” cites officer Morillo of the CCPD, one of the first responders on the scene.

Hartley Rathaway is the disgraced son of Osgood and Rachel Rathaway, CEO of Rathaway Industries and Director of the Keystone Central Symphony Orchestra, respectively. Rathaway Jr. came out publically as a homosexual four years ago at the age of 20, after which he was publically disowned from the Rathaway family, whose net worth is estimated to be approximately 1.3 billion. Rathaway Jr. was disinherited from the family, including the loss of a trust fund rumored to be in the hundred millions. His father, Mr. Osgood Rathaway, has stated publically stated at he has no son, and declined to comment on the events of Wednesday morning.

After his disinheriance, Rathaway worked with S.T.A.R. Labs in the creation of the particle accelerator that cost the lives of 117 people in the Twin Cities last December. Rathaway worked on the project as the…

The article kept going, a few more paragraphs about Hartley and the Flash and Central City. James read it a third time, just to be sure. Vandal. Billionaire. Renowned physicist who worked on that damn monstrosity that killed so many people.

Then he kept googling, because clearly, there was a lot he didn’t know about Hartley, after all.

**********

James gave up practicing his routines after about fifteen minutes in the evening. He almost fell and almost dropped someone and almost broke a few bones. So, well, distraction was the enemy of any acrobat. He dodged Chandra’s questions on the way back to his trailer.

His trailer that felt like a traitor.

How many secrets had Hartley had? His family, his wealth, his upbringing? James knew about his work, his career, that he was kicked out on his ass, that he loved physics and to invent things, but Hart never said he worked on the particle accelerator. He never said he was a billionaire.

The trailer felt more pitifully small than it ever had. It was always enough for James, but after the opulence that Blue Eyes was probably used to, what kind of shab he must’ve thought James was. James hadn’t thought twice about it when Hartley showed up looking for a place to stay, dejected and terrified. It never occurred to him to be self-conscious about the small quarters, because beggars couldn’t be choosers, and Hartley was there begging for a place to stay. Not that he needed to—James wasn’t so heartless that he’d ever turn away his Soulmate if he needed him, even if it was
weird and awkward for both of them. He’d just sighed and opened the door, laid down some ground rules and let Hartley take up as much of the tiny trailer as he needed to.

Hart never complained though. Well no, he did, but only about stupid things like getting a water filter. Who the hell wanted a water filter? They made everything taste funny—it was just water, who cared? James had always chalked Hartley being prissy up to him being gay, not up to him being rich as hell. Or not rich, anymore, but that kind of thing was in your blood once you were raised into it; it didn’t just disappear. Entitlement.

Except Hart never acted entitled. Well, okay, that was a lie. He acted entitled about a lot of things. But not the space, the trailer, the bed, the money. Just… grateful. He never complained about how small it was, just how many messes James left, the dishes in the sink. He never whined that his life was so pathetic, that he was jobless and penniless, just tinkered with things and helped out the other circus members with their problems and complimented or commented on James’ routines. He just… existed, in James’s space, in James’ life. And it was nice.

But how miserable he must’ve been. Or… not must have, but was. Because he was. Not all the time but… would you treat me this way if I was your girl?

It’s not like James hadn’t had time to consider since then, to think about all the things he’d done wrong. He did. He had. He’d lost counts of all the nights he’d laid awake and stared at the low ceiling above his bed, their bed, and counted his mistakes. He knew. He knew he’d done Hartley wrong. Blue Eyes couldn’t help that he was gay—James believed that, he knew that whatever else it was, it wasn’t a choice—and Hart couldn’t help that he was pretty, that if he were a woman this would’ve all been so easy, exactly what James had always wanted in a partner: smart, gorgeous, funny, and god he even knew Italian. Of course he knew Italian. Hartley knew everything.

It wasn’t Hart’s fault that when he accidentally brushed James in his sleep, James had to push him out of bed to suppress the urge to roll over and fold Hart into his arms, to crush them both together. It wouldn’t even be so bad if it stopped at that, just holding his Soulmate. But his body—just his body, it was animal instinct, that urge to claim, to rut against something warm and tight and pretty. And those instincts inside James—he was a red-blooded male after all, and with a warm body in his bed, he was hard-pressed not to want to just—

Who was he kidding? James got up from his chair and grabbed the table, shouting at nothing as he knocked it over in a sudden fit, dishes crashing, and he heaved in a breath. Who did he really think he was kidding? He sat on his ass on the ground and bunched his fists and swore. Because he knew, he knew, he knew—

He wanted Hartley. He did, always had. Well, maybe not at first sight, Initial Communion, more scared than anything, but dio donnato—even then, maybe, this pretty stranger who’s hand he shook because the other was so bright-eyed when James yelled, so flushed that James had to shake his hand, had to try and prove him wrong because he was scared even of the way he felt looking at that face.

James’ eyes screwed closed, pulling in unnaturally thick breaths.

Too quickly he had wanted it all: that cheeky goddamn smile, those baby blue eyes. How many times he’d run around it in his head, wishing Hart were a woman. Wishing anything. Anything. Just… not…not what James couldn’t let himself want.

He choked on a sob. He missed Hartley so goddamn much.

He probably shouldn’t’ve given in to temptation so many times, so easily. Probably shouldn’t have
spent his days staring at any scrap of skin Hartley showed, mesmerized by his smile, dying to lean forward and kiss the cheeky smirk from his face, to carry him into bed and sin and sin and sin.

He stood up and kicked the bed, upended the mattress, knocked the dishes off the counter with shouts of rage. He kicked the trunk of things that Hartley had left and hurt his foot, swore and grabbed it, hopping before he landed on his ass on the trunk, miserable as he remembered holding Hartley in the dark of the night, not knowing or letting himself figure out how to make it good for the smaller man, kissing his neck but never his mouth, hands on his back, his hips, his stomach if James was feeling bold, but never his flat chest, never in between his legs, because he couldn’t—he shouldn’t.

James had been raised with too many siblings and too strict of a father. The youngest of many and having to stand out to be noticed at all, having to defend himself against the taunts of older siblings, called names when he liked to play with dolls, told that ‘no son of mine is gonna be a fag!’ in no uncertain terms, toys plucked from his fingers and thrown in the fire, mother frowning and telling him to watch his older brothers, to be like them, to hide if he had to. He didn’t have to hide—he wasn’t like that. When he went to confession to repent, those weren’t the sins he had to admit. When he prayed to God to make him better, it was prayers asking to be less angry, to be good and not so mean, it was never prayers not to want the wrong person, never prayers to wipe away some evil in him.

He wasn’t like that. Not as a child, not as he grew into a teen and dutifully didn’t look at any of the other male performers, didn’t sneak glances he shouldn’t at the wrong sorts of pretty people. Not when he was older still, left home for the cities, making a name—or a dozen names, as it were—as a con-man, finding beautiful women who seemed keen to get to know him, whispering his apologies to God as he let himself tumble into their beds, elevating his understanding of sins of the flesh, letting go of some of the stuffier parts of his upbringing.

He wasn’t like that until he was. Until he always had been.

James slid from the trunk onto the floor again, back against it, feeling hollow and empty.

What had it all been for? How can it have been worth it, if this was where it got him? He glanced around at the wreckage, fury gone as it came, dispassionate. The broken dishes, the upturned bed, the feathers from the pillows strewn about, table on its side. All things that could be fixed. The one thing that mattered couldn’t be fixed. At least, not easily, if ever.

What had it all been for if he never let himself touch the person he loved, and lost him because of it?

They could’ve been friends. They could’ve been the best of friends. But James had loved him too much, wanted him too badly, been unable to quell or control the fire that Hartley lit inside of him. And he’d taken it out on Hartley in return.

He felt sick. He hadn’t eaten. The trailer felt wrong, and James didn’t know if he could stay there anymore. Not now that he knew where Hartley was, had been all this time. Here, in Central City.

He knocked his head back against the trunk. Hartley’s things. He sighed and stood, could barely remember what he’d shoved in there in his fit of horror and anger and realizing the other wasn’t just gone, but was never, ever coming back.

With delicate, shaking fingers, James opened it, and almost sighed. It wasn’t things that were going to break his heart. It was equipment, tools he’d been tinkering with, the boots he’d wanted to match his gloves—sonic gloves, apparently, and James wondered if he’d been planning that even while he was here in this trailer. He wondered if Hartley ever would’ve told him about his life, his fortune, his
He wondered if he would ever get a chance now to ask.

James slid his fingers along the contents of the trunk and glanced at the puppet with the polka dots, untouched and safe on the shelf. “Well, Hart, how about it… how much will a second chance cost me, d’you figure?”

The puppet didn’t respond. Tough crowd. But that was okay, because James was pretty sure that was a question he was going to have to ask the real Hartley. And to do that… James looked around the broken mess, the trunk, the puppets, pulling thoughts together… to do that, he was going to need a little flair.

Chapter End Notes

James is an UNRELIABLE NARRATOR. Say it with me: James is an unreliable narrator. “James didn’t really believe in denying himself from things he enjoyed.” Hahaha- hah- ha *chokes on ugly laughter through the tears*

Anything he says directly about how he thinks and feels in the first ¾ of the chapter should be taken with a grain of salt. To understand James, read between the lines. His chapter is like a performance in and of itself, and sort of like a performance, there’s slight of hand, what he wants you to see and directs your attention, and then where you actually have to look in order to figure out the trick. (I spend too much time on deciding a tone for each character omg).

Also, if this seems like an abrupt turn around, remember it's been a year (or a lifetime) in the making, and it's not really a 180 so much as it is a final acceptance that whatever else, the truth is that he wants Hart there, and he always did and always has. And that wasn't so much a lie that he was ever telling himself, he's just now starting to accept *all* the ways in which he wants Hartley. More ground yet to cover, of course :)

Anyway, let's see how our other characters deal with what went down this chapter, eh? ;)

ps - i apologize for any and all destruction of the italian language. if anyone knows italian well enough to correct all the insults and swears i tossed in there, feel free to let me know ^_^;;
Chapter Summary

2 Heads by Coleman Hell and With Arms Outstretched by Rilo Kiley

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barry’s fingers clenched and unclenched on the drive home. He felt roiling emotions and it was all wrong and tense and tight and he was pissed but for all the wrong reasons and he knew it but that didn’t change the fact.

They hadn’t even talked to the reptile lady.

They’d been sitting in the audience, watching the strange performances, Barry at least partway entertained, impressed by some, until Len started to feel angry next to him. Barry didn’t notice at first, not paying any mind to the bleed, but he glanced at Len during one of the acrobatic tricks to laugh and Len’s face had been dark with suppressed rage, fists clenched tight, and it had swarmed his perception then. Len hadn’t answered his inquiries, focused on the acrobat and Barry had followed his gaze in confusion until the man left the ring and Len was standing.

“I’ll be back. There’s something I have to do.”

As if Barry would just leave it at that, following Len and quietly hissing for an explanation, Len getting more tense but not answering, more dogged by the step. “You won’t like this,” was all he’d said before they were outside and rounding on the acrobat.

What a fucking mess that had been.

Neither had spoken since then, except for Len to ask if Barry wanted to find the reptile woman and Barry’s terse response that they were going home.

He glared out the window and tried to collect his thoughts, his feelings. He knew Len could feel it all, could feel the tension and anxiety and anger coming off him still, the car a cyclical space for their negative emotions.

He let out a breath and tried to let go some of his anger. Len’s hands tensed on the steering wheel.

“I can drive you home, if you’d rather.”

Barry tried not to choke on the tears suddenly welling up, sniffed and shook his head. “Your place.”

The worst part of his own anger might be how it was setting Len off so badly. Barry knew they were in some weird space still. Len had fought so damn hard to get Barry to be with him and yet tried to push him away whenever things got tense once they were together. It made no damn sense to him—what was Len thinking would happen? That Barry would leave, could leave, now, after everything they’d been through to make it to where they were? It hurt that Len thought Barry might honestly chose to run away instead of deal with this. That after yelling at Joe and fighting so hard and agreeing that he belonged to Len, belonged with him, some part of him thought that Barry didn’t
want to be beside him.  

Or at least, beside the parts of Len that he thought Barry didn’t find so savory. But half wasn’t enough.  

The pancakes, the quiet moments, the Netflix nights and relaxing on the couch, the massages, Barry wanted all of that. Of course he did. He’d expected his whole life to bond with someone sweet, someone like Iris—someone to come home to and tell about his day and celebrate their successes together. Someone to work hard alongside, to be a team with, to understand and be understood by. Someone to build a family with, to have kids with, his own or adopted, it didn’t matter.  

But Len had been right, months ago over breakfast, when he told Barry to have a little faith. Then, he’d only seen a man who derailed trains and called himself Captain Cold and hurt his friends and family; who led a gang of criminals that Barry didn’t even know all the members of. Didn’t know if Len would tell him if he asked. He knew that man could be good—hoped to God that man could be good—but he also knew a lot of pain at Cold’s hands. That was the man Barry had Bonded with.  

And that half wasn’t right and wasn’t enough either. The whole picture wasn’t simple, but Barry wanted and needed all. This wouldn’t work if they didn’t give each other their honest selves, whatever those were. Except that Len was still trying to hide himself. Barry was ready to just do this, to share his friends, his family, his secrets with Len, opening every aspect of his life now—finally, maybe, but it was happening—and Len still had these secrets, had whole chunks tucked away that Barry didn’t get to ask about, didn’t get to know about.  

And it hurt. It hurt that Len didn’t trust him enough to tell him what he was going to do when he followed that acrobat. It hurt that Len didn’t trust him enough to believe he was sticking around to sort this out. It hurt that Len didn’t want him to know things, to know parts of himself.  

And it hurt that Len had slept with Hartley goddamn Rathaway for reasons Barry couldn’t even articulate. They weren’t together then. Len wasn’t his. Except he was. They were Soulmates and they goddamn belonged to each other and—  

Len pulled up in his driveway and Barry was breathing heavy. He got out of the car and the cool air helped set his head on straight. He needed… something. Needed to feel like Len was his despite everything (he was, except he wasn’t wholly), like Len didn’t choose Hartley over him (he hadn’t, except he had), to reassure the anxiety he was getting off Len that he wasn’t angry (he wasn’t, except he was), to let Len know that he wouldn’t do anything stupid (he wouldn’t, except he might).  

Barry shook the handle until it unlocked and phased his hand through the door to get the bolt lock, ignoring the feel of Len’s surprise as the man followed him into the house. He had too much inside him bubbling outward to wait, to be patient. He was overflowing.  

“Neat trick.”  

Barry rounded on him before Len could do much more than close the door behind him. “Hartley Rathaway—the asshole that you slept with was the Pied Piper and you didn’t think I would want to know that?! You know he tried to kill me, right?”  

“That’s your issue? So did I.”  

Barry gaped at him for a moment, truly dumbfounded and he watched Len’s eyes widen as he realized what he’d just said. Barry’s mouth snapped closed and Len spoke.  

“I’m sorry—”
“I can’t believe you. You ruined our night out and chance to find a meta just to punch some guy because he hurt Hartley’s feelings?!”

“He did a helluva lot more than that, Barry.”

Barry dragged his hands through his hair in frustration, nodding, trying not to be petty, trying to stick to the parts that were relevant and not—“you were wearing his watch! Something from Hartley!”

“It was a gift.”

“From a guy you basically cheated on me with!”

“We’ve been over this,” Len ground out. “We were broken up and I was a colossal ass but we agreed we were through this!”

They were. Barry breathed deep through his nose. They had. “You picked him over me,” he whispered, a shudder going through him.

He felt something turn in Len’s stomach, or maybe it was his own, phantom like and too real at once. “No, Barry—I picked me over you.”

Barry swallowed. He knew what that was like. He’d done the same, after Joe was hurt. He got it. He did. It made sense. He understood.

He still felt so totally helpless and he hated it. “I need something from you,” his voice was scratchy but determined and he looked at Len when he said it.

“What?”

Barry stepped forward, slow into Len’s space but the other didn’t fight, letting Barry press him back against the door, not hard, gently in fact but he felt a jolt in the bleed anyway, something like a quick flash of fear and he swallowed back some of his next urges, stepping back just enough, hands on the lapels of Len’s jacket but not trapping him there. Len had his head tilted back just a bit and Barry wanted—he wanted to—

“Not need. That was the wrong word. But there’s something I want to do,” he tried to keep his breathing even.

“Do tell.”

Barry’s eyes dropped down Len’s front then flicked up to meet his gaze. “I want to blow you.”

Len’s eyebrows shot up his forehead and Barry didn’t need the bleed to know he was floored. “What?”

“If you’ll let me. I want to erase the feel of him from your body.” From my memory, he thought but didn’t say. And he knew part of where this tangled up mess inside him was coming from, no stranger to jealousy and envy most of his life, and he wanted Len to be his. He couldn’t care who Len had been with before they Bonded, but if he belonged to Len then that damn well worked in reverse and he needed—wanted—needed—to reclaim each inch of Len’s body as his own. It was probably too possessive and too jealous and he didn’t care.

But Len’s eyes were searching his face in confusion. “You don’t have to, Barry.”

He must have thought—“I don’t think I have to. This isn’t like that time I told you to ‘take’ me. I
want to.” He leaned forward, distilling the space between them to scant inches and then less than that, mouth next to Len’s ear, soft and heated and honest. “I want to make sure your body knows who it belongs to.”

He could feel the tight heat pooling inside Len, focusing on the bleed because he wanted to know each and every feeling in Len, every sensation along his skin. He pressed his advantage, mouth moving to Len’s jaw, neck, ghosting over it and back up to his ear as he spoke, knowing it was having an effect from the shivery phantom sensations on his own neck, breathy and not-quite-whispering:

“What I want is for you to tell me exactly what you and him did, how you kissed, where you had your hands,” he smoothed his own out over Len’s chest, inside his jacket, “if you were standing or sitting when he was on his knees for you. I want to rewrite all those memories with my hands, my mouth,” he started to push Len’s jacket off, kissing his neck where it met his jaw, just below his ear. “I want to erase anyone but me from your body.”

He felt Len tremble for just a moment, felt him swallow under where Barry was mouthing his neck. “Jesus Christ, Barry.”

He pulled back just slightly, to look at Len. “It’s your call.”

Len kissed him. They both groaned into it, Len’s arms around him, jacket on the floor, Barry’s hands sliding up his shirt, desperate to touch skin. It was hot and amazing, pressing their bodies, their hips and thighs together, breathing and diving back in for more but Barry wasn’t about to be deterred or distracted by his own pleasure. He pulled back, kissing Len’s jaw, “where did you touch him? Where did he touch you?”

Len practically growled, “fuck Barry, I don’t even remember.”

Barry kissed him again and slid his hands up Len’s body then down to Len’s belt.

“Were you standing?”

“Yes.”

Barry cupped his erection on the outside of his pants and before he could let himself hesitate, he was dropping down to his knees, looking up at Len while he did. “May I?”

And he felt the intense, hot jolt inside Len. His voice was totally shot to hell, raw, “yes. God, yes.”

Barry could get used to that sound. He tugged on the belt, pulled Len’s pants down just enough, mouthing over his cock on the outside of the stretched fabric of his underwear, Len’s breath stuttering when he did. Barry sucked the head gently before leaning back on his knees, too focused and determined to be nervous, pulling the soft fabric down, mouth watering at the sight of the flushed and swollen cock.

He had no idea what he was doing, but he was doing it anyway. He stroked Len’s cock in his hand then licked along the underside, from base to tip and Len gasped from that. He used broad wipes of his tongue along each side and shuddered when Len did, when Barry’s tongue swirled around the tip, because god he could feel that. He could always feel it a little, his own hands on Len, but this was more intense again, so focused on each sensation now. He sucked the tip into his mouth and Len’s stomach clenched and god it felt good, aching between his own legs already.

He started to suck, stroking with his hand and tongue on the underside, and it was sloppy, he knew he was sloppy, more saliva than suction, hand helping, stroking and guiding. He would gag when he
tried to take too much—there was so much to take, Len’s cock was so damn big and this wasn’t as easy as it looked. His neck was going to be sore later from the strange movements, the need to build a proper rhythm.

But Barry was in control and feeding off it, reveling in how he was making Len feel, in making both of them feel. The bleed was awash with pleasure, with heat and with a wet phantom mouth on his cock and the knowledge that it was his own felt blasphemous in the best way. He swallowed around the tip, heard Len groan, feeling it on his own cock, moaning around Len’s cock in his mouth.

When he needed a full breath he pulled off for a second to stroke, reminded of his goal when he looked up at Len’s hooded eyes, watching him, lips parted.

“Your hands,” Barry’s own voice sounded rough and his cock was straining on the inside of his jeans. “You can touch. My hair, face?” He remembered feeling that, on the phone, every little detail. He felt a wave of heady jealousy with the thought, running his tongue around the tip of Len’s cock to make his breath hitch.

“God, Barry, you’re gorgeous.” His hand was sliding into Barry’s hair and both of them shuddered when it tightened just enough in the strands. “You have no idea.”

Barry sucked Len’s cock back into his mouth, resisting the urge to ask if he looked better than Hartley. Right now, he didn’t want Len thinking of anyone but him. And he had an idea of how to make sure Len would never forget exactly who it was on his knees right now.

Barry sucked Len’s cock down as far as his gag reflex would allow, swallowing involuntarily, bobbing and alternating breathing with sucking, Len groaning and his hips thrusting just a bit, Barry’s free hand holding on to Len’s hip. The hand in his hair made it harder to pull back, gently but insistently pulling his head forward but it was so hot Barry didn’t care, his own cock throbbing in waves of pleasure. Len’s other hand dropped to the side of his face and his fingers were soft, Barry moaning at the feel, instinctually hollowing out his cheeks in response and Len moaned. “So gorgeous, _fuck_, Barry, you’re—_mmm_—so good, so _dahhmn_ beautiful.” His breathing was heavy and Barry knew he was close, on edge, “God, _ah_ the things you do to me, Barry.”

Barry breathed in then sucked in Len’s cock as far as he could and started to vibrate his tongue and throat.

“_BARRY!_” Len shouted, gripped his hair in shock, swearing and bucking but Barry’s gag reflex didn’t choke him, the vibration alleviating that and Len was obviously trying not to all out fuck Barry’s face, moaning and fingers clenched in his hair, stuttered movements of his hips held in check just by a thread. Barry couldn’t blame him—he might cum himself just from the phantom sensations on his own cock, the feeling pushing him harder, groaning around Len’s cock. And Len was about to—gasping in breaths as Barry vibrated and sucked and just—

“Barry, _fuck_, I’m gonna, _fuck_ I’m gonna cum, _Barry_—”

He tried to pull Barry’s head back but there was no way Barry wasn’t about to swallow, not after all that, and he pressed forward, taking in as much of the length as he could, wincing as he felt the cum spurt into his mouth, on his tongue, hot and bitter and he trembled a little before swallowing, hand stroking until Len was done. Then he swallowed again and pulled his mouth and hand back, dropping back onto his heels and catching his breath, head pressed to Len’s thigh.

“That’s harder than porn makes it look.”

Len let out a laugh, slumped against the door and breathing heavy too, legs bent like he was having a
hard time holding himself up and Barry leaned back to survey this, feeling pleased. He was pretty damn sure that no one else had ever given Len a blowjob quite like that.

“You’re amazing.” Len was looking down at him in wonder and Barry smiled a little, preening under the praise and standing back up.

“I need some water and my knees are sore.” So was his throat but he wasn’t about to complain about that.

“Well,” Len chuckled, still sounding a little breathless, “my front entrance might not be the best place for this?”

Barry scratched the back of his head while Len sorted out his clothes. “I got impatient?”

Len cupped his jaw and kissed him then, surprising Barry, moving back before he had a chance to respond to it, and it so much more gentle than a few minutes ago. “I love you, Barry. Only you. Everyone else, anyone before you, they were just killing time.”

“I…Thank you.” He didn’t really know what else to say, and knew it wasn’t that, feeling lost and conflicted.

Len sighed, hand dropping. “That makes you sad?”

Barry looked at the floor, feeling like a jackass because that wasn’t the right emotion to feel after what they’d just been doing, feeling restless like he needed to move. He stepped out of his shoes and the entrance, moving in to the living room and trying to gather the jumbled thoughts inside his head, talking before he knew what he was even going to say, “why do you love me?”

He frowned at himself, almost wishing he could take it back, but shook his head. Len’s eyes were following him and he dropped his arms and made himself look at Len.

“I just mean… I don’t get what it is that makes you…love me, specifically. I know we’re Soulmates, and this isn’t about Hartley but it kind of seems like… someone like him would be more your type of guy? He’s smart and he likes to flirt, even if he is a dick you don’t seem to mind. He’s a criminal, so he’s on your side, he’s smart and flirts and you said he was pretty. So I just… if you were anyone else I could say it’s because I’m the Flash, but even that’s just in your way so…”

“I don’t love you solely because you’re my Soulmate.” He said it with so much authority that Barry’s heart had to clench. Len’s eyebrows were drawn down and he came over to Barry, took his hand and brought him to the couch, tilting his head to consider. The bleed had switched over to the way Len felt when thinking through a puzzle.

“I’ve never had to think it through in words…” he started slowly, “but I suppose—first, I appreciate that you stand your ground unapologetically about things that matter to you. Things like your father’s innocence, to the point where you were blogging about seemingly-impossible occurrences because you wouldn’t let anyone convince you that you were wrong. You never let anything close to good sense convince you not to be the Flash. And…” he looked to the side for a second, “you’ve done the same for me, when you shouted down Detective West. You don’t hesitate to give me hell but you keep coming back, you don’t back down. You show up at my house even when…” he looked at his knuckles and Barry looked down too, at the fresh scars, thinking about how Len’s bathroom just got a new mirror this week, how his living room was still missing the one it had had. “Even if I don’t agree, Barry, you made up your mind about me and I appreciate that…dedication.”

He was picking each of his words carefully, and Barry’s heart was hammering in time with Len’s,
feeling the anxiety at this type of vulnerability. It made him ache in the best way, but he still had to
let out a little laugh to cut through some of the tension. “I think they call it being stubborn.”

Len smirked, then shook his head. “It’s more than that. It’s almost dangerous, your strength of
conviction. If you were anyone else, that kind of ability to be unswayed can topple governments,
lead armies, or cults if you’re not picky. But you…” he turned Barry’s hands over in his, running his
thumbs along the palms. “That’s another thing, I suppose—even if the Flash is a nuisance, you’re
good. And when you do things like lock up the metas, you recognize you’ve done wrong, and if you
can’t fix it, you apologize. I’ve met a lot of people who can’t do that, people out for revenge, people
convinced they’re right no matter what. I can admit that I’m one of the people who can’t do that. But
you, Barry… you’re better.”

He swallowed and shook his head. “I’m not, Len. Don’t… don’t put me on some pedestal. I’ll just
fall off.”

Len huffed, “says the savior of Central City.”

“I mean it. My choices—my selfishness almost opened a black hole over the city. I had to go back
and kill Eobard. You saw that, in the memories from Grodd, and what I told you—that’s not good,
Len.”

“I’m not putting you on a pedestal, Barry, I’m just seeing what you don’t let yourself see. Like you
don’t believe in how handsome you are, or that the Flash should have a holiday. Good isn’t a static
state, it’s a series of choices. I’ve never cared too much about being good, but I do know what it
looks like. And maybe it’s ironic, but it makes me love you.”

Barry swallowed, shivering a little, moving closer to Len. He wished he could say it. He didn't know
why he couldn’t. It was probably true—it must be true. How he felt now, the way it ached.

“Don’t worry, Barry. No need to force it.”

He let out a breath, frustrated with himself. “You mean everything to me though.”

That he felt genuine surprise from Len in the bleed made him ache all the more, and Len reached
forward and hugged him then, tight and close, “that’s more than enough, Barry.”

Barry leaned back and kissed him, a little wet because he couldn’t stop the tears on his cheeks, but
Len kissed him deep in return. Barry was reminded, when Len’s hand started pressing him down
against the couch cushions, just how hard he’d been a few minutes ago, before they’d started talking.
He pulled back, a little nervous, “Len…”

“Not interested in me returning the favor?”

He swallowed, “Right now?”

“Seems like you could serve to relax a bit,” he smirked.

“Are you sure?”

“Very.”

Barry nodded, a little shaky, and let Len start to unbutton his shirt, kissing his neck. It was more
gentle than usual, soft kisses peppered anywhere he could reach, pulling Barry out of his layers until
Len could kiss his clavicles, his moles, his nipples to make his breath hitch before trailing lower.
There were wetter kisses along his abs, Len’s tongue flicking against the ‘v’ of his hips, making him
stutter out a gasp because the flesh was so sensitive and Len’s tongue was so hot.

Len started to unbutton his pants and Barry was pretty sure it was going to be the shortest blowjob in history. They had to shift for Barry’s pants and underwear to come off, fully naked and bemused that Len was still fully clothed, tugging at his shirt until it, at least, came off with a chuckle.

“If I’m handsome, then you have no idea how sexy you are.” Barry pulled Len in for a kiss after saying it, finding it soothing and arousing at once, feeling closer to Len than ever before. Len’s hands were massaging his hips and Barry let him pull back from the kiss, feeling himself flushing already.

“You’re gonna’ enjoy this, Barr. I promise.”

Barry smiled and dropped back to lie, letting Len settle between his thighs. Len had called him Barr. Len was smiling and cheeky and his tongue was—

Oh.

“Wow.” His voice was hoarse, so hoarse, and all Len had done was lick the underside of his cock, the same as he’d done for the other.

Len hmm’d and his hand was around the base and Barry gasped and clutched the cushions, the back of the couch, anything in reach as Len’s lips closed over the tip—hot and wet and god it felt so good it felt—“ohhhh why did—ah—we wait—so—ah—long—to—oooooh.” Len was good with his tongue, so good, wow, and the suction, it felt—he was vibrating already, it was so hot, so—

“Fuck, fuck—I’m gonna’, fuck Len I’m—ahhhh!” Barry arched his back, whole body a line of tension distilled to the hot, tight, wet mouth and tongue and throat sucking him in, coming with a shout, orgasm extended because it was so fucking good, feeling Len swallow around his cock, tongue the underside of it, making him shudder and whine even after his orgasm.

It had definitely been one of the shortest blowjobs in history. Except that Len didn’t appear to be stopping, stroking and sucking to keep Barry hard and it was almost too sensitive but Len knew by now to be gentle for a minute after the first and oh.

“You—ah—” he shuddered at a swipe of the tongue, Len working to build him to a second orgasm. “You really spoil me-mmm.”

Len mmm’d around his cock and Barry leaned up on his elbows to look, the sight of Len between his legs almost enough to make him close already, and he dropped his head back to enjoy it.

********

They were cuddling in bed, later, naked and showered and Barry was feeling content, relaxed in a way he hadn’t ever since Grodd attacked and the military came to town. Everything recently had felt like one problem after another, compounded, and in just two days Laurel would acquire ‘Harrison Wells’s’ will from Weathersby & Stone and the fate of STAR Labs and more besides might be held within. But right now, for the first time in ages, he felt he could forget about all of it.

Len was kissing his shoulder, warm behind him, teasing him. “You know, I thought I was the jealous one in this relationship.”
Barry laughed, “yeah right. Jealousy is kinda’ my life story.”

“That so? Gotta’ say, if this is the way you always express it…”

Barry elbowed him good-naturedly. “Don’t get too many ideas.”

Len smiled against his shoulder, then moved back a bit, his hand that was idly running along Barry’s chest stilling. “There’s something you should know. Not something about us, it's about the Rogues.” Barry glanced over his shoulder, feeling a strange warmth at knowing Len was about to offer information, despite how tense Len was. “Pied Piper is a Rogue now.”

Of fucking course. Barry rolled over to face him, incredulous but not angry, no real heat to his words. “You’re telling me Hartley Rathaway, of all people, joined the Rogues?”

Len sighed and leaned up on an elbow. “How’d you think I even got to know him?”

Barry flopped onto his back. “My guess was a gay nightclub, believe it or not. You know he’s a bit of a dick, Len.”

“We’re all dicks.”

“Cisco’s gonna’ be so disappointed when he finds out and—hey. Did Rathaway help you with the cold gun?”

Len looked to the side and Barry groaned. “I cannot believe you had sex with the guy who helped you with that.”

“It was a situation of mutual convenience.”

Barry sighed and pulled on Len’s arm to make him come back and start cuddling. “Tell me about it? Not… not that. But… what that was, earlier at the circus? I promise I just wanna’ know, I’m not gonna’ make a big deal of this.”

Len leveled him with a flat stare. Barry giggled despite himself.

“I mean… a bigger one than I already have. It’s in the past, really,” he smiled for good measure, and kissed the word Cold on Len’s shoulder, one of his favorite tattoos.

“Alright, Barry. Story time, but this conversation doesn’t leave this room.”

“Yessir, captain sir.”

Len rolled his eyes, but at least he was smiling too before settling in beside Barry and starting to talk.

**********

It was two days later when Barry was enjoying being back in the precinct, processing evidence on some blood work when the smell of food and the tapping of heels caught his attention. He looked up from his equipment at the pretty blonde in a Big Belly Burger outfit at the door of his lab, tapping her foot and smiling and—

“Lisa?”
“Hey Barry,” she smiled, strutting in like she owned the place.

“What are you doing here?” he hissed, looking nervously at the door.

“Oh just bringing you lunch,” she dropped the food on one of the tables, glancing around unrepentantly. “Neat set up here, don’t suppose you’d let me swipe anything? Oh, don’t look so concerned. I promised Iris I’d play nice if she gave me some advice on how to sneak in here, where your lab is. I even signed in at the front and everything. Used Felicity’s name for that.”

Barry felt his eyebrow twitch, and instead of responding to do anything in that mess, he rubbed his temples and blew out a breath. “Why are you really here?”

“What, not hungry?”

His stomach growled on cue and he frowned at her tinkling laughter. “Big appetite, right?”

He crossed his arms and didn’t look at the food. “Does Len know you’re here?”

“Oh, Lenny can be a spoil sport. He’s been very careful about me talking to you, seems to think I’m going to bite your head off.”

Barry rolled his eyes but came closer to the table and thus the smell of food. “Can you just cut to it?”

“Hmm, impatient, Speedy?”

“Speedy is the name of the Green Arrow’s sidekick.”

“Ooh, rivaling with Dr. Snow for who’s more uptight this week?” She pouted, but then tossed her false-blond curls behind her shoulder and became more serious. “Fine. If you must know, I’m here to convince you to say yes to Lenny’s little bday trip out of town.”

He’d almost forgotten about that and frowned, “I already said no.”

“So change your mind.”

“Why should I? And don’t tell me that I owe it to him for saving me from Eiling or something like that.”

Her eyes became harder. “Well you do, but no, that’s not why.”

“You gonna’ get to your point anytime soon, Lisa?” he was so done with this conversation already, glancing at the door but normally no one dropped by except Joe or Eddie.

Her focus was razor sharp on him for a second, eyes scanning him in a way that told him he was inadequate in about twenty different ways. “You know, you seem to think that everything—even gifts—are a burden on you. I hope you realize that’s not the case, Barry. Lenny waited his whole life for you. Left home when he was seventeen just after he got that Mark. Left me.”

He thought about that awful memory of Len’s, hiding his sister in her room, protecting her from their father, and he looked away for a second. “So you think I owe something to Len because…what? He left you for me?”

She sighed in a scathing way. How did you make a sigh sound scathing? “No. Lenny didn’t leave me for you, Barry. But Lenny had to leave to protect you, or your connection, and that meant protecting himself. Because Lenny will always protect his family, and you became part of his family, that day.”
“I don’t…”

“That’s exactly it—you don’t understand. That’s what it means to be a Soulmate, Barry—it’s not just a lover or a friend. A Soulmate is deeper than that. You get to pick your lovers and your friends. But you don’t pick blood and you don’t pick that.”

He didn’t know what to say or where she was going with this. “What does this have to do with this trip?”

She pushed off the desk to stand full and intent, almost angry. “You really don’t get it? Lenny built his whole life around you twenty-five years before he even met you and all that you’ve done is throw it in his face since then, okay? Give something back. If you’re his family, his goddamn Soulmate, the least you could’ve done was try not to abuse him and now—”

“Wait, what, slow down—I didn’t abuse Len—”

“Oh do not even start with me, Barry Allen. You led him on, you threw him into walls and you kissed him, you tried to control every aspect of your relationship until he would bark on command and rollover for you—I watched it happen, Red, don’t even try to deny it.”

“Lisa—” he was shaking his head but she carried on.

“Don’t. You choked him, Flash, and kissed him right after! Don’t you know what kind of things that does to a guy like Lenny!” She shook her head, angry, blinking hard and sighing, pinching the bridge of her nose for a second.

Oh. Oh no. Barry sucked in a breath, realizing. “No, no no—god, Lisa, I wouldn’t—I would never abuse my partner. I didn’t—”

“That’s exactly what you did though!”

“We weren’t partners!”

“You were Soulmates!”

He dragged both hands over his face, feeling sick. Soulmates were family. Len must see it that way too. Len had been hurt by family. Why hadn’t he said anything? Barry swallowed. “Right. But I… I’m sorry, Lisa.”

“Tell it to him.”

“I already did.”

She huffed and he shivered, and decided that he had to try to explain—needed Lisa to get it, at least. Needed to say it.

“Lisa, it was wrong, I already know that. He and I, we talked about it, really. I apologized but I had no idea, then—about his childhood, yours, I mean,” her eyes widened a bit, and he wondered if she assumed Len hadn’t told him. And then remembered that Len hadn’t told him, that Grodd could be thanked for that. Barry tried to clear his thoughts, shame whirling around inside him. “When I hurt Len, I was… in a lot of pain, still, from what Mardon did. I didn’t plan to kiss him—I didn’t plan any of it. I was angry, worried about Joe, but more than that, I was terrified.”

“Of what? You expect me to believe that the Flash was scared of Lenny when he was alone and unarmed?”
“Not that he’d hurt me, but of how attached I was getting, how much I was starting to… to want him. And after the gala, I was sure I’d just been naïve starting to trust him, sure he was just going to keep hurting people I cared about, not on purpose but because he didn’t care enough not to, didn’t care about me at all, really.”

Her eyes were widening but that wasn’t even the worst of it, and it felt like words were just tumbling out now, “I felt like he’d strung me along and manipulated me, got me to admit that I wanted this just so that he could turn around and put himself in a position to take what he really wanted. And I was scared that I wouldn’t be able to deny him that… deny him anything, that he’d just use my own trust against me if I didn’t run away, if I didn’t make it hurt for both of us.”

Something shifted in her face even more, any vestiges of that mask wearing off. Her voice was soft when she spoke next.

“You’re both such idiots, you know that?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

There was a crease in her brow as she stared at him. “You scared him.”

Barry nodded. “I scared myself.”

“And then for a month, you cut him out.”

He nodded again. “I thought it was the only way I could survive being his Soulmate.”

“You were wrong.”

“I know. I know that now.”

“You tried to control him.”

He shook his head. “Not really. I was grasping at straws, desperate. I know you see me as the Flash, Lisa, as someone with… power. But most of the time, I’m just trying my best to stay one step ahead of my enemies, even with my speed. When one of my enemies turned out to be my Soulmate? I was a mess. I can’t compartmentalize, not like that. From day one, I knew I could never hurt him, not really. Even if he stormed STAR Labs in full regalia with all his Rogues, I couldn’t ever go full-tilt against him. Which is what I was scared of, before, that he’d be able to anything and I wouldn’t be able to protect the people I cared about… and I wouldn’t be able to protect him either.” He curled his hand into a fist, staring down at it, remembering chasing after bullets. Remembering the fear of not being fast enough. “I never wanted to hurt him, Lisa,” he looked her in the eyes, “and I swear to you, I’ll never hurt your brother again.”

Lisa’s eyes were too intense and she drew in a shaky breath. “You’d better mean that. All I want is for my brother to be happy, Barry. That’s it. And that’s your job now. I tried but I was never any good at it. And Lenny… he’s a lot more brittle than you think he is.”

Barry nodded, believed it.

“The trip—he won’t tell you, because he’s Lenny and he doesn’t think he deserves nice things, but… ever since the year you turned nineteen, he’s gone out of town on his Marking day. I think he’s got some flat or cabin or who knows what stashed away somewhere. Some place that part of him was ready to throw all this away for and start fresh with his Soulmate.”

Barry had to chuckle, “Len would never leave Central.”
“He’d do anything for his Soulmate, Barry.”

He stopped laughing.

“Look, Lenny goes out there every year for a few days and I don’t know where or what it is, because it’s just for you. So…” she sighed, tilted her head and let the blonde curls fall. “Go on the trip, Barry. He needs this.”

“The city—”

“Can wait. A few days. D’you expect to never take a vacation, a trip, a break? And besides—I’m sure wherever it is, it’s running distance for you.” Her smile was lopsided and he nodded.

“Okay, Lisa.”

She looked relieved. “Okay, Barry. And please,” she seemed nervous, “don’t fuck him up any more than he already he is… you mean everything to him.”

“He means the same to me.”

Chapter End Notes

I mean, I'm all for possessive!Len, but uhm, possessive!Barry? That's my jam. Definitely my jam. Give me Barry who smirks when Len tries to leave hickeys that last, then sucks dark bruises onto Len’s neck instead; who wants to show off his sexy lover; who slides into Len’s space whenever someone checks out his partner and starts to whisper filth in his ear. Give me Barry who’s so possessive that it amuses Len but god its distracting and ‘kid would you chill for a minute?’ Barry who’s spent his entire life being jealous of others and isn’t about to not enjoy having someone he gets to be possessive over. And give me Len who loves that about him, who revels in it because who would’ve thought good-two-shoes Barry Allen gets so filthy at the slightest provocation? Give me Len who secretly likes to make Barry a little jealous just so Barry will drag him to the nearest private location to have the raunchiest sex, leaving marks all over Len and pulling out every stop to give Len the best orgasms of his life, making sure Len keeps coming back for more.

Consider this an open prompt to any smut writers: more possessive!Barry please.

And um, okay, go go Lisa? So far in this fic we’ve seen a lot of her anger and bullying side, for better or for worse. Here, it winds in and out, but there’s more going on—her concern, her willingness to befriend Iris and even Felicity, her acceptance of Barry and Len and all that it means. For the record, I love Lisa. Lisa means the world to me.

For the record, I *tried* to shorten this chapter (probably resulting in more typos lol, that’s what always happens), but it refused to cooperate, so it’s like 2k words longer than I had intended. And at some point, I’ll legit go and update the glossary with all the new chapter titles. Bond Family is basically your in-laws, but because Soulmates aren't always married, it means your Soulmate's family.
Hey, will you be free in an hour?

Can be, what’s up?

Want to grab coffee with me before I meet up with Laurel for the will thing?

Sure thing.

Len pocketed his phone after getting a location from Barry, finishing up the paperwork he needed to sort out for the bar.

“Shawna?” he called from the office he was sitting in, where the actual administrative functions of his property were carried out.

“Yeah boss?” She appeared in the open office door with a puff of smoke.

“Can I get you to mail these papers off? I’m running short on time, have to meet up with someone downtown.”

She slunk into the dingy room with a smirk, holding out her hand for the envelope. “Hot date?”

“Coffee date.”

“Oooh, boss, any juicy details?”

“None that concern you.” He knew he was smiling though as he stood up and grabbed for his riding jacket.

“You going to a coffee date dressed like that? Look like you belong in a bar.”

“That’s because I generally do.”

She laughed, “hopefully whoever it is likes leather.”

Len snorted and thought of the Flash suit, “he doesn’t seem to mind it.”

“So coffee isn’t the first date!” He gave her a reproachful look, something that clearly wasn’t enough to quell her glee, “wait till Mark hears about this!”

Being their MateMaker was a headache and a half some days.

“Gossip with Hartley if you need to, Mark doesn’t need to know I’m going on dates.” She just
giggled and he was pretty sure he’d lost that round, almost at the door, adding an afterthought. “Oh and if Bivolo drops by today or tomorrow, tell him I want his opinion on some art pieces; I’ll be adding to my collection soon.”

**********

If nothing else, Len was glad that Barry had the foresight not to meet at Jitters. That place was too near the precinct and pretty much always crawling with a detective or three, ones who might actually recognize Len if they got a close enough look. This little organic bookstore café was a little too kitschy and quaint for his tastes, but it wasn’t a place any of Barry’s colleagues were likely to appear, at least, occupied instead by what seemed like budding artists and at least one hipster-looking photographer taking a far too effortful photo of the cupcake display, standing in line behind Len. He tried not to roll his eyes as he ordered his own and Barry’s coffees before snagging a corner table and waiting.

He didn’t even have to look up when Barry arrived, the bleed making it too easy to tell when the other walked in the door, though he’d always had a bit of a sixth sense for when Barry was around. Not hard to figure out why, now.

“You got one for me?”

“Your favorite.”

Barry smiled at him while he took his seat and Len let himself enjoy it for a moment before noticing that Barry was nervous, face and feelings both giving him away.

“What is it?”

“I—right. Okay. There’s some stuff that we should talk about. I’ve been thinking about it all afternoon, actually. Good stuff, don’t look so worried. Well, mostly good. Neutral at worst. But before that…” he leaned forward, looking earnest. “For my birthday. Your Marking day. I’ll go to… wherever it is you want to go. Three days? No more than four. Please. Thank you?”

Barry closed his mouth and sipped his coffee in an obvious effort not to babble but Len was too surprised for a moment to speak, heart up in his throat. It wasn’t often someone shocked him quite so well, but Barry seemed to make a habit of it. Finally, he schooled his expression and voice after clearing it, clasping his hands and leaning forward. “What brought this on?”

“Some things were… pointed out to me,” Barry frowned for a second before shaking his head. “And I want to do things that make you happy. Things that are important to you. Because, Len, you don’t tell me what’s important, or what you need. You just… like with Mick, you were ready to tell him to buzz off that morning, even though he’s your friend and he needed to talk, about his Soulmate, and spend time with other people. And that’s… I really appreciate it. But it’s not—it doesn’t work, or at least it’s not sustainable. I need to know what you need.”

He was digesting that, a little dumbfounded, when Barry kept talking, a little self-deprecating smile on his face. “If you don’t ask for things that you need, then you just bottle it up till I push you over an edge and say you don’t want to be alone every night, and we both know how that went.”

Len let out a huff, shoulders dropping, not sure if he should laugh or wince, looking to the side and
tilting his head. “Well it did get you to spend the night.”

“Yeah,” Barry rolled his eyes, “pretty sure that could’ve gone smoother. And it’s just…” he reached forward and took Len’s hands, surprising him, the sudden touch, the warmth, Barry turning them over and twining their fingers, glancing down at their hands then up at his eyes, nervous. “You’re used to just taking things, right? Stealing what you want, doing what you want? I thought—I felt for a long time like that’s how you were treating me, at first. Like being Soulmates just automatically meant you were trying to own me and do things and didn’t care how I was going to feel about it. And I didn’t really clue in that you just didn’t know how to ask instead, not really.”

Len rolled that around in his head, smoothing his fingers over Barry’s wrists, his pulse point, his own heart refusing to be restful in his chest. “You really have been thinking this afternoon.”

Barry sighed but leaned forward to catch Len’s gaze. “I need you to ask, Len. And talk. And more than that, I need you to tell me when and why I hurt you so that I don’t keep doing it. Because I know when it hurts but you’re right, I’m not a mind reader.” His lips quirked up, his voice became teasing. “I don’t have ESP, and I didn’t realize that you’re just too emotionally stunted to just say ‘please’ sometimes.”

Len snorted, "mhmm."

"Really though, Len, it’s okay to ask for things."

“I was asking.”

“You were telling, and pushing.”

“Pushing?”

“You didn’t… like, with the presents? When I asked you to stop and then you ordered shoes for me? I felt like… like you didn’t know me at all. And that you were just trying to buy my love, if I wouldn’t give it to you.”

Len felt his own face harden, but Barry was rushing to continue talking before Len could find any words.

“I know—I know now that’s not how you meant it. And I’m sorry. I never really thought that refusing things would hurt you. I just didn’t want to be decked out in things you bought me like…”

“Like I was some kind of sugar daddy?” The thought twisted his stomach but it wasn’t like it hadn’t passed his mind, with their age difference.

Barry looked a little embarrassed, “I guess so. Or like… well, like I belonged to you too, like a possession. And I worried that if I said anything, you’d just try harder. We’re both stubborn like that, you know? We don’t get deterred easily. But when people push me I push back. Really hard.”

“I'm aware,” he replied, a little sardonic.

They shared a chagrined not-quite-smile for a moment, but Barry sighed and readjusted his fingers against Len’s. “I’ll try, Len—I am trying—to give you what you need. I want to give you what you need, I just don’t always know what it is. I try to read the bleed, I try to know when to push and when not to, and I know you’ve tried really hard too, ever since…” His fingers fiddled with Len’s thumbnails, looking down. “I just mean, I know you’re trying to make me happy. But that can’t happen unless you’re happy too. So please, talk to me.”
Len’s throat felt tight but he nodded and squeezed Barry’s hands gently in return. “Okay, Barry. I’ll work on it.”

Barry sighed and Len felt a lot of the tension going out of him, suddenly dropping his head forward, disentangling their fingers so he could drop his forehead on his arms and talk into the table. “Oh thank god. I think I rehearsed that like 20 times in front of the mirror before coming here.”

Len chuckled and leaned back, sipping his cooling coffee for a moment, collecting his thoughts and feelings and organizing them before coming full circle to the start of the conversation. “The trip… four days? Thursday after you’re off work till Sunday?”

Barry sat back up and nodded. “Ah, sure. I can make that work. Is it—whatever it is—close-ish to Central? If there’s an emergency, how long would I take to get back here?”

Len contemplated the distance, “300 miles?”

“Okay, I can do that in under 20 minutes if I need to. Let’s hope there’s no emergencies.”

“Thank you, Barry. For all of this.” He was a little uncomfortable with it, with how nervous this conversation made him, but something else too, something warmer and happier bubbling away inside him. “And for… opening up, I suppose.”

“Well I’m hoping that part’ll go both ways, at some point.”

“Oh?”

“You told me once… you’ve got properties, and some kind of—I don’t know—‘territory’? And I only just learned that Hartley is a Rogue so… maybe not today, but at some point, I hope you tell me more about that. All of that, illegal or not, it’s a massive part of who you are. And I want to know all of who you are.”

Len arched an eyebrow. “Won’t that make your job hard—both your jobs, rather?” He was over trying to discuss the Flash and Rogues dynamic, long since, but to his surprise, Barry just shrugged.

“Life wouldn’t be any fun if it was easy.”

“Mm, at least we can agree on that.”

“There’s one more thing.” Barry felt nervous again, Len’s chest a little tight with it, something else arising there, harder to place. “You know I’m about to go and meet with Laurel and Ollie, and I know Joe’s gonna’ be there too, and Caitlin and Cisco have to be, and another lawyer on behalf of the board, but… would you come too? I mean, I doubt the other lawyer will recognize you or anything, and…”

Len reached forward and took Barry’s hand a final time, suffused with the need to protect, the need to be there, the relief at being asked, at being included. “Of course, Barry.”

**********

Barry’s nerves were coalescing into pretty much every pore, and it was all Len could do to have Barry hold his hand—palm sweaty, grip tight—as they walked into a seldom-used meeting room in
STAR Labs.

The lawyer greeted Barry, as did the board member, and Len had to let go of his hand and stay back while Barry signed something that Ms. Lance asked him to. She spared a glance over in Len’s direction, almost curious, but didn’t say anything else. Queen was near her and dressed in a suit, Felicity by his side and talking quietly with Caitlin, while Cisco was next to Joe West, sharing a private laugh. Both men nodded at Len, though Cisco did so with a smile.

Len wasn’t sure if he’d ever truly stop being surprised by that. After how angry Lisa was on his own behalf, he considered that Barry’s friends had a lot of right to be angry, or at least scared of him still. And maybe they were. But aside from West, none of them had really been so much as cold to him. He assumed it was some magic of Barry’s, the ability to make everyone accept Len’s presence as given.

When the proceedings began, he was able to take a seat next to Barry, West on Barry’s other side—too close, but he’d live—and the rest of them sitting around the long table, Ms. Lance at the end. Felicity slipped into the spot beside Len with a smile.

“Shall we begin?” Lance started, and from there Len listened to what amounted to legalese for the first bit, conditions of opening the will, things that had been read, etcetera. The only thing he was really focused on was Barry’s mounting anxiety, restlessly jittering his leg under the table, chewing his thumbnail. Len was so focused that he almost missed it, distracted by the sudden alarm, the overwhelming shock that turned into white noise in a split second, the—

“Come again?” Barry leaned forward in his seat and Len glanced at Laurel, reading aloud, her own eyebrows up in her hairline. He replayed the last few seconds in his mind, and wait, no, that couldn’t be—

“The estate in its entirety has been willed to Barry Allen.”

“THAT CAN’T BE!” yelled the old asshole across the room, the board member, his equally old and white and stuck up lawyer’s hand on his arm to calm him from bursting out more.

“Sir,” the lawyer hissed and Len tensed but Barry was still slack-jawed, staring at Laurel.

“The entire—”

“That’s right, Barry—”

“Let me see that,” the other lawyer demanded before snatching the paper. His eyes skimmed it but Laurel was giving Barry a surreptitious thumbs up and Barry was half out of his seat, looking around wildly. Cisco whistled and laughed and even Felicity swore under her breath. Len just went still, tried to figure out what this would mean but there was no way his brain could catch up that quick, reeling—how big was the estate? What did it include? His shares of the lab? Did Barry own STAR Labs? Had the military known? Was that why they wanted to suppress the—

“There are conditions,” the other lawyer growled, glaring at Laurel then Barry like it was somehow their fault. “But it’s authentic.” He was reading through other papers—there were a whole chunk of them, flipping through quickly. “It has all of his assets listed in full, and a clause that anything not listed go to Mr. Allen. His shares, his house, his pending patents, you name it.” The man sounded disgusted.

“We need to finish the reading aloud,” Laurel said, taking the top paper back, smugness oozing from her. Len decided this Laurel woman wasn’t so bad, considering she was a friend of Queen’s and a
lawyer besides.

“This is an outrage,” the board member was angry as hell by the look of it, face purple and he was standing up. Len tensed, but needn’t have, the guy was heading toward the door. “You will be hearing from my people!”

And at that, Len had to laugh, and then Cisco did too, and Caitlin even chuckled, Barry too dumbfounded to.

Cisco grinned over at him, “he sounds more like a movie villain than even you do, man.”

“Like Draco Malfoy in his old age?”

“Dude—you know Harry Potter references?!”

Queen cleared his throat and Len sat back, grinning, immensely relaxed as everyone settled in to hear Laurel finish what she was saying. Under the table, Barry reached over and held on to Len’s hand again, squeezing gently.

**********

It was at least an hour later by the time Laurel was done reading things and paperwork was being signed. There was more to be drawn up still, but Wells had included almost everything in his will, including the transfer documents for the lab and his home estate to Barry. Len noticed that Barry felt increasingly nauseated as the clock ticked, settling lower in his chair, becoming more tense. It was obvious that despite everything, he didn’t like this, another unwanted gift. Len wondered at the shame he could feel, at the frustration. When Laurel was finally done and calling for Barry to sign things, he moved around the table and asked her,

“I don’t suppose I can take the lab without the estate?”

She smiled and shook her head like she understood, like she knew why Barry might have misgivings—did she know? How much had Queen told her?—and replied, “no, Barry, but you can sell anything after this. I know this wasn’t what you, what anyone, was expecting, but it’s better than Eiling getting this place, right?”

He swallowed and nodded, and Len was standing now, glad for the chance to stretch his legs and Cisco came over to him with a low whistle.

“Crazy. Did you see this coming?”

“Hm?” Len glanced at him, distracted. “No, not this. Certainly handy though.”

“No kidding,” Cisco laughed. “I’m glad Barry’s accepting it. He’s gotta a lot ‘f hard feelings about Wells. We all do.” He rubbed his chest idly and Len had to wonder what Cisco and Caitlin made of the whole thing, their mentor being a psychopath from the future.

“But this helps with some of that.” Caitlin came to stand next to them. “I’m sure Eobard had some plan, but I don’t think he would’ve realized just how much this would help us.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised if—”
“A video?” Barry’s voice drew all of their attention, a few feet away next to Laurel, usb stick in hand. Len felt his stomach churn.

“The will stipulates that you have to watch it within six months of his death for the transfer to be complete, or else it’ll go into receivership and after that, the military can purchase it. We’ve missed that deadline, but we can easily file for an extension since the will wasn’t opened until today. But you should watch it tonight, right now if you can—it’ll send a verification to Weathersby & Stone when it’s been watched, and they’ll forward that to me.”

Barry wrapped his hand around it, and Len could feel the bile threaten its way up his throat, swallowing tight himself around the phantom. Barry’s face was determined at least, not betraying his discomfort. “Got it.”

Len wanted to go over and see if he was okay, but West beat him to it. “Everything okay, Barr?”

“I—yeah. Yeah,” he looked at his hand, “I’ll manage.”

Joe clapped Barry on the shoulder and Len tried not to let his blood boil, because Joe was helping, even if Len hated him. Barry glanced over at him for a second, then sighed, and Len wished he could suppress certain things without it augmenting others, without their physical bond going into overdrive when he pushed the emotional one down. Hating Barry’s adoptive father wasn’t going to make things easy, with the bleed.

“Are you gonna’ watch it, Barry?” Caitlin moved over as if sensing the struggle, putting a comforting hand on Barry’s arm. “We can watch it together, if you like? Sometimes it helps to have a friend.”

He smiled at her, soft and Len couldn’t help but observe how much he relaxed at the simple gesture, some shared history he didn’t know about. But ultimately, Barry shook his head. “No, Cait, that’s okay. You don’t have to go through watching Wells pick apart our lives anymore.” His gaze flicked to Len, “hey Len? Would you—”

“Lead the way.”

Barry showed him to a quiet room with just a few computer terminals, Len cognizant of the long stare of West at their backs until they were out of sight.

“I don’t wanna’ do this.” Barry’s stomach clenched again, body tensing to fight back whatever it was, and Len would’ve hugged him then, but he feared that Barry might crumble if he did.

“Go throw up, I’ll set up the video.”

He was genuinely a little surprised when Barry took him up on that, disappearing from view with the usb drive suddenly in Len’s hand, sitting down and setting it up while he pushed aside the feelings in the NAB, unpleasant and unproductive.

Then Barry was back with a bottle of water, pressing himself to Len’s side and hitting play before Len even registered his return.

“Hello Barry.” Harrison Wells’s face was on the screen and Len wanted to punch it. “If you’re watching this, that means something has gone horribly wrong. I’m dead, and the last fifteen years have been for nothing... Bummer. Fifteen years,” he laughed briefly on screen and Len just saw a sad and desperate man. “Know what I realized? In all those years, helping raise you… we were never truly enemies, Barry. I’m not the thing you hate. And so, I’m going to give you the thing that you want most. It won’t matter. You’ll never be truly happy, Barry Allen. Trust me, I know you. I
know everything about you—I know who you marry, who your Soulmate is, what you name your firstborn child—none of it will make you happy. So enjoy this, while it lasts. Now, erase everything I said up to this point…”

Len’s whole body tensed as the bastard spoke, mimicking Barry’s posture beside him. Who he married, who his children were? That didn’t—Barry wouldn’t marry, not anyone but him. And children were out of the question. But then Wells kept talking, and even Len’s eyes had to widen, pushing aside the rest till later. Barry’s fear, elation, and hope felt like a bright song, like a light inside him, intense and visceral, he was almost shaking with it.

“Did he just…”

“He did.”

“Barry…”

“I’ve gotta’ go tell Joe.”

Barry’s father was about to be a free man.

Chapter End Notes

I should’ve just called this chapter “hand holding” lol.

But okay, so I actually wrote/rewrote a few scenes following this, but they just… didn’t add anything, not really, and didn’t achieve anything for the narrative. So I cut this chapter short, and decided we’ll pick up with Barry’s PoV next and move forward.

For anyone surprised I went with Eobard’s will pretty much how it is in canon, I think it adds a very neat dimension. It doesn’t mean we’re done with the military, only that Eiling will be looking for new avenues to get what he wants. I also tend to try and stick close to canon, insofar as I am able, so while we won’t see Earth-2 in this, the will made sense, and Patty Spivot also exists in this universe (though in a slightly different role, as will be seen later).

Also, sorry for any and all bastardization of actual legal process. I know nothing about it, hence the vague hand-waving.

And finally, just want to say thanks as always for reading and for when you time to leave comments ☺ you guys are awesome.
The week after reading the will passed in a flurry of tension and apprehension.

Barry was beside himself. After watching the video and showing it to Joe, after having his whole life upended with all of his friends around to congratulate him about it, he finally felt like things were really going his way for a while. Even Joe and Len had shared a smile over Barry’s enthusiasm, and he was pretty sure the whole day had turned to magic. He’d run straight to Iron Heights as soon as Joe gave him a confirmation that the evidence would be admissible, and cried through a conversation with his father where neither of them could stop smiling.

“You’re gonna’ be a free man.” Barry couldn’t stop repeating it, laughing through the tears.

The high dwindled quickly to impatience and a million other emotions after that. There was so much to take care of. With the lab—which Barry could barely even think about yet, owning all of STAR Labs and the Wells’ estate—he had a lot of paperwork to sort through, all of which Laurel was a lifesaver for. He already had plans and the preliminary paperwork to transfer all the money to his dad, something to live off of and make his life easy from now until forever, because he deserved it, and Barry couldn’t dream of using the money himself.

Beyond that, all of this meant that Cisco and Caitlin could stay. Caitlin was already in a discussion with the university about a joint-position so she could stay on at STAR labs but still work with the university and gain access to their resources while they gained the benefit of her future publications and research. Cisco had just called his prospective employers to let them know he wasn’t seeking the position after all. Apparently Tina McGee with Mercury Labs had made a comment about Harrison Wells still scooping the best talent from beyond the grave, and even Barry had to laugh at little, if only for Cisco’s benefit.

After that it was nail biting and frustrating for most of the week. Exonerating someone took considerable paperwork and required getting the new evidence in front of a judge, who had to review the whole case. Even Captain Singh called in a favor to get things going as quick as possible for him.

“I’m happy for you, Allen,” he’d said like he meant it, like he was relieved Barry hadn’t been crazy all these years. Barry couldn’t thank him enough, relieved looks or no.

But the look from the Captain was nothing next to some of the other ones he was getting at work. Barry was used to the Flash being a subject of discussion, but never himself, or if he was, it was only for being considered so strange, or because someone had heard about his childhood. This week, he was getting a combination of confusion and jealously and pride, pats on the back mixed with condolences. Colleagues were offering support for his father being exonerated, awe and envy over his sudden inheritance (which had hit the gossip mill like a freight train), and chagrined curiosity over
why the man who confessed to murdering his mother had willed everything to him.

It appeared that the consensus on the last point was either that Harrison Wells had felt overwhelmed by grief for what he’d done that he’d gone out of his way to try and help set up the rest of Barry’s life, or else that he and Barry had had some illicit relationship. Both theories he’d heard turned Barry’s stomach; Eobard felt no guilt over his actions, quite the opposite, and the thought of his relationship with Eobard being any more fraught than it actually had been was just too much to stomach.

He tried not to complain about his job too much at home. Joe was patient, but he had his own complaints and long days at work, between being a meta-human liaison for the military and being asked by other detectives about Barry, about the theories of why Harrison Wells had willed and confessed like he did, all things that made Joe turn sour fast. Even Barry had to wince at the expression on Joe’s face when he talked about it.

Len was more open to listening, the days Barry made it over there, between the massive amounts of paperwork that he had to familiarize himself with for STAR Labs, saying goodbye to Oliver, Felicity, and Laurel when they decided they’d been away from their duties in Star City for long enough, and visiting his dad as much as possible.

Anytime he dropped onto Len’s sofa that week, he found himself earning a shoulder rub or foot rub and practically melted into the other man, too exhausted to worry about anything else for an hour. They weren’t talking much about anything in depth, not about anything from Eobard’s message, or any of the other issues hanging over them, and Barry could feel things churning away inside Len, but there wasn’t too much he could do about it. Things were still… there was still ground to cover, miles of ground, really, but he didn’t know what to do about most of it. Mick was around too, congratulated Barry on his ‘good fortune’ and played cards with Len while Barry read a book and passed out on the couch one evening after his rounds, and for the nights he spent there, things felt uncomplicated, somehow, at least for a little while.

**********

On the sixth day, Barry was still impatient, and eager, and after all this time, two court visits, a mountain of paperwork, and a million other things, he got confirmation that his father was finally getting out tomorrow.

His whole day went off like a lightbulb. He was too jittery to sit still. By the evening, he’d run to Iron Heights and back already, waves of excitement and relief, but he had more nervous energy than he knew what to do with still. He ran to the prison a third time just to stare at it in the distance, then found himself taking a winding path back to the city, needing to just move and run, zigzagging across the landscape.

It really shouldn’t have surprised it as much as it did that he ran smack dab into a military training exercise.

The lights and sounds had attracted him once he got near, curiosity overtaking his jubilation as he cased the surrounding area in a second. It looked like a nighttime exercise of some sort that he didn’t know enough about the military to make sense of, and as soon as he stopped on the outskirts to get a better view, they noticed him pretty much immediately.
He was alarmed when they raised their guns, ready for a fight, but with a shout from whoever was in charge, he pretty quickly got the gist of what was going on and—"no I am not here as part of your training exercise on meta-humans!"

Barry’s mood soured in an instant. He wanted to poke around and see if they actually had any meta-humans around, but before he could, someone was directing him to Eiling. He should’ve know that if meta-humans were involved, he was around somewhere, though Barry couldn’t figure out why a General in the military was so focused on Central City as to spend all of his time nearby. When Barry was shown into his mobile office, the man was actually going over documents like a real human being and not just a combat-obsessed military prop.

“Welcome, Flash. I see you found our newest training camp.”

“Training so close to the city?”

“We bought some real estate, Flash—our team has set up somewhere if we want to have a presence in helping deal with the meta-human crisis here in Central City.” Eiling looked too smug for his own good, leaning back and tapping his desk. “Congratulations, by the way, on your surprise play of acquiring STAR Labs. It looks as if we may have to turn our future development contracts to Mercury Labs instead.”

“Don’t you have work in the pentagon or something?”

“Meta-human assets are important to the continued security of our nation.”

Barry scowled at him and crossed his arms, “and you’ve convinced the city to think of me as one of those ‘assets’?”

“I think you could be invaluable to your country, Mr. Allen.”

“I’m happy being a help to Central City without the military’s help, actually.”

“You know,” he leaned back in his chair, “you could so much more with our support. Your friend Mr. Queen only manages to do what he does unchecked by the military or a federal beat down because he’s always been a favorite of Amanda Waller. You really think you’ll be able to keep doing what you do here in Central with no consequences, Allen?”

Barry scoffed, ready to give Eiling a piece of his mind, but there was a knock at the door. He tensed, and wasn’t even surprised when Kane entered a moment later, greeting Eiling with a sharp glance at Barry. She was dressed in the same combat uniform as everyone else outside who had been running whatever drill Barry seen, hair tied back and looking like a proper soldier, except that one of her arms was in a sling and she looked wan and pale. Barry tried not to feel too satisfied about that.

“Kane, I believe you have something to say to the Flash, while he’s been so kind as to drop in on us.”

She stiffened visibly, then turned to Barry with a tight glare, mouth a hard line that pushed out the words, “my apologies, Flash. I acted without orders and it won’t happen again.”

Barry didn’t know what to make of that, with Kane so obviously not sorry about having tried to kill him. He was at least 80 percent sure this was just Eiling’s way of saying Kane trying to kill Barry hadn’t been his fault. It didn’t help that she undercut the words with smirk, eyed Barry like he was some type of particularly pleasant looking prey.

“You know he’s lying to you, right?” Barry asked her. “About Bette?”
That wiped the smile off her face. “I know he pulled the trigger, Allen. I know he did it to save him and his men, and that she turned herself into a suicide bomb. And I also know why.”

So she did know. Barry just frowned and shook his head. Why? “Bette was a friend.”

Kane’s face was incensed. “She was a—”

“That’s enough, Sargent.” Eiling had a hand raised to cut her off. “You’ve said what you came here to say.”

“Yeah and I’ve heard enough.” Barry turned to leave. “Don’t think I’m going to change my mind about helping you.”

“Don’t think I’m done yet either, Mr. Allen. And congratulations too, about your father.”

Barry shot him a scathing glance and was gone.

*********

He couldn’t focus on anything after running into Eiling. He was never going to not hate the General, but he’d been trying not to let it get him down, not when his father was getting out of Iron Heights so soon.

He ran himself to exhaustion before winding down to make it home, craving the familiarity of his own bed, well after midnight by the time he made it in the door. Joe was still up, on the couch and watching late night news.

“No rest for the wicked?” Barry asked when he came in, Joe glancing up at him, face smoothing into a tired smile.

“No rest for the excited, Barry.”

He dropped down on the couch next to Joe and couldn’t suppress a small smile of his own. “It’s really happening.”

“All thanks to you, kiddo.”

He faltered for a second.

“What?” Joe asked.

“I just—that’s not really true, is it?” Barry chanced a glance at Joe then down at his hands.

“Barr—son, you can’t see it that way. You’ve done literally every possible thing to get your father out—”

“And I still ended up needing Wells’ help to do it.” He knew he sounded bitter, and that it wasn’t the time for that.

“Wells’ confession was something you aimed on getting from the second you knew he was the one who killed Nora. Who cares if you got it this way or that way—you got it, ‘n that’s what matters.”
Barry sighed and knocked his shoulder gently into Joe’s. “You’re right, I know.”

“Uh huh. Tell that to Iris sometime, huh? Pretty sure I’m 0 for 3 with her recently.”

“Oh?”

“Oh nothing I just—well I’ve got another earful once or twice about this whole—about you ‘n Snart.”

“Ah.” Barry nodded, wondering what he should say.

“Look, Barry, I…” Joe sighed. “How are you?”

“Me? I’m fine. My dad’s getting out tomorrow so I think I’ve never been better. Well, minus the military and all that but I can handle that.” That wasn’t what Joe was asking and he knew it. So after a moment, he continued, a little quieter. “Things with Len are good too. He’s… a good listener. Quiet. Funny, when you get used to his sense of humor.”

Joe’s gaze was a little too focused for Barry’s liking, but he was nodding. “‘n he treats you okay?”

Barry thought about that week, about the shoulder rubs, about time spent quietly on his couch, about time spent in Len’s bed unwinding, or cuddling with more contact than he knew Len was used to, still warming up to it, and Barry smiled to himself, then up at Joe. “He does. He’s… I know he’s a lot of things, and I know there’s things he and I still have to work on, but he definitely treats me good. He cares about me.”

Joe sighed, a little heavy, then patted Barry’s knee and stood up. “That’s the most important part.”

“You going to bed?”

“Looks like it.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Joe raised his eyebrows, “sure thing.”

“Iris, I mean, you were so happy for her, when you found out she was pregnant. And I…”

Joe leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, and Barry had to look away from his too-soft expression.

“You don’t think you’re ever gonna’ have kids?”

“Well’s video, it said… but I just don’t see how that’ll ever happen, not with me and Len.” It had been stewing in the back of Barry’s mind, that and thoughts of the newspaper he’d seen before Gideon disappeared at the same time as Eobard had died. Barry was fairly confident at this point that he’d never marry Iris, but it made him wonder just how much had changed from killing Eobard, or maybe from saving Eddie, or else from stopping the singularity.

Joe nodded, then shook his head. “Time travel, I don’t even try to wrap my head around all that—” he waved his hand “—mess. Too many nights tryin’a figure out those paradoxes Cisco’s always talkin’ about. What I do know, Barr, is if you ever do wanna’ have kids, you’d make a great father.”

“You think so?”

“Son, I know so.” He smiled, so warm, and Barry felt relieved, felt reminded of what was happening
tomorrow.

“I guess we should both catch some shut eye.”

Joe nodded, and Barry locked up before heading up to bed. Laying down, staring at the ceiling, he couldn’t quite shake the thoughts of the conversation, of the worries bubbling up in him, about Eobard telling him he’d never be happy, and what his life path had been supposed to be, what was supposed to happy in 2024, and what his life had been like leading up to it. If he was ever going to have any idea of the path he’d been destined for, and if it even…

His phone started to ring beside him. He didn’t even need the called ID to tell him who it was.

“Hey Len.”

“Hey, Barry. Just checking in.”

Barry could read between the lines. He could only imagine how messed up his feelings must be right now, bleeding through to Len. Len had been like an anchor all week, nothing like the intense peaks of Barry’s feelings that would change by the minute.

“Thanks.” Barry’s voice was quiet in the dark. “I know I probably seem like I’m all over the place right now.”

“It’s fine, expected really. I just wanted to make sure you’re alright, though I suppose now that I’ve heard your voice, I can let you be, I know you wanted a night at home.”

“Just ‘cause it’s familiar, because I want to be home tonight, not because I don’t want to see you. I do, actually—want to see you, that is. I... it gets easier, when you’re around.” It was easier to admit that now, easier than it had ever been before this week.

“Anything I can do?”

Barry sighed, wishing he could invite Len to come over, torn. It was his own house too, but he didn’t want to push Joe too far too fast. “You’re coming to the party tomorrow, right?”

“So long as it makes things easier instead of harder on you.”

“Yeah, it’s a party, and everyone will want to see you.” He heard Len snort, but Barry meant it. “Ollie and Felicity already left town, but Cisco and Iris and Dr. Stein all want to get to know you better. And you have to meet Eddie still. Well, meet him again.”

“Again?”

“…You, uh, met him once before. He’s the one who arrested you after our fight in the street that one time?”

“He’s that idiot?”

Barry couldn’t help but laugh. “Don’t let him hear you call him that. He was pretty proud of his heroics. And he did sort of save my life, so technically, you should thank him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He could just picture Len’s unimpressed scowl and smiled quietly to himself.

“Hey Len?”

“Mm?”
Barry knew, logically, that he was going to be a bit beside himself when his father was finally free. But he didn’t expect to be quite so overcome by emotion watching him walk out of Iron Heights as a free man, with his name cleared for real. They hugged and it felt like the world was falling into place like it was supposed to. Eobard Thawne could suck it—this was exactly what happiness felt like.

The drive back was full of laughter, of long and easy sighs. Henry was staring out the window at every passing tree while Barry drove—something he didn’t do all that often but could do and did on this occasion so he could have the drive to catch up with his dad alone. He wanted to talk about everything, ask his dad everything, but his father was more interested in hearing about Barry’s life. Barry tried to give him updates every time he went to visiting hours, but this was different, no pane of glass and phone receiver, more flowing, able to talk freely about the Flash and the military and Grodd—‘yeah, we sort of dealt with Grodd a while back, once or twice?’—and Len. Barry got to smile and tell his dad about Len saving his life, even if he’d been unconscious for it. He left out the part about Len killing soldiers, something he tried not to dwell on, but couldn’t blame Len for, not considering it was his only option for escape.

Barry started to get excited when they made it back to Joe’s neighborhood. Henry would be staying in the guest room—formerly Iris’s room—until he found his own place. Barry was already contemplating asking getting an apartment with his dad, helping him get set up, ideas tumbling one after the other. But he tried to focus on the present, as he was pulling up to Joe’s driveway and there was a party waiting for them inside. He hugged his dad again as soon as they were out of the car, laughing, “I can’t believe this is real.”

“Me neither, kiddo.”

Their smiles were mirrored back at one another before going in, the welcome party bursting into cheers and greetings and hugs—Joe then Iris then Caitlin, Cisco next. Len was there and Barry grinned at him, standing by a wall next to Martin Stein and his wife, Clarissa, with Eddie and Ronnie close by. No one else knew that his dad and Len had already met, but that didn’t matter. Barry moved across the room and said hi to everyone as he did, hugging Cisco, greeting Eddie and watching as Iris introduced him to his dad, and his dad congratulating them on the pregnancy, Iris glowing.

“This is nice,” Len said, moving closer to Barry’s side. He was holding one of the glasses of champagne and Martin poured Barry one too before moving on to get one for Caitlin. Barry’s smile couldn’t be any wider.

“I’m glad you came.”

“Well,” Len tilted his head to the side to try and mask just how much he was smiling too; Barry could feel that he was enjoying this, warmth tugging at him in the bleed. “You did ask nicely.”

“You should come say hi, before we cut the cake.”
“Mm.”

“How was meeting Eddie?”

“No threats of bloodshed on either side.”

Barry elbowed him gently, “come on.”

“He seems… nice. A good match for Iris.”

Barry decided that was the most he was gonna’ get and just shook his head. He, on the other hand, had received an earful from Eddie the next time he’d seen him after the secret of them being Soulmates was out. Eddie had hugged him and told him it was okay in a few different ways and asked if he was okay and said that Iris spoke highly of Len, which was a bit of a stretch Barry was sure, but he’d been happy that Eddie hadn’t mentioned Len’s criminal record a single time. He just hoped Eddie hadn’t tried to hug Len too, though Barry would’ve paid to see that if it had happened.

The party went on over the afternoon from there. Len talked to Henry and wished him well, Joe and Len somehow—almost magically—skirted one another the entire afternoon, somehow always on opposite sides of a room or else in totally different rooms. It was impressive, really, but Joe was laughing with Cisco and Len stuck close to Barry unless someone else distracted him. Martin eventually gave a toast with sparkling wine and Ronnie teased him for it, Caitlin and Clarissa laughed, everyone else toasted (Iris with her glass of nonalcoholic sparkling juice) and it felt… right. Like this really was what happiness felt like. With this team, with these people beside him, Barry was sure he could take on Eiling and the rest of the world too.

At least, that was until his father nodded at him to talk for a second, aside. Barry grinned, more than happy to have a second alone with his dad, excusing himself from Len’s side.

“You good?” he asked, clapping his dad on the shoulder as he coughed from the bubbly wine, both of them smiling as Henry complained about his lack of alcohol tolerance after all this time away, the opposite of Barry’s problem. He didn’t dwell on that though, opening up with his plan, about them looking for an apartment together, about his dad coming to work at STAR Labs, now that Barry apparently owned it.

But his dad just looked down with a forced smile, and Barry hesitated.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Henry coughed and hesitated himself before nodding. “Yeah, um, it’s a party. Come on, we can talk about all this tomorrow.”

Something was wrong.

“Talk about… what?”

“Barry.” His dad just said it, the one word, short before he looked away, frowned, and tried to say nothing. And Barry knew in that moment…

“Are you not… planning on sticking around?”

“Okay.” Henry was nodding, blinking, too serious. “Okay. Do you think… can you be all that you are becoming with me here?”

Barry scoffed, hurt and confused. How could he even ask that? It was… he was… “You’re the only
family that I have left.”

His dad searched his gaze, and Barry tried, he tried to understand.

“Well, that’s not really true. Don’t you have another family in this room?” Barry glanced up, over at the others, his eyes meeting with Len’s confused gaze for a second. He could feel it, all the hurt inside Barry, he knew. But he turned his attention back to his dad, who kept talking. “They need your help too, Barry.”

Henry put his hand on Barry’s shoulders, earnest and sure, then up to cup his face, like he hadn’t done in years, because they hadn’t had a chance in years. “When you need me, I will be here. But right now, Central City doesn’t need you to be Henry Allen’s son. It needs you to be the Flash.” He smiled like he was proud, like he wasn’t breaking Barry’s heart, hollowing him out. “My kid. The superhero,” he whispered, then dropped his hands and stepped back.

Barry felt more lost than he had in a very long time.

“I have to go. I need you to tell me that it’s okay.”

It wasn’t. Barry could only nod, opening his mouth to say yeah but the sound wouldn’t come out. His dad took it though, and hugged him. Barry tried to fight the tears but it wasn’t working, they were falling down his cheeks anyway, holding his father tight. All that time, just to lose him again. Lose him because… why? Because Barry was a hero now? It was so unfair. And he knew it was stupid to feel like that but he couldn’t help it, drawing in a shaky breath then letting his father go.

“You should… it’s your party. Go, talk to people. I’ll just… be a minute.”

His dad looked at him, hesitated for a long second, but ultimately nodded. Barry considered sitting on the porch to get some air but didn’t want to run into anyone who might be leaving the party, so he made toward the stairs instead. He didn’t have to look behind him to know that Len was following, heading to his room without glancing back.

“Barry?”

“He’s leaving,” he choked out the syllables and tried to stop himself from breaking down, knowing there was a still a party, knowing he needed to get himself together, but Len’s arms were around him then and he couldn’t hold back, for a minute, clutching him back and letting go, just letting himself hurt, shaking quietly. “He’s leaving,” he whispered, sniffing before shaking his head and holding on tighter. Len was rubbing soothing circles into his back and it was the only thing holding him together. He forced himself to stifle all the pain from welling up, taking comfort in the bleed, in the steadiness of Len.

After a minute, he pulled back and wiped his eyes, mumbled an apology and grabbed a tissue, opening his window for cool air. Then he sat on the side of his bed and tried to just breathe it out, to calm the redness of his face before he dared to go back downstairs. Len sat beside him after a moment, “you gonna’ be okay, kid?”

He tried to nod but it came out more like a spastic twitch, and ultimately stopped trying. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, and pulled a hand through his hair.

“What did I do wrong?”

“Wrong?”

“I—he… he thinks…” he blew out a breath. “He’s leaving because Central City’s too crazy, because
it needs the Flash and he doesn’t want to be some kind of burden. Because he thinks I don’t need him, that I have…” enough family. Barry shook his head.

“Barry, it is not your fault that your father wants to leave this City.”

Except it was. Barry just glared at his closet door for a minute, and Len sighed beside him.

“If I was him, after being locked up for fifteen years, the first thing I would want to do would be stretch my legs too. Move around, see the world I’d been dreaming about, tucked away. A few months in the clink is enough to make a man stir crazy. Fifteen years? It’s no wonder, Barry.”

But that wasn’t what he’d said—he’d said… “He said Central City needs the Flash.”

“And it does,” Len drawled, head tilted toward him, “but Henry Allen? Man probably needs training wheels. Fifteen years ago the world didn’t have iphones, Barry, let alone meta-humans. He’ll need time and space to figure the world out before he’s ready to live in it.”

“Why can’t he do that while he’s still at home?”

Len looked at him askance. “Home? Where do you think home is for a man who’s spent over a decade away? Old house belongs to someone else, kid lives with the detective who put him away? Where’s home to him, Barry?”

Barry bit his lip, then swallowed. It hurt. It all hurt, like a hot knife twisting inside of him. “I don’t want him to leave.”

Len gently put his arm on Barry’s shoulder, and waited until Barry met his eyes before talking. “You’re the reason he has a choice to leave.”

Barry exhaled slow, and felt some of the tension leave as he did. “Yeah… you’re right, I guess.”

“I am.” Len’s voice was more normal now, not quite so soft, and Barry tried to smile at him, at least. Then he flopped onto his back and stared up at the ceiling.

“This day really didn’t go like I was expecting.”

Len let out a quiet chuckle and the sound warmed Barry. “Does anything, ever?”

Barry watched him stand up and start looking around the room. “Not really, I guess.”

“Gotta’ say, I didn’t expect my first time in your room to go like this.”

Barry debated throwing a pillow at Len for his smirk, but decided just to shake his head and smile. “House full of guests—you know, reporters and detectives, my whole family? You sure it’s the best time to make sex jokes?”

Len looked amused, poking at something on one of Barry’s shelves. “Not really sure if that’s quite ‘living on the edge’, Barry.”

He stared up at the ceiling again, wishing he could hold the humor but he felt it dissipate. “Hey Len? … Do you think… will we ever get married, d’you think?”

He could feel Len’s surprise, hear whatever he was fiddling with drop back onto the shelf. Barry kept his eyes carefully trained on the ceiling.

“Would you want that?” his voice was quiet.
“I… it wouldn’t be a normal marriage, really. Probably not a legal one, since you don’t exist on any records anymore.” He supposed that Felicity could probably slip them into a system though, if they wanted.

“Rings?”

“Just simple bands, I guess. Unless you have something in mind?”

“And a wedding?”

“Just a small ceremony, just family and our closest friends.”

“How’d you figure that would work? Lisa, maybe, and your friends.”

Right, their combined friends couldn’t mesh, and then the Rogues, who could never know the truth. “Will I ever meet them? Other than Lisa and Mick?”

“Do you want to?”

He didn’t know. This conversation was spiraling. He wasn’t sure what possessed him to ask except that he couldn’t stop thinking about the future, the past, the present, all the messes Eobard had made of his life leading him to this moment, and all the things he’d been trying to let go of ever since Initial Communion, all the new things he was trying to make space for. How he was ever going to be happy.

“Hey Len?”

He waited for him to ask, “yes, Barry?” this time. Len could feel him, feel how close he was to shaking. And Barry could feel him, tense, too warm in his sweater. He closed his eyes.

“Do you think we’ll ever have kids?”

There was static in the bleed.

“Hey guys?” Iris was in the doorway, and Barry sat up in a fluid movement as Len turned to her. “Looks like Martin and his wife, and I think Caitlin and Ronnie, are all heading out. Wanna’ come say goodbye?”

“Sure, Iris, we’ll be right down.”

She smiled bright but it didn’t reach her eyes, glancing between them before disappearing out of sight. Iris, who was talking about baby names the last time Barry had seen her.

He stood up with a sigh.

“Just… think about it, Len.” He put his hand on Len’s shoulder, and finally let himself look at Len’s face, really look at it, at the way he was trying to hold it closed, but Barry could read those lines now, the tension in his brow and around his eyes, the hard turn to his mouth, the straightness of his posture. Barry felt too worn for this, too thin, but he drew Len in anyway, hugged him gently, kissed his temple. “It’s okay.”

Len nodded, hands gentle around Barry’s waist.

“Let’s head downstairs.”
One thing I really love about The Flash is that it's a show about family and friendship, more than about anything else. The relationships are so important in it, parent and child, siblings, friends, adoptive, and more, and it goes out of its way to show all the different ways those relationships can exist. Family is important in this fic too—redefining what it means with Soulmates, lying and coming clean to family, growing that family, and sometimes changing what you expect to be your family.

This chapter took a long time coming, and I want to thank you all for your patience. This is actually the third or fourth (or fifth) version of it; I wrote and rewrote pretty much everything but the party scene a few times. The original version didn’t have the military (the only part of the chapter I’m still not sure about tbh), two versions had Len at Barry’s house the night before the party (one of those versions had Len talking to Joe and one didn’t), and one version didn’t have any scenes at Barry’s house before the party at all. So… a lot of changes. But I think I mostly like where it finally landed.

And this fic is at a stage where before I got to throw stories and characters out and watch those threads dangle, but now I’m starting to weave all the plots and foreshadowing and things I’ve built up, together. It’s a bit of a balancing act, trying to make sure nothing gets lost in the mire, but I hope that even with a slower update schedule than it used to have, you guys still enjoy all the messes coming your way in this fic ;)

ps - the chapter title is French (sorry if I've butchered it omg) for "Murder of the Half" meaning murder of one's Soulmate. In this world, it's actually a DSM (diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders) classification to have MdlM syndrome, which is something that occurs after a person has killed their own Soulmate. It's pretty rare. It's also not something Henry ever had, but had he and Nora been Bonded, it would've been clear he wasn't her killer, because he didn't have the syndrome. Just a random tidbit for you all :)
Len couldn’t deny (at least to himself) that he was… nervous, about this little trip. For all Barry had eventually agreed to come, it was still almost a full four days alone with him, out of town, no distractions… Len wasn’t quite sure what to expect.

It had been close to a week since Barry had dropped his father off at a bus station to leave town and enjoy his newfound freedom, and Barry still wasn’t quite himself. But at least he hadn’t broached the topic of weddings and kids again, something for which Len was privately grateful. It wasn’t something he himself was about to bring up, even if he was mentally designing rings. He wasn’t especially keen on wearing one, knowing how easily rings could get in the way, but being married to Barry… it was a thought he could get behind, one that he could enjoy, if only in daydreams he wasn’t about to discuss with anyone.

The rest of it… he didn’t particularly want to discuss the rest of it. So instead he focused on the trip, planning out the details the night before they left. Barry was spending the night at his own (technically Joe’s) house, which Len suspected was on West’s request, wanting to spent time together before Len whisked him away to his ‘secret supervillain loveshack’ (thank you Cisco for that moniker).

But Barry spending the night over there apparently wasn’t going to stop him from indulging. He was as tense and nervous as Len was, so it shouldn’t have come as a surprise to him that Barry decided to relax the old fashioned way. He felt the phantom of fingers on him while he was reading in bed and smirked to himself, setting aside the book.

This joint masturbating was more rare now that he was typically getting off with Barry and thus not focusing on the bleed at the times when Barry inevitably masturbated more frequently than Len did. But he wasn’t about to ignore the opportunity right now, not when he could use the stress relief as well, slipping his boxers down to tease himself slowly, feeling a jolt of excitement from Barry as soon as he started.

Len liked to set the pace when they did this, something slow to drive Barry a little crazy. He just
could picture the other’s long fingers, the flush to his cheeks, how he probably—definitely—was biting his own lip. Len’s tongue flicked over his own bottom lip and mimicked the sensation, free hand teasing a nipple. The bleed wasn’t as strong as it had once been, not unless he was deliberately focused on it, channeling into it, and Len’s fingers drifted down to his Mark to anchor the sensation, feeling it strengthen when he did, hand gripping his cock tighter as the fuzzy phantom touches felt clearer.

He could feel something warm on the inside of his thigh and sighed, spread his own legs, welcoming. But Barry always went too fast with this, and Len—he reached for the lube in his side table, deciding to set the pace with this as well. He slicked up two fingers and stretched to reach, feeling Barry jolt again when Len’s fingers found his own entrance, mimicked what Barry’s were doing but with slower, much slower, teasing circles.

He couldn’t help be feel amused in response to the consternation coming off Barry in waves, laughing to himself in the quiet of his room. He slipped one finger in and wasn’t sure if it was him, Barry, or both of them whose arousal intensified at the sensation. He was still going slow, still aiming to drive Barry mad, but they were both fingering themselves open, then, matching pace, everything in sync. He pressed in a second finger and knew Barry did the same, wishing he could hear the other’s gasp, almost certain he had heard it, feeling his skin start to electrify, hands working himself in perfect time with Barry’s.

Len groaned aloud when he felt Barry press in a third digit and copied it, hand on his cock speeding up, and gasped as soon as he felt, could tell—fuck Barry was vibrating his fingers. Len shuddered and his movements jumped from slow to intense, fast as he could go, impossible to match the sensation but he could feel it anyway, could feel—Barry’s hand on his cock was vibrating too and he was getting close, so—his own balls were tightening, heart racing as he—god he was—

Len threw back his head and moaned as he came, feeling in time with Barry, knowing they were coming together, as one.

He shuddered out his aftershocks and sighed with relief, body deflating, tension abating. He knew it was only a matter of time before Barry asked him to use more than just his fingers and his mouth when they were together, that soon he would be holding on to Barry’s hips and pressing inside him. Or vice versa. Those images chased themselves around inside his head as he fell asleep.

He hoped the cottage they were headed to the next day wouldn’t disappoint.

**********

“You gonna’ tell me where we’re headed?”

Len had just turned onto the interstate and smiled over at Barry. “If I do that, you’ll just sprint ahead as soon as you get restless of being in the car.”

In the passenger seat, Barry snorted and leaned back, all gangly limbs. “Don’t pretend you’re not just waiting for it to be a dramatic reveal.”

He tried not to laugh, lips curling up. Barry had shown up after his workday ended with his bags and a nervous smile, let Len pull him in for a kiss before they were on the road.

“I like to think I’m not that dramatic. I will tell you it’s a cottage.”
“A cottage? Really? Does it have a white picket fence?”

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes, drawling, “don’t get carried away, Scarlet.”

“Scarlet, huh? No fence then. But wait, what’s the difference between a cottage and a cabin? I had my money on cabin.”

“One is made of logs.”

“Okay, so you have a cottage. In what state?”

They were heading north on the 29. “Nebraska.”

“Only you would buy a cottage in Nebraska.”

Len didn’t debate the statement. “Population density is lower, it’s far from Central, not a place anyone would come looking for me.”

“And you come out here once a year?”

“At least. Make sure it’s maintained. It’s a little escape when I’m fed up with everything else.” He didn’t describe what ‘everything else’ was, thinking for a moment of the Santinis and the job, his father, and more recently, meta-human messes.

Barry nodded, and they lapsed into comfortable quiet for a while. It was a decently long drive, he knew, and Barry probably was itching to go out for a run, but he stuck it out anyway, eventually chatting about his day, his job, his week. After the halfway rest stop (Barry bought a ridiculous amount of snacks), Barry flicked on the radio and then ended up plugging his ipod into it, much to Len’s chagrin.

“You’re going to make me listen to Lady Gaga, aren’t you?”

He could feel surprise coming off Barry for a moment, caught a smile out of the corner of his eye, “you remembered?”

Len was pretty sure he remembered every single detail Barry had ever shared about himself. “So long as it’s not ABBA I’ll survive,” he replied instead of commenting.

“What’d you have against ABBA?” Barry started scrolling through songs and Len chewed on that thought.

“Are you forgetting I grew up in the 80’s? You’ll never believe how much gay clubs in the 90’s seemed to love that crap.”

“Ha! So how many times have you had to hear ‘Man After Midnight’?”

“Don’t get me started.”

“So if I were to…”

The opening chords started to play, and “Barry…”

Barry was grinning and Len let him have this, much as it made him cringe. “Do you know the words?”

“I’m not singing this with you.”
“You do!”

Len focused on the road while Barry started to belt out the song (surprisingly well) and he tried to pretend he wasn’t enjoying the hell out of this. It was more fun that way, attempting to frown and smothering his own grin.

They listened to shitty pop music for the rest of the drive and Len couldn’t find it in himself to complain.

**********

It was late by the time they rolled up. The music had faded to dim background noise and Barry became more alert and excited the more remote the roads they took were, until at last they were on the short unpaved road that led up to the cottage. It was a small bungalow, no fence—certainly not white picket—and mostly unassuming on the outside. It would be dusty and unused on the inside he knew, at least until tomorrow morning when he cleaned it, but the interior was all warm wood, a loft as the bedroom upstairs, a kitchen and living room, a small sun room that doubled as an office, a wrap-around veranda and a view out onto the small river that ran through the nearby town and behind the cottage.

Barry whistled low as they got out of the car and Len couldn’t peel his eyes off the other man for a minute, gauging his reaction in the low, barely-there light. Barry was turning in slow circles before they even got in to the cottage, looking up at the stars, unfettered by light pollution and clear to see in the crisp night. His wondered expression sat well with Len, his slight awe at the view, one that Len was suddenly sure he didn’t often stop to appreciate despite his ability to run out of the city and away from the lights easier than anyone else on the planet.

He could probably watch Barry all day, all night. But Barry shivered not long after, jacket too thin for the chillier Nebraska air and Len caught his eye and nodded toward the cottage, smiling to himself as Barry followed him inside.

“The place’ll be dusty for tonight,” he warned, heading for the breaker box to set up the electricity. “Need to run the taps for a minute I’m sure.”

“You’ve got full utilities running out here?”

“Oh course.”

“This is cool,” Barry still sounded distracted, glancing at everything at once as soon as Len got the lights on, drinking it in. He wasn’t smiling, exactly, but he seemed content and captivated, just in the moment, and that was more than enough. Len gave him the tour and told him he’d clean it up in the morning, as it was late by the time they got in and they’d eaten already, a while back at a pit stop.

“D’you wanna’ get ready for bed?”

“Bed?” Barry glanced at Len like he was paying attention for the first time since they arrived. “What time—Oh. Heh, yeah that might be…” He smiled affably and Len wanted to kiss it off his face. He pulled Barry in gently and leaned forward, stole the kiss he wanted and felt Barry sigh, felt him relax a little.

“So what’d you think? Acceptable?”
“Best birthday present anyone’s ever given me.”

Len arched an eyebrow but playing it cool was pointless with the bleed, especially with Barry so close. He would know exactly how pleased Len was to hear that, and just like that, he could feel a little smugness coming from Barry.

“You really like giving gifts, don’t you?”

“What’s not to enjoy about it?” Len finally let Barry go so that they could get ready for bed, letting Barry have the bathroom first while he found blankets and bedding in vacuum-sealed bags and set up the room. Before long, he was sliding in to the bed up in the loft room next to Barry, forgoing a shirt in the warmth of the cottage, Barry doing the same.

“Hey Len?”

“Mm?” They were both sitting up in the lamp light and Barry looked tired, finally, hair a little mussed like he’d been running his fingers through it.

“This whole cottage, and all of it… I hope you know how much I appreciate it.”

Len glanced out the corner of his eye at Barry. “And I appreciate you being here.”

Barry was gnawing on his lip, and Len sighed.

“I know it hasn’t been easy for you, what with… all of what I’d done, getting over your fear I’d hurt people you loved, just getting to a place where you weren’t…” afraid of me, he wanted to say. Not that Barry had ever been ‘afraid’ exactly, but he’d felt the tension, the anxiety, the way he struggled to put himself next to Len on a park bench, the way he’d tried so hard not to fight when Len pushed, pushed because he’d been so frustrated by Barry’s apprehension of him, by the slow pace of having to wait for his Soulmate to come to him after 25 years of waiting before that.

“I forgave you a while ago, Len. It’s okay, that was… before.”

It wasn’t just ‘before’, he knew. It was after Barry had agreed to be with him too, pushing himself to stay in Len’s house, to open his life, as much as he could. Barry was more secretive, more guarded, than most people would ever realize, he was so good at pretending to be open.

“I’m just saying, Barry, that I appreciate your trust.” He wasn’t entirely sure it was earned, all things considered, but he did appreciate having it. Barry smiled and nudged his side, settling against it.

“I appreciate you.”

“Hm.” Len smiled too, eyes closing for a second to just enjoy the feel of Barry next to him. “Let’s sleep, dear.”

“Hmm, dear. I like that.”

**********

Breakfast was a conundrum. Len had wanted to stick around in the morning and clean up the place, but after finishing some rations they’d picked up on the road the night before, they definitely needed to grab some proper food for the weekend.
“Groceries?”

“That’s what I said. I’ll just head into town and grab enough for the weekend. Cottages don’t come pre-stocked, in case you weren’t aware.”

“Har Har.”

“You wanna’ come?”

Barry glanced around, “why don’t I get started on dusting?”

Len was pretty sure he just wanted some time to get his bearings in the cottage, but instead of pointing it out, he teased, “you gonna’ speed through it, Red? Make things boring and too easy when I get back?”

“Not all of it! Gonna’ throw on some tunes, do it right.”

Len smiled at Barry’s guilty grin. “Sure sure. I’ll be back soon.”

He went into the little quiet town just a few miles from the cottage. There was a small grocery store, not his usual selection but enough. He took a little while to pick things out, substituting some items for others and doubling what he’d typically expect for two people, knowing Barry could eat that much and then some if he wasn’t subsisting off those protein bars that Cisco made him.

The drive back was short, and he was fairly certain he was back before Barry was expecting him. Not that Len was complaining, not with the sight he was greeted with when he opened the door. Music was blaring, some pop song he didn’t know from some teen queen, and Barry was singing along to it—the chorus, no doubt, shaking one hand in time with the *play play play play and hate hate hate hate and shake shake shake shake, shake it off* and waving a broom around in the other, dancing, finishing off by playing it like an air guitar, feet zigzagging side to side and all Len could do was stare for a full minute. Then he grinned. Then he outright laughed as the song was winding down. He couldn’t help it. Barry looked so silly but felt so happy.

Barry’s head snapped up as the music faded, realizing he had an audience. He blushed a lovely shade while Len dropped the first few bags of groceries on a corner table as the song faded out and a radio jockey announced the name and told them they were listening to some non-stop pop that made him want to shake his head. “By all means, Barry, do continue. I’m not complaining about the show.”

Barry was grinning now too, pulling at his lips, clearly trying to look mad and failing. “How long were you—”

The first few chords of song started up and Barry became more alert, a slow smile spreading across his face. Len didn’t need the bleed to tell him mischief was afoot.

*Oh don’t you dare look back, just keep your eyes on me—*

Barry nodded one leg and his head along to the beat, finger beckoning Len to come closer. “Oh no, Barry, definitely not,” Len was shaking his head. That wasn’t happening. He didn't dance.

*I said you’re holding back, she said—*

Barry opened his mouth—“*Shut up and dance with me!*”
Oh no.

Barry zipped forward, tugging on Len’s hand. He was already rolling his eyes, letting himself be dragged to the center of the room by the time the next verse started. “Barry…”

We were victims of the night, the chemical, physical, kryptonite—Helpless to the bass and the fading light, Oh we were bound to get together, bound to get together—

Barry was laughing, singing, moving, perfectly in time, grinning, shoulders shimmying in a way Len had never had the natural rhythm to, dancing like it was perfectly normal.

She took my arm, I don’t know how it happened, we hit the floor and she saaaaaaid—

Barry grabbed Len’s arm and used it to twirl himself, letting Len ‘lead’ while he sang along to the chorus, moving in close with his hands on Len's waist, a flash of a grin that Len could barely track, mesmerized, laughing despite himself, as Barry and the song told him to shut up and dance.

He probably shouldn’t, but Barry was happy and the infectious mood swept him up just a little, moving his shoulders just enough to count as bobbing along to the song, pleased when Barry grinned wide, eyebrows up, joy filling the bleed, filling Len. He caught himself moving, dancing, recognizing the simple ballad structure, the chorus, able to keep the light in Barry's eyes bright.

Deep in her eyes, I think I see the future, I realize this is my last chance—She took my arm, I don’t know how it happened, we took the floor and she saaaaaaid—

The song bridged, and the chorus returned, and Barry opened is mouth to sing along, “Oh don’t you dare look back, just keep your eyes on me—”

Len knew the drill with duets, couldn’t help but surprise the other, pulling him close by his hips, “I said ‘you’re holding back—”

Barry’s accompanying smile was enough of a reward, “She said ‘shut up and dance with me!”

Barry was laughing, and in Len’s arms then, dancing closer, and Len was laughing too. This woman is my destiny, and Len couldn’t help but echo the sentiment of the song, if not the gender, watching Barry twirl again, feeling him against Len, sharing his smiles. Barry was his destiny. He let himself continue moving, dancing, not surprised when Barry threw his arms around him and kissed him at the end of the song, both of them smiling into it, holding one another.

The radio turned over, another song, but they stayed in place, and Len wouldn’t have moved for all the money in the world. He didn’t know the last time he’d ever felt quite like this, or if he ever had, just free, and full, and something—something so pure and easy and right and—

Barry gasped into the kiss, pulled his head back and found Len’s gaze. His green-hazel eyes were a little wet, shiny and full of joy and he looked—felt—happy. Len shook with it.

“Barry.”

“C’mon,” Barry started to tug him back toward the stairs that led to the loft. To the bedroom. Len’s laugh came easy, still caught up, uncaring of the fact that more groceries were waiting in the car, that things were left half done. Barry was smiling and tugging him toward the bedroom and he wasn’t about to complain. Rather the opposite.

They tumbled into bed and into one another, kissing, gasping, hands and mouths, Barry’s moans when Len bit his neck, Barry’s hands working them both as they slid together, vibrating fingers
around them slick as Barry came and continued to rock against Len. Len came with Barry’s name on his lips, heart beating heavy and full in his chest.

Len felt happy in a way he hardly understood.

**********

They spent their day cleaning and laughing and stealing kisses, mostly. Barry ran the terrain outside while Len prepped dinner, then came back and started poking into and around things while Len was cooking. His constant inquisitiveness was like a familiar comfort in the bleed.

“What’s this?”

He was looking into a box he’d dragged up from somewhere and Len wiped his hands and made his way over.

“Hm?”

Barry was peering down at some old VHS films that Len had stashed up here, unable to throw some of them out for nostalgic reasons that he’d deny to anyone who asked. He felt a little embarrassed at Barry finding them at all.

“Oooh, don’t tell me these are home videos of your childhood?”

“No,” Len snatched up the one Barry was holding. “Mostly old Disney movies I taped for Lisa when she was little.”

“Really?” Barry’s emotions did something indecipherable.

“Really. Though this one…” Len squinted at the chicken scratch on the spine of the tape and remembered belatedly… “It’s a documentary.” He couldn’t help the small smile, the memory taking over, the stupid old cheesy documentary about winter in Antarctica and… “We can watch it, if you like.”

He wasn’t sure what possessed him to suggest it but part of him immediately regretted it. He was supposed to be romancing Barry with candlelit dinners and hot baths and massages, not watching movies about penguins that came out when he was in his teens.

“Sure?” Barry’s voice did something weird and Len realized he was staring too intently at the VHS.

“We can always turn it off if you don’t like it.”

“No prob.”

“Right.”

“Why don’t I start that while you grab the food?”

Len handed him the VHS and tried to figure out what had just happened. He really had no idea why the hell he felt so nervous watching an old film with Barry but something about it was doing strange things to his stomach. He grabbed the food and found Barry on the couch, the TV paused on a grainy image of a glacier. Len sat down and pushed away his own distraction.
“Really, we don’t have to watch this.”

“I’m happy to watch it, Len.”

“Right.”

Barry just gave him a strange look and pressed play on the remote. Len had placed a plate of food in front of him and they ate in silence. The narrator’s voice informed them of the average temperatures of Antarctica in the summertime and the screen showed them a few clips of baby penguins waddling around and Len caught himself smiling, laughing at their fluffy bodies and attempts at noises that could really only be called pathetic chirping. He remembered why he had watched this so many times as a teenager, practically on repeat, memorizing all the words at one point. He’d recite it in his head when he needed to just check out for a little while, freezing himself over like an Antarctic winter, just comfortably cold and numb, the life cycle of penguins and their struggles playing over and over on repeat in his head.

He leaned back and glanced at Barry, who he noticed was glancing at him. They both looked back at the screen and Len opened his mouth but—

“It’s fine Len, I like the documentary so far.”

He closed his mouth and said nothing, stretching an arm out over the back of the couch as the film progressed. Something in him eased. Barry seemed to be enjoying it. He couldn’t figure out why he cared about that, except he did, but Barry felt intrigued and warm in the bleed so he let go of the worry he was holding on to and settled closer to his partner.

Barry laughed at all the right parts, aww’d sadly when one of the penguins met an unfortunate fate, and mostly cuddled into Len’s side and leaned into him. He smiled up at Len when the narrator explained how most species of penguins mated for life and Len felt… something. At home. Easy. In love.

He wished he hadn’t thought that. He pushed it aside. It wasn’t…it wasn’t conducive to anything. He loved Barry, and it felt good, and it was… god, it was everything. Everything that had felt right since leaving on this trip. But Barry was so good, so light even when he was hurt, so bright even when his heart felt dimmed, so ready to forgive, so selfless to even be here, and Len… he wasn’t any of that. Of course he wasn’t. If he were a better person, less selfish, if he was kinder, he wouldn’t have fought so hard to keep Barry nestled to his side, knowing the other had no choice in it, not with their bleed, not with the way things had unfolded. Len loved Barry but how could even claim to when—

“Len?”

“Hm?”

Barry was looking at him and not at the movie, and Len realized he had stopped focusing on it.

“Everything okay?”

“Peachy.”

Barry frowned, but settled back into his side, and Len let out a slow breath and forced himself to focus on the film. On the long extended night of winter that the penguins would suffer though, the fathers keeping the eggs warm in their shuffling march, protecting their young. Their children. Something that Len would never have, not because he hated kids, hated the thought of having a family, but because—
Something twisted in his chest. Barry didn’t ask what was wrong that time and Len was grateful. He let himself focus on Barry instead of the movie, on how warm he felt against him, on the smell of his hair and the relative calm inside him, the twinge of worry but the comfort there, settled in, how right Barry felt.

Len made himself relax and focus on that until he was lulled back into the film, able to smile again, able to recite the lines aloud by rote and jostle a surprised laugh out of Barry at a few points, making them both smile.

He tried not to think about how fleeting happiness was.

Chapter End Notes

This whole cottage thing is like an... interlude. This chapter was like, ¾ happy. That’s close to a record. There’s been two-three other chapters so far that were this fluffy (Bond and Vitalis, and arguably Read the Bleed).

Which, for the record, doesn’t mean the next chapter is super angsty. I mean, it's a little angsty, there's emotions, there's stuff. But no, this is... The calm before the storm section. Because once they do get back to Central, that’s when shit starts to hit the fan and we start to spiral into the end of the fic with a chain of events or three.

So for now, enjoy this, eh?

Oh and p.s. -- I write Central city in Missouri, pretty much replacing where Kansas City currently is, for the record. If you have any questions about that, feel free to check out my slow descent into madness as I attempted to locate Central in the CW universe over on my blog's geography tag.

P.p.s -- I'm sure you could figure this out, but Bond Songs (or BS as people who don't like them call them) are just songs about Soulmates, finding a Soulmate mostly, or love songs. Not all love songs are Bond songs, but yeah, you get the idea.

P.p.p.s -- my dissertation is *literally* about introducing people to experiences (e.g., movies, shows, restaurants, etc) that we've had before but are new to them, and the impact of that, based on their reaction to what we've introduced them to. It wasn't even my idea to include the penguin film in, it was VP's, but I was excited to slip it in because, yeah, my day job is literally about that right now (but don't ask me for detailed results lol, the research is super early stage still). She was like "it would be cute and happy" and I started writing it and went "shit I made it sad". Whoopsie! :)
**Communion**

Chapter Summary

*Sawdust and Diamonds* by Joanna Newsom and *The Promise* by Tracy Chapman

Chapter Notes

**Extra trigger warnings:** mentions/discussion (brief and not explicit) of past child abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“French toast for breakfast?”

“Doesn’t that need eggs?”

Len glanced at Barry, sitting at the table in his boxers and a tee, eyes darting between a box of cereal on the counter and the nice outline of Len’s ass where he was bent to peer in the fridge. “Yes?”

“Did you forget I ate them all yesterday when we did a late brunch after, uh…” after Barry had dragged Len up the stairs to have his wicked way with him.

Len’s eyebrows shot up and he glanced back into the fridge, “so you did.”

Barry stood and stretched, “good excuse to go for a morning run. I’ll head in to town and grab us some more eggs. Anything else we need?”

“You eat through anything else I should know about?” Len closed the fridge and moved over to the coffee maker.

“Oh, not… uh…”

Barry felt a little guilty thinking about it and Len shot him an amused glance. “I don’t need to know, Barry. Pick up whatever you think we need. You want to take the car?”

“No I’m good. I’ll be back soon.”

“And I’ll make you a feast.”

Barry grinned and sped into some clothes and out the door, loving how it felt to run through the brisk air around here, cleaner and crisper than the air the cities, smelling of nature and the nearby river. It felt like a wholly different world, just the two of them.

It was Barry’s birthday, which meant it was Len’s Marking Day. Len, who had a cottage, who brought him here, who taped Disney movies for his little sister and kept overturning everything Barry was ready to expect from him.
Barry made it to town and slowed to a stroll, inconspicuous as he glanced around. It was fairly small, much smaller than Central, with rows of shops on the main street, little ones with window displays and colorful overhangs that he caught himself looking into. He was passing gift stores, insurance offices, delis, and clothing stores. Barry caught himself walking past a display of sweaters and something nagged at him, stopping him and he stepped back, and… He smiled to himself. One of the grey sweaters on a rack outside the shop had a graphic of a cartoon penguin, with a silly caption that read ‘Brrr… Chill Out’.

After watching that documentary? After Len’s odd wistful feelings, his nervousness and trepidation to have Barry watch it, something obviously important to him, some nostalgic keepsake that was halfway silly but he enjoyed anyway, well, Barry couldn't help it. Two minutes later, he was walking out of the store with the sweater in a bag, grinning ear-to-ear attempting to picture Len’s face when he saw the ridiculous thing.

**********

Barry expected to give Len the sweater pretty much as soon as he walked in, but the smell of food overwhelmed him. He dropped the bag by the table and unpacked the groceries, stealing bacon and eagerly awaiting French toast, enjoying brunch.

He let Len pull him outside and down to the river after they ate, wetting his feet in the cold water, shallow on the rocky bank, watching Len skip stones that just got sucked down into the current. “Think the water needs to be still for that to work, Lenny.”

Len smirked over at him, “that’s no challenge at all then, where’s the fun in it?”

Of course. Barry rolled his eyes and wondered how fast he’d have to run to stay on top of the water and run upstream. Not that he was about to try it, but he could understand—challenging oneself. Life became stale if you stopped challenging yourself, things stayed too still and stagnant then.

“Hey Len?”

There was hesitation. Len paused then threw the stone in his hand without glancing at Barry. He was in a dark thermal sweater and and jacket, standing on the bank with his boots on still, unlike Barry. “No.”

“No?”

“Whatever you’re about to ask, pretty sure my answer is gonna’ be no.”

Barry frowned, then breathed out his nose. The thing was—Len was right. How he’d known… “you reading my mind now?”

There was a small uptick at the corner of Len’s mouth, more telling than even the bleed was for a moment, “not yet. Maybe one of these days.”

“I was just… I wanted to ask you about… do you think we’ll ever have kids?”

Len scooped up another stone, and then another, their splunking sounds heavy as they fell into the river. The day was a little grey, sunlight filtering in occasionally through overcast clouds. Len took so long to answer that Barry wondered if he was going to answer.
“Do you want children?” he eventually countered.

Barry’s feet were cold in the shallow water swirling around him, getting a little numb. “I’ve always wanted a family of my own. I always figured I wouldn’t let myself start one until after my dad was free, but one day. I didn’t know if I’d ever get that, really, him free I mean, but now I have and… I don’t know, with my powers, if I even could but…” He stared across at the other bank. “I still hope that one day, I’ll have a family. Have kids.”

He felt more than saw Len nod, in tune to the way the light breeze felt across his shorter hair, across the back of neck. “I’m not father material, Barry.”

Barry’s eyebrows went up and he couldn't help but glance at Len, who was testing the weight of a stone in his hand. “You’d make a great dad, Len.”

“I don’t… I’ve never wanted to be one, Barry. I don’t want to know what kind of father I would be.”

Barry understood. He did. He knew about Len’s upbringing, about what he must’v gone through. He knew. He just… had hoped.

“Family means… a lot to me.”

Len was quiet for another minute, and then he dropped the stone back on the bank and looked at Barry, finally, eyes deep with something Barry didn’t quite recognize. “I’m sorry.”

Barry felt like he was about to wade too far into this, too fast, like the current was around him and not a safe distance away in the middle of the river. Like he was losing something, something he had been grieving since the day he Bonded, a life lived in another timeline that he had to close the door on, let go of completely. He didn’t know how, though. And he didn’t know how to fight Len on this, wasn’t sure what to do about it, so he nodded. He wasn’t done with the conversation, but he was done for right now. “… why don’t we head back up to the house?”

“Barry?”

“Come on.”

He slipped his shoes back on, wet feet squishing into them, and felt Len follow him a few steps behind, quiet.

He toed off the shoes and wondered at being barefeet, at being so at home in a place he’d never been to, welcome because it was Len’s space, and that was the same as being home. Wondered at what it would sound like if children ran through it with their laughter filling it, bunk beds in the sunroom, Len teaching them to (try to) skip stones in the river. Len, who would be such an amazing father, if only he saw…

“Barry… maybe we should talk about this more. I need you to understand—”

“That you don’t want kids and never will? I get it, Len, I do, I just—don’t. Agree, that is. So I… look, it’s… a special day for us. So maybe we can not fight about this right now? I’m sorry I brought it up.”

The other man searched his gaze then nodded slowly, deliberately, blue eyes clear, lips parted then sealed together and Barry felt an intense relief. He walked to the kitchen and caught sight of—

“Oh right,” a pleasant distraction, something to focus on. “I got something while I was out.”
“What’s that?”

Barry grabbed the bag with a small smile, mostly of relief, a little mischief, “just a little something for you. That you might end up icing me over because of.” He held out the bag for Len. Len who just stared at it.

“You… got me…something?”

“Yep.” Barry was suddenly feeling nervous.

"A present?"

"... kind of?" It wasn't really, though it was. More a joke gift than anything.

“You hate gifts.”

Not that again. “I don’t hate gifts, I just… things were different, then. And look, just open it and you’ll see, it’s mostly a joke.”

Len took the bag and moved to the couch, sitting too slowly, too carefully and Barry was increasingly apprehensive by the second, settling beside him, cloud-covered sunlight streaming in from the big arched windows of the cottage front.

Gently, with far too much care, Len pulled the sweater out of the bag, the little penguin smiling up at him. Barry felt silly, like a jerk, like this should be a much nicer, much more intentional and real gift.

“I, uh… I saw it in town and it just … reminded me of you. And made me smile so I thought… maybe it would make you smile too, or laugh.”

The feelings in the bleed were intense, just loud and conflicted, jagged, and there was something so fragile, so brittle about him, about all of this moment, skimming his long, always steady fingers trembling over the smiling penguin.

“It reminded you of me?” His voice was raw and raspy and Barry’s alarm was mounting alongside his confusion. “You just got it because it reminded you of me?”

Something was wrong and Barry had no idea what. “Len?”

“I—” He swallowed in a breath, shook his head, obviously tried to collect himself, but then, there were tears, actual tears on his cheeks. Barry watched them slide down and saw Len lift a shaky hand to his cheek, pull it away to look at the wetness on his fingers, at the drop that fell onto the sweater in his lap. His other hand was convulsing on the fabric and everything inside of him was winding up, felt like he was tearing apart. He bit his knuckles but it escaped him anyway, a sob.

Len shook. Barry shook. He could feel it. And it ached. In such a good, horrible, violent way.

Len clapped his hand over his mouth and moved to stand. Barry had a hand on his shoulder in a millisecond, keeping him there.

“Don’t—”

“It’s not pity, you idiot. It’s okay to let go.”

“I can’t—” Len sat back down, clutched the sweater in his lap, and all at once, it felt like so much tension inside of Len broke, that he broke, and he was shaking. Barry didn’t hesitate. He wrapped his arms around Len, who took all of a second to wrap his arms around Barry, torn completely
asunder from the inside out.

Barry couldn’t for the life of him figure this out, but he stopped trying to. He just held Len. Len clutched him in turn, arms tight around his middle, face buried into Barry’s stomach like it was trying to hide, though Barry had always been too bony, too thin to be cozy. Still, Len found the softest part of him and hid away inside of it, and Barry hugged him as he cried. They laid back slowly, Barry half-pushed by the weight of Len, who settled between his legs, face and arms unmoved, and Barry stared at the ceiling as one of his hands moved to drift, lazily and gently over Len’s short shorn hair.

Soft cries echoed in the quiet cottage, sunlight filtered onto them from the window, midday and no place to go, nothing to worry about. He could feel Len’s everything. Bittersweet like pomegranate seeds and juice in the summertime, rolling down his tongue. Len felt like pain and jubilation, like he was overwhelmed by sensation, shaking softly as more tears fell, sadness unfathomable but undercut by something so warm and light, so strong it filled them both. Barry held him lest the feeling slip away, breathing slow and deep in counterpoint to Len, the only sound between them aside from Len’s soft, occasional sob.

Every time he felt like Len was trying to force himself to quell the feelings, Barry rubbed circles into his back, brushed fingers over the back of his head, whispered promises about how it was okay, how he was here, how he wasn’t going anywhere, and Len was gone again, clutching harder to Barry like he was a lifeline. Barry just wanted him to know, to feel that it was okay, that he could do this, have this, let out as much as he needed to.

He couldn’t say how long they laid there. His shirt was soaked in tears. The sunlight and shadows had moved across the room, and long after the shudders stopped wracking Len, long after the room had quieted to sniffs and then to almost silence, Len laid there unmoving, and Barry held him.

It was the sounds of birds outside that eventually broke the quiet reverie.

Len moved, maybe intending to be sharp and sudden but it was slow and sluggish, exhausted by his own emotions. He turned and sat again, legs outstretched after being curled onto the small couch, turned mostly away, a single shudder wracking him. Barry pulled off his tear-soaked sweater with a private smile, looking at the lines of Len’s back.

“I’m sorry,” the other man finally whispered, “for that.” His voice was hoarse.

Barry moved behind him, legs out to frame Len, arms around him, body slotted along his back, dipping his forehead into the crook of his shoulder and neck, talking to his shoulderblades.

“You have nothing to apologize for.” He didn’t.

“I haven’t…” Barry could hear, feel from where they were connected so close, Len sigh. “I don’t cry.”

He wasn’t sure if it was a macho thing but it made little sense to him, all things considered. Barry moved his head up to hug Len tighter, to be able to glance over his shoulder down into Len’s lap, where his hands were facing palm up, constellations of callouses mapping each.

“I cry all the time. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

It was there, now, shame in their Bond, like something more acrid on the roof of his mouth.

“No I… I know. But I haven’t cried in almost 30 years.”

Barry’s chest felt tight. He wanted to ask how that was possible, why that could be. It seemed too
much, too inhuman, too tight of control for any one person, especially any person who felt things as deep and strong as Len. He didn’t know the words to express that though, but Len kept talking, fingers flexing as he did.

“My grandfather’s funeral… I cried then. It finally sunk in that day that he was gone for good, and I… I told myself I would be strong, for Lisa…” His voice was getting less hoarse, just a worn croak to it, less thin. He sounded almost resigned, for all Barry knew he felt vulnerable. ‘Our father used to teach us ‘lessons’. Lessons about how to survive in the world. His world, when he was in and out of prison, after he was kicked off the squad. Lessons like ‘look out for no one but yourself’ and ‘don’t leave any trail behind’ but also like ‘don’t love anyone because it makes you weak’ and ‘don’t ever ever cry’.”

Barry’s arm held him tighter around the middle and drew in a slow and measured breath. He wondered how long it would take to learn to fully suppress something as basic, as human as crying, if you were beat each time it happened. He couldn’t… he felt… he felt so helpless, wanting to hold Len closer, to erase the pain, to kiss away each scar he knew had a story hiding under those layers of clothes.

“I learned how not to cry when I was hurt. The immediate response of tears from physical injury, that happened, but I pushed it down, closed it off. I learned… I didn’t cry when I was sad, or angry, I just… lashed out. Pushed forward.”

Barry could see it, could picture the night that he’d found Grodd at the dam, had swapped memories with Len, had gone to his house and found his knuckles bleeding and every reflective surface in his house destroyed. He hadn’t shed a tear.

“Len…” he whispered finally, when no other words seemed forthcoming. “You don’t have to do that anymore. You can cry with me.”

Len’s throat felt tight, and for a moment, Barry’s did too, but then he nodded and reached over for… for the damn penguin sweater that had started all of this. “I wasn’t crying because I was hurt, Barry. It caught me off guard. I started crying from… happiness.”

Barry watched him turn the sweater over in his hands and felt it, the warm glow inside of him. He pulled back and away from Len enough to catalogue his face, the soft and quiet smile there as he looked down at the fabric in his hands and Barry was mesmerized by the expression. He almost couldn’t believe the transformation.

“Len, if that’s… it’s just a silly sweater. I can get you something so much nicer than that.”

Len glanced over at him, then smiled down at the sweater again and shook his head. “It’s perfect. Because you got it because it reminded you of me and that’s perfect. I should tell you, Barry... me ’n Lisa don’t even get things for one another, nothing we haven’t asked each other for, we agreed not to so many years ago and gift-giving like this isn't something that's really… suffice it to say that no one's truly given me a gift since my grandfather died.”

Barry felt his stomach hollow out as Len spoke. No one, except sort of his sister, had bothered to get Len anything in… in thirty years.

“Is that why… the gifts. Why it meant so much for you to give me something?” It hurt to realize that, to know it.

“It was a way for me to give you something that wasn’t just… bruises and pain, Barry.”
“I’m so sorry, Len. I had no idea that you… that it would mean so much to you. I never thought…”

“It’s okay.” There was something wry there, something like a smile tinged with sadness.

“When we get back to Central… I’ll accept whatever you want to give me.”

He felt Len’s heart beat in his chest, eyebrows pulled together for a moment in disbelief. “I know you don’t… you don’t have to push yourself.”

Barry smiled, one hand moving to cup Len’s cheek. “I’m not, dear. I trust you’ll know where to draw the line and I… I want anything you want to give me.”

Len searched his face, his eyes, and then nodded against Barry’s hand. They leaned forward as one, gently, a quiet kiss shared. Len’s hands were still fisting the sweater and Barry felt overwhelmed by Len’s emotions still, exhausted by them, but it was so unbelievably right for the moment that they kissed.

Barry knew in that moment, he would do anything to protect Len.

**********

After their quiet moments in the afternoon, both of them took some space. Len went to shower while Barry made them a late lunch, Len read while Barry went for a run, and Barry couldn’t help but feel that in its own, very strange way, the day felt perfect. He was sharing his birthday with his Soulmate for the first time in his life. He’d been waiting his whole life for today, as odd as today had been so far, and he wanted… he wanted something more.

He showered when he got in from his run, felt nervous and excited, fixed his hair in the mirror even though he knew (hoped) it was about to get messy again, the clock eking closer to evening.

He went to find Len on the couch, who smiled, a little shy still, up at Barry, trying to play it off cool with an eyebrow arch but Barry could see through that now. Could see Len now.

“Hey.”

“Hi, Barry. Enjoy your run?”

“Yeah, it gave me some room to think.”

“Oh?”

“I want… today, since we’re here, and we’re together, and it’s special, I want… we should have sex. I mean—you should—ah—we’ve been sort of doing that but I mean—” He really hadn’t expected to fumble this so bad, forgetting for all of a minute how supremely awkward he was, even as Len’s eyes started to go wide and he forged ahead before the other could interrupt. “I mean I want you to, ah,” he knew he was blushing, he just knew it, looking down at his hands because was he really about to say, “make love to me?”

Yep. He’d just said it. He bit the inside of his lip and glanced up at Len’s dumbfounded expression.

“Barry, are you—”
“Before you ask if I’m sure, I’m totally sure. Like very, like we probably could’ve done this a while ago because wow it’s not like I don’t want it and haven’t been thinking about it each time I masturbate it’s just that I kind of wanted it to be special, you know? And now I’m rambling but uh…” Whew. He could say this. “I really want to feel that with you. Today. Here. If that’s—I mean of course it’s only if you want—”

“Absolutely.”

Barry almost sighed in relief. He could probably stop rambling now. “Great.”

“I wanted to make it… special, whenever you decided we should cross that bridge. I don’t suppose you’d give me the time to run to town and get about a dozen roses and spread out their petals?”

He said it with a little grin, but that he said it at all told Barry he wasn’t the only one nervous about this so he laughed a little, “why don’t we skip that and jump straight to, uh, just doing it?”

“Right now?”

“Maybe?” he kind of shrugged his shoulders in awkward question, hands up. “Yes?”

Maybe it wasn’t supposed to be so spelled out, but Len put down his book and Barry felt a jolt, warm tightness pooling in his stomach and lower. Len’s steps took on purpose, walking straight into Barry’s space and capturing his face in his hands and kissing Barry deep without a moment of hesitation.

They kissed deep, tongues and the gentle scrape of teeth, suction, heady sensations, making out until they had to find a horizontal surface, had to make their way up the stairs and needed air. They each lost their shirts, and Barry shimmied out of his pants before falling back against the mattress, Len following him down, chasing him with another kiss. They were both already breathing hard, arms and hands all over one another. Len tugged at his hair and kissed his jaw and his neck and sucked on it while Barry bucked up into him, spreading his legs to welcome Len between them, gasping.

They had to break long enough for Len to reach the lube, for Barry to slide out of his underwear, but Len’s familiar fingers found his entrance quickly. Everything slowed down, from heated and feverish to deliberate, slow and teasing, and Barry whined and spread his legs wider.

“C’mon Len,” he whispered, hoarse.

“I wanna’ take my time with you, Barry.”

Barry groaned. If by ‘time’ he meant forever because he hadn’t even pressed one digit inside yet. “You tryin’a make me cum just from teasing me?”

He earned a warm and low chuckle for that, a deep kiss, slow and tantalizing as Len’s fingers pressed gently against his rim. “Just making sure you’re beyond ready by the time I get inside you.”

Barry’s breath stuttered and so did his hips, canting against Len’s fingers and one finally pushed into the more-than-waiting muscle, inside him. He gasped and clutched the sheets, already starting to sweat.

“You’re gonna’ make me crazy.”

“Mmm.” Len didn’t seem to think that was an issue, kissing and nipping, lips all over Barry’s chest, a second finger joining the first to thrust slowly into him, almost lazy with their pace. He knew Len felt far from lazy though, alert and excited, tense and coiled, holding himself back from losing control
and just taking. He could feel it, and god it turned Barry on.

“Wanna’ make you lose control, Lenny.”

Len licked from his clavicle to his ear to make Barry shiver, caught his lobe between his teeth and whispered the next words into his ear, “you’ll be the one losing it, Barry.”

The words were punctuated by a third finger opening him up and Barry let out a moan in response. Len wasn’t even fully naked yet and he had three fingers spreading him out, making everything good and intense and sharp and focused. It was a stretch, it always was at three and they were slick, so slick and Len was definitely being generous with the amount of lube. The fingers stretched and scissored and massaged his prostate and Barry almost lost it, time dilating as Len’s middle finger rubbed back and forth against that spot, moaning louder and starting to shake, forcing time to resume so he didn’t go completely insane.

“You’re close,” Len whispered near his ear, nipped at his jaw.

“M-y-yeah,” he was trying to hold on, but it was so—

“Come for me, Barry.”

Fucking god—he whited out, Len’s other hand suddenly on his cock, stroking just the few times it took for him to cum, letting out a strangled sound that was half like Len’s name as he did, shaking.

Len pressed in a fourth finger and he thought he might die of ecstasy, tears rolling down toward his temples on the side of cheeks as he gasped against the pleasant burn, the new intrusion, oversensitive.

“Len, Len—god—Len—please—please I need—”

“Sshh,” Len had moved his hand (after wiping it clean) from Barry’s cock to his hair, wiping the sweat-slicked strands from his forehead. “I’ve got you.”

Barry made a whining sound that was somewhere between an mmm and an nnn, arching until Len’s fingers retreated from inside him.

“You’re sure yo—”

“God yes, Lenny, please—”

“Okay, Barry, okay.” Barry could hear him opening the lube, forced his eyes open to see the ceiling, blurring through his blissed out tears, blinked at Len’s face, at his hungry expression and felt warm all over. Len’s hand was on his cock and it was so big, so full and flushed and Barry hooked his legs back, up around Len’s middle, hands reaching for Len’s back as he lined up. He wasn’t wearing a condom, they’d talked about it before, about doing this with nothing in the way now that they were together and he felt nervous and excited and sure all at once, ready and hot and god—

“God,” he whispered, rasped, fingers clutching Len’s shoulders as he felt the head of Len’s cock press against his ring of muscle. His body was more than ready, stretching and swallowing the first inch, the breach of it so wide but so good and they both let out a shuddered breath as one.

“God, Barry,” Len echoed, sliding another inch inside of him. “You’re so tight, god you’re so tight. So hot.”

Barry’s breath was hitched and broken and he willed himself to relax, swallowing as he felt Len
press in deep, so impossibly deep inside him, deeper than his fingers or anything else had ever pressed and he knew there was more yet to come.

“Len you feel—Len you’re—” he gasped “—inside me.”

Barry could feel it, could feel it all, reflected back at him. God. This was—it was so much more. Len bit his lip and looked down at him, eyes blown dark, skin with a slight flush, just beyond beautiful.

“Barry,” his hands felt like brands against his hips now, holding them as he pushed in deeper. “Barry.”

It was so slow, so agonizingly slow until Len was in all the way, up to the hilt and Barry was so full, he felt so goddamn full of Len, fused as one. And insanely, amazingly, he could feel the bleed, feel Len, feel how good his cock felt, pulsing heat surrounding it. Not just his cock but his hands and his skin and his chest and each breath and—it was so much sensation and he almost came from that alone, leaking precum again, aching in the best way. They both groaned together when the push forward, the push in, stopped, when they just stayed like that for a beat, breathing, discovering the sensations.

Len kissed him and Barry could barely think, haze of pleasure, kissing back and hips canting, rocking ever so slightly and Len gasped against his mouth. “Can I—”

“Move—please, god, you feel so go—ood,” he choked out, insides clenching as Len’s cock started to retreat, only to press back in. His thrusts were gentle, slow, not too deep and Barry rocked up to meet them, felt spread out, felt the phantom of slick heat on his cock, shuddering in time with the thrusts. They kissed again before Len’s face fell into his neck, breathing slow and deep, lost in sensation. One of Len’s hands left his hip and found Barry’s, linked their fingers and pressed them back to the mattress and Barry’s other hand went up too, near his head to gather a fistful of sheets as he clenched around Len.

Len’s thrusts slowly gained momentum, snapping deeper into Barry, making him gasp each time. He couldn’t believe some of the noises he was making, sounded so wrecked but he didn’t have the brain power to be embarrassed, to be self-conscious, lost in the dual feeling of Len inside him, of their communion, of everything that made them feel like one person in two bodies, hands and hearts connected. He would be surprised he hadn’t come a second time yet if he had the capacity of thought, but it all felt like such intense pleasure that maybe it was all one long, sustained orgasm, one intense moment stretched out between them.

Len was gasping by his ear and Barry felt his body start to tighten, his own mimicking it, tighter and tenser. Len's thrusts grew harder, faster, bodies slick and Barry clenched instinctually around Len, urging him on, more, deeper, feeling the heat press tight against his cock, feeling everything start to accelerate, running up to the edge, together—

Every cell in his body, every fibre tensed as he clutched Len’s hand and came, gasped and moaned into the white behind his eyelids, feeling Len pulse inside him, feeling himself pulse, feeling everything impossible and too good too good too much too too too—

Perfect.

He shuddered against Len as their orgasm peaked long and intense. They were kissing and shuddering and high on one another, world distended and slow, sliding back down to reality at an arrested pace, lazy. Len’s stubble tickled his chin and cheeks and Barry sighed and smiled, content and happy.
In a minute, they would have to move, have to clean up, have to separate and stand and probably be sore. But for right now, he could just enjoy this embrace.

Chapter End Notes

Welp. Okay. I could say a ton about this chapter. Magnitudes. But for once, I'll refrain.

Instead: interlude's over :) Real life in Central City taking back over. I hope you guys enjoyed the cottage and everything involved.
Hartley spent a lot of time at the Central City library. For one, he appreciated reading and learning, and as he wasn’t researching anymore, this was an acceptable way to grow his knowledge and stretch his brain, for the present. For another, the fourth storey windows had an excellent view of Rathaway Industries just right across the street, and he liked to go there when he was feeling particularly bitter and fantasize about all the ways he wanted to tear the building down.

He was doing that on Sunday morning, sitting at his favorite table, unable to focus and oddly restless, feeling close to nervous but excited, a sort of excitable energy as he idly tapped a pen on his notebook and stared out the window. Had he had an extra cup of coffee that morning without noticing, or was the research of the Nobel prize winner he was reading up on more boring than his original perusal of the topic had suggested, too easily distracted? Or perha—

BRRRBBBBOOOMWSHHHHH

The explosion wasn’t quite enough to rattle windows, but Hartley jumped out of his seat (and almost out of his skin) nonetheless, eyes wide as he scanned for the danger, hypothalamus knocking down a chain reaction of hormones, adrenaline flooding his system. The shock of triumph and glee in the bleed that accompanied the fight and flight response almost knocked him off his feet, that and the realization, staring out the window, that the explosion had come from above—from the 26th floor of Rathaway Industries Tower. Hartley knew that floor from memory, even from outside the building—it was the CEO’s floor, and the window blown out—his eyes widened impossibly further—it was the board of directors’ meeting suite.

He felt an intense jolt of something in his NAB, a tug, a familiar frission of too much tension, strong and somehow close.

But Hartley couldn’t worry about that. Because no one was attacking Rathaway Industries except him.

**********

It didn’t take long to get inside and up into the building—people were fleeing in the opposite direction, security ushering people out, and Hartley knew all the pertinent routes and codes anyway, bureaucracy ensuring that none of the high-level access codes were almost ever changed.

He was glad that if nothing else, the Rogues’ paranoia had rubbed off on him enough to start carting
around his gloves and cape when he went out downtown, after what had happened with Grodd and now with the military lurking all over the city. It had felt stupid to start, but he was grateful for it now, blasting open a doorway and finding an elevator, punching in a clearance code to take him above the 20th floor.

The CEO’s floor was in chaos—smoke bombs clearly having gone off recently, shouts and sirens. He had the supreme pleasure of blasting several security guards out of the way from behind as they trod carefully up the corridor toward the board suite, not looking behind them.

“Stay down,” he snarled at their unconscious bodies as he passed, irrationally angry for reasons beyond him. He wasn’t here for security, he was here for whatever asshole was threatening his—for whoever thought it was acceptable to take his own vengeance from him.

His ears caught the thread of conversation coming from down the hall as he crept his way closer to the boardroom.

“…and that—” there was the smacking sound of skin hitting skin, unpleasant really, the sort of sound Hartley disliked, “is for not learning ASL like a fucking prick—” but he was focused on the voice. “And that—” another smack “—is for learning six other languages instead of ASL for your kid—”

His heart was hammering in his chest by the time he was in the doorway of the boardroom, hinges scraping as he pushed it open, dangling and barely attached. The room itself was a disastrous tableau for the instant Hart took to witness it—board members cowering around one another in the corner, windows blown out and smoke from the explosion billowing out, swept up by the wind. There were chairs overturned and ruined, singe marks on the table, and on that table was—of all the fucking people—James goddamn-motherfucking-what-in-the-hell-are-you-doing Jesse dressed in his blue and yellow acrobat outfit with a domino face mask and nothing else to hide his outrageous identity. And he was hovering in boots that Hartley recognized, hovering holding Hartley’s father, Osgood Rathaway, by the tie and collar of his shirt, fist raised to bruise, or bruise again, Osgood’s face swollen and bleeding already.

The door fell off its final hinge, crashing down, drawing every eye in the room to Hartley.

A moment of stunned silence later, his heartbeat synchronizing with James’s, feeling their NAB in every fiber, the restless lifeblood coursing through them as one, and then a smile broke out on James’s too-handsome face, a grin from ear to ear, relief and humor and pain and joy and too many things screaming inside him, inside them.

“Hart,” James whispered, Osgood slipping from his gasp and down onto the table surface, forgotten.

“What the hell are you doing?” His voice croaked, cracked, paralyzed to the spot.

“I—it’s a gift, see?” James threw his arm around the room in a grandiloquent gesture and no, Hartley didn’t see at all, confusion and white noise of the variety he typically wouldn’t tolerate in himself.

“How…” He needed to determine the right questions to ask, the smart questions. Ineffectual questions were meaningless. He needed to—

“What is the meaning of this?!” Birmingham, one of the board members, seemed to get his stones together enough to stand up and outrage. How had James managed to quell them for so long? “You know this man, Hartley?!”

“That’s enough, you!” James threw out his other arm and oh. There were bombs—many, many bombs. Hartley really wished his brain would catch up sooner than it was, typically thinking so much
faster, but right now all he could consider was: when had James become a terrorist?

“All of you! This is my show, gentleman, and I have the floor still! You—” James nudged Osgood with one of his hover boots “—off the table now, I’m done with you. Hartley,” he held out his hand, and his voice softened from his performing boom to a quieter cadence, “would you uh, come up here for a moment? For the grand finale?”

“You’re insane,” he whispered, spared a half second to look around the room again, just his eyes flicking. There were sirens in the street—there had been for minutes, in his ears already by the time he was in the elevator—and the breathing of board members, slight whimpers, all encouraging him to get on with this show.

He didn’t spare a glance at his father, but looked back at James instead. The domino mask covered his eyes but Hartley didn’t need to see them to know how nervous James was, hanging on a tightrope thread, dangling in some tight and tense way. He swallowed, and stepped into the room, up to the table and pulled off a sonic glove to put his hand in James’s. They both shivered at the contact, and had James always been so warm? He felt himself being tugged then, pulled and climbed onto the desk.

“Blue eyes.”

Hartley willed himself not to cry as James peeled off his mask, not letting go of Hart’s hand.

“There’s something I’ve got to do, and I hope you’ll forgive my forwardness.”

Hartley didn’t get the chance to ask what he meant, because a moment later, James was kissing him. James was kissing him on the board table in the CEO suite of his parents’ company amidst exploded rubble and in full view of the entire board of directors with sirens outside and shouts in the hallway, wind whistling in through the broken windows and... and all he could hear was silence. For a moment, there was nothing in the world at all, nothing but the feel of James’s lips against his own. Soft, smooth, relenting, tasting inexplicably of summer fruit, deep enough to taste, not even chaste, his own mouth open in a gasp.

It lasted seconds. And then James pulled back and the sound of his breath was the only thing Hartley heard, just an inch from his lips. “I’ve regretted every single day that I never kissed you when I had the chance.”

“James—” they were kissing again, and at the sound James made, the surprised and sighing moan into Hartley’s mouth, he thought he might die, that he might burst open at the seams.

But then the rest of the world regained its sound. And what sound it was.

His father was shouting. The board members were shouting. Sirens were blaring. And then, not a half second later was—

“Freeze!!!”

“Oh shit—” Hart’s body slammed back on instinct, moving to a defensive pose in front of James. The security, finally. Of fucking course.

“Cease and desist and we won’t have to shoot you!”

They weren’t the regular security—men with riot shields and guns and maybe this was a SWAT team?
“Like we’d come quietly!!” Hart punctuated the last word with a sonic blast from his glove, against their shields and throwing them back while he James grabbed him and pulled him back, hover boots softening the fall as they landed behind the table to avoid whatever bullets the guards might be inclined to shoot. James whistled low at the blast even as board members scampered away from them toward the door, giving them a moment while the riot guards let them pass.

“Hey James?” Hartley glanced over his the edge of the table. “Please tell me you have an exit strategy?”

James was just staring at him. “Wh—oh—yeah—c’mon!” He threw an arm around Hartley’s waist and—holy shit—he wasn’t about to, he couldn’t—pinche estupida—he couldn’t, he fucking mierda—

“JAMES!” He did. James threw them out the goddamn window. He defenestrated them! He—

“AAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!”

They were literally in the air. James's boots were supposed to hover not fucking fly they were going to die they were going to die they were going to die—

There was a tug, a sharp pull that was most definitely them slowing considerably, a jolt as they almost stopped and a zipping sound amidst the whipping of the wind against his ears and James’s manic laughter. Hartley was going to be sick. They were gliding. Not falling. It was too fast. He was clinging to James, who had a strong arm around his waist. They were going to die. None of this was at all dignified nor pleasant way to go. He should probably open his eyes but James shifted and he clung harder, at least until they hit an abrupt stop.

Hartley opened his eyes. He closed them immediately.

They were hanging suspended on a zipline that James had reached for and clasped them to in midair—maybe the hover boots helped oh he was certainly going to be sick—and were now hanging just under the ledge of a roof that was still a respectable and deadly twenty stories high. Hanging. He was hanging. In mid air. Clinging to a lunatic.

“Calm down, Hartley,” James’s whisper was soft and soothing by his ear. His Marked ear. The one no one else ever touched. “I’ve got you, I won’t let you fall. I do this all the time.”

Hartley couldn’t help the hysterical laughter that bubbled out, tears in his eyes from the wind hitting his face. “You goddamn lunatic acrobat crazy mother fucking—”

“Come on.” James just had time to spring a note of strain as he hoisted—oh god oh he was gonna’ die—Hartley over the ledge of the building. He clung to, rolled onto the roof, gasped in a few grateful breaths as James climbed over.

“How fast d’you think they’ll take to get here?”

“It’s not them I’m worried about. The Flash will probably be on our heels any second if he’s not already. Cut the line and let’s go.”

There wasn’t time to throw up. James cut it and Hartley was already across the roof, heading into the building and down.
“We need to ditch the costumes!” He called over his shoulder.

“Like hell!”

James was wearing his acrobatic suit; of course he’d be attached to it. The idiot. Time to run.

**********

In a turn of events that surprised Hartley to no end, they made it back to his apartment in one piece, alive and unfettered (somehow) by the Flash. They tumbled into the apartment, ridiculous costumes still on, his neighbors dodging them in the hallway, and James’s laughter was infectious. Hartley was giggling, high on adrenaline as they celebrated, “we did it—we actually got away.”

“I told you!”

“You’re a maniac!”

“I’m a genius!”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

James laughed and wiped a tear from his eye. “God, Hart—your costume! I was not expecting that!”

“You?! I wasn’t expecting an acrobat to show up in my father’s boardroom! What on earth were you doing there?”

James sobered slightly, still grinning but Hartley could sense—for the first time, somehow, since this ridiculous debacle started—a hint of hesitation, of nerves. Sure, the man could jump out of windows onto ziplines, but answering questions? Apparently cause for alarm.

“I, uh,” he pulled his ear, his nervous tick, “I kinda’ wanted to uh, stick it to the assholes who treated you like shit?” James winced and made it a question and Hartley’s jaw almost dropped. He sobered as quick as James had. Reality started to set in.

They were in his apartment. They were in costumes. He hadn’t seen James in over a year and he had bombarded Hart’s parents’ company to—“to what? James, what could possibly possess you to—this was all just to make some statement about my—to my parents? My father? That was your entire end game?”

He did a little jazz hands thing, half-hearted, “surprise?”

“Is it possible that you lost a great deal of your remaining brain tissue since the last time I saw you? Did you fall and land on your head? Damage some integral part of your neural anatomy?”

“I just—I was finishing what you never got to?”

“That doesn’t make sense any sense.”

“I…googled you? And found out that you attacked your parents’ company, dressed up as—” he waved his hand.

“The Pied Piper.”
“You’re really taking that Pipes thing and running with it.”

“You’re the only one who’s ever referred to me by that particular moniker.”

James smiled and Hartley frowned. Then he took off his gloves, opening the wardrobe in the living area to drop them in their usual spot. The apartment was a bachelor style and smaller than he’d strictly like. On Leonard’s payroll, he had enough cash to upgrade but hadn’t got around to moving yet. He hung up his cape.

“Just so you’re aware, James, I only attacked the Rathaway building to draw out the Flash and get captured the first time. I was working an angle.”

He could feel surprise in the bleed. He could feel surprise in the—holy shit. He swallowed. The bleed. As his adrenaline subsided, he noticed that the sensations were strong, much more so than normal, no doubt the effect of proximity after such a long delay. He had to breathe deep to focus and not get lost in the sudden static and sound of James’s emotions.

“I never would’ve thought I’d catch you conning, Hart. Looks like you learned a thing or two from me after all.”

He rallied and glowered. “Take off that mask, you look ridiculous.” He’d put it back on after kis—he shut that thought down hard.

“If by ridiculous you mean amazing.” He pulled it off though, and it was so much easier to see how nervous he was then. Not that Hartley needed it, the bleed between them as sufficient evidence.

“Why are you in Central, James?”

“Oh, other than to figure out what you’re doing dressing up in a fancy costume and running around having all sorts of fun without me?”

He crossed his arms and waited.

“I just finally found out you were in the city, and I wanted…”

“You just found out? You mean you just found out I was here?”

“Of course! If I knew where to look for you, d’you think I would’ve waited this long to come find you?!”

Hartley took a step back as James took a vehement one forward. There was no way… “We met in Central—”

“Keystone, technically—”

“You knew I worked here!”

“I knew you hated the place that threw you out on your ass!”

“Where else would I go?”

“Why would you come back? The circus was in Gotham when you jumped ship—you could’ve been anywhere!”

Hartley shook his head, almost rolling his eyes because—“only an idiot would stay in Gotham.”
“Well, not Gotham. But you could’ve been anywhere that isn’t that nut-job invested mess.”

There was an easy joke somewhere in there but Hartley didn’t feel like figuring it out.

“You couldn’t…”

“What?”

Feel me, Hartley didn’t say. Because he’d always been able to… to tell. How far across the country James was from him, how nearby. He’d shut it down deliberately, had tried not to feel it, to know it, but the knowledge had always been available to pull up, like a library book he could slip off a shelf and peruse at his leisure, only that he didn’t want to do so.

“Didn’t you say you found me by googling me?” He asked instead.

“Uh, yes, that might be the case. But I didn’t google you until last week.” He kept talking, overttop Hartley’s surprise, “why would I? I never expected that punching your name into a computer would tell me more about your life than you ever did.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your past, Hart! You never told me you were a billionaire as a kid!”

“Wh—bu—how—you—you didn’t know?!?”

“How would I know?!”

“I thought everyone knew! I talked about weekends in Venice! I told you my parents cut me off when I came out—”

“Which I why I wanted to stick it to those assholes!”

Hartley rubbed his temples. This was a lot to contemplate. “I need a drink.” He was probably spending too much time with the Rogues if that was his go-to response at this juncture. He debated whether it was classical or operant conditioning that pushed him to it, a pleasant distraction for all of a second as the rest of his brain started considering options for alcohol he had on hand. “You need one?”

“Hart…”

So much for that.

“James. James. Just.” He sighed. Tried for reason. Failed. “What the hell gives you the right to tell my parents off for hating me when you did the exact same thing?!”

“Hate—” James stepped closer, into Hartley’s space, peering down at him. The hurt washed between them and Hartley wasn’t sure where it begun or ended. “Hartley, I could never hate you.”

“Just what I am,” he spat, incensed.

James tensed, winced, and visibly gathered himself. “No… not that either. Not any part of you. And look—I am so, so sorry, Hartley.” He took both of Hartley’s hands in his, clasped between them and Hartley couldn’t find a lie in the bleed, nor a hint of one in James’s eyes but he had to look away.

“Why are you here, James?”
“To find you.”

Hartley pulled his arms back from James and swallowed, halfway to nauseated with nerves, messing with Hartley’s mind.

“Why?”

“To do this. To apologize. To see you.” He stepped in closer again, “I missed you, Hartley.”

And—oh, there they were. The tears. On the upside, they were angry tears, but they weren’t going anywhere despite how he swiped at them. How many times had James said exactly that to him in his dreams?

“How can you do this? Do you have any idea how much you hurt me, James?”

“God, Hart, I know, I know and I—I’m so sorry.” James was choking up and Hartley couldn’t hide his shock. He’d never seen James come close to tears. “So sorry. I never should’ve—I was horrible to you. I know that. I was cruel and weak and angry and I took it out on you and I will do anything to make it up to you. Anything, Hart.”

“I can’t—”

“Please.”

He was finally getting his life in order. He was finally letting go. He was finally—“What do you want from me, James?” It shouldn’t sound like he was begging. It shouldn’t sound so desperate. He detested it.

“I want to be with you.” James had no hesitation. Just an honest, open heart that hurt too much and it was almost worse.

“What—what does that even mean?!”

“I’m your Soulmate.”

“I know that.” Hartley disliked being at a loss. It left him with the discomfiting sensation of confusion and vulnerability, because his hope was at war with his reason and tears were still stinging his eyes.

“I want… I want to be your partner, Hart. Your… lover.”

He snapped to attention, spine straight. “Oh that is rich, that—that’s—” he bit off and stopped, took a minute to collect himself. He went to the tap—with a water filter thank you very much—and took impolite, heavy gulps of water from the nearest glass before slamming it on the counter. Then he pulled off his glasses and splashed water on his face, gripped the edges of the sink and took a minute to just… breathe. Finally, glasses in place again, a modicum of calm, he turned back around. “Are you shitting me right now, James?”

“No, Hartley, I mean it.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “After nine months of treating me like shit and over a year apart, you waltz into my life—in your acrobat costume, I might add, and on hover boots that I invented—break into my parents’ company in what I assume was a vestige of misbegotten chivalry in a ‘grand romantic gesture’, kiss me for the first time in front of the board of directors, and after all that time you decide you want to be lovers?”
James looked to each side like there was some catch he was missing before hesitating and looking at Hartley, “… yes?”

“Do you have the slightest idea what you’re asking from me?” His voice scratched at itself.

“Just for a chance. A chance to make it up to you, a chance to earn it, a chance to do whatever it takes for you to forgive me.”

Hartley’s throat was embarrassingly stuck for a moment until he cleared it. “You’re even more of an ass than I thought possible.”

“Hart—”

“You do realize that I don’t trust that one bit? I know how this story goes. You treat me like shit. I leave. You grovel for forgiveness and say you’ll do better so I take you back. Next thing I know you’re back to your old ways and we start all over again, an ugly cycle.”

“No- no, Hart, I wouldn’t—I don’t want that any more than you do. I don’t want to treat you like that.”

“You already have.”

“But I know the problem was—I was—it was all me. I know that.”

“You’re absolutely correct about that.”

It was visceral in the bleed, sharp and deep, flinching but—“I know. Baby, I know. I was—I was awful to you. I thought I—I couldn’t—when we would do—I was so mad at myself for how bad I—I wanted you.” James’s voice cracked, tears in his eyes now. Hartley had no idea what to make of it. “I wasn’t supposed to but I did. I’d never felt that way about a man before, about anyone, and—’n I hurt you, I hurt you so bad to hurt myself and I’ve spent each day wishing I could take it back.”

Hartley shivered, swallowed. “Nothing has changed, James. I’m still a man.”

He choked out a giggle like whenever he was uncomfortable. “I know that.”

“Do you? If you want to be my lover that would mean having sex with me. And not that shit we called sex before—I won’t ever put myself through that again.”

“Whatever you want in bed, anything.” He was nodding, calmer, impossibly so, considering what he was saying.

Hartley’s eyebrows shot up. “Do not make promises you can’t keep.”

“I do mean it. Anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Any—”

“Anything, Hart.”

He tried to collect the tumult of emotions and make sense of them, of the push and pull. “James, I am going to ask you something insulting but I will only ask it once.”
He nodded, earnest. He looked as earnest as he did when he did his stupid tricks, eager to please, to excite, gregarious and anticipatory. Hartley didn’t know what to make of it.

“Are you offering to have sex with me, to be my lover, because it’s the only way you can think of to make me forgive you, or to come back into my life? That it’s all or none?”

James was a veritable deer in the headlights, alarmed and Hartley felt sick.

“James, that’s—”

“No.”

James felt sick.

“You can’t—”

“No, Hart, I—” he swallowed and stepped closer again, so obviously in distress, voice raspy. “I want you.”

“You took almost two years to admit that I meant anything to you, James. I can’t—I can’t go through that. I can’t let you tell me you want me and just—we can be platonic, and find love in other people.”
He didn’t want that. God he didn’t want that. He wanted his James, and he wanted all of him. But he only wanted this if it was real, if James could make it real.

“I don’t want platonic, Hart.”

Hartley’s tried to see around the stinging in his eyes. “You can’t treat me like—you’d have to be with me—you’d have to treat me—”

“Good, Baby. I’d treat you so good. Whatever kind of sinner it makes me, I’m going to hell for a lot worse things ’n that, at this point.”

“You won’t be able to hide me—I’m not going into a closet for anyone.”

“No hiding—you never did.”

“You’d have to—you can’t hide me, James, I mean it. You would have to admit—”

James kissed him, quieted him, tasting like salt and sadness. Hartley willed himself not to cry harder.

“I can’t,” he sobbed out the syllables and pulled back, clutching James’s biceps. “Not now, not yet. I don’t trust you.”

James’s stomach dropped. Hartley could feel it and he shook his head.

“That’s not a no, James. You’re an idiot, I know,” he sniffed, regaining some composure, “but you’re smarter than that. I can’t until you—I need you to show me who you are, if you could ever actually come to terms with… with everything it would mean to be with me.”

James was nodding, heart already hurrying again, “okay. Anything. I’ve been over this in my head, blue eyes. More times ’n you can count. A thousand times—every day since you’ve been gone if I’m honest. I wanted to take back all the times I hurt you. All ‘f my pride and my good bad ideas, all my selfish—everything I thought I needed paled next to losing you. So I’ll do whatever it takes now to prove it to you. I just want you by my side if I can make you happy.”

Hartley laughed, bitter and resigned and afraid but he didn’t know quite what else to do. He dropped
his hands from James’s arms. “Okay.”

“You have a chance, James. To convince me. But I will leave your sorry ass on the pavement if you treat me like shit again.”

“Just tell me what to do, Hart. If I fuck up I’ll learn. There’s a lot I don’t know but I swear to god I’ll figure it out.”

He nodded, “I won’t have any issue telling you off, James.”

**********

They talked and caught up for the entire day, ordering food in for meals and tossing questions back and forth. Hartley hadn’t realized how much he missed this until now—having James’s running comments about what he’d been up to, his way of turning everything into a joke but not at Hartley’s expense, his effusive laughter.

The NAB felt strong all day, stronger than it ever had when they lived in that trailer together, like the strain of distance had increased the intensity, particularly upon regaining proximity. Hartley wondered if the field of symbolonology had explored that possibility, but placed that thought aside to let himself enjoy the free and easy feeling of James. Of James beside him, emotions within him, the cadence of his voice, just… all of him. Of James.

And every now and then he would smile or throw his head back and laugh and Hartley’s heart would almost hurt it was so full. And James would stop and look at him like he knew, like he could feel it, and both of them would grow shy for a minute, unable to stop looking at each other before Hartley suppressed his smile with a roll of his eyes.

“Let me,” James said when Hartley went to clean up after their dinner, and Hartley got up to stretch. “You keep this place so tidy.”

Of course he did. Hartley eschewed the title of neat-freak, but cleanliness was one of his virtues as far as he was concerned. But he supposed, in that trailer, he’d been clean but there were little messes always strewn about no matter what he did, and maybe his tendency to have things just-so had gone unnoticed, along with so many other things. Hartley couldn’t believe that James had truly known so little about his life before they met. He’d never really intended to hide it or lie, he just didn’t particularly enjoy talking about it, and with the homophobic comments James made more often than not, he wasn’t exactly aiming to open up about certain aspects of his life. He hadn’t realized, but now he wondered how afraid he was that James would treat him the same as his parents did.

James, who was humming a tune and moving around the kitchenette, who was brighter and sillier and happier than either of his parents had ever been. James who was still in his costume while tidying the take out containers away, though the cape was draped over a chair.

“You know, I’m sure I have something around here that would fit you if you wanted to get out of your costume. Sweatpants or pajama pants, and plenty of shirts.” He wondered idly if he still had any articles of clothing left from his most recent romantic paramour, something that would fit more appropriately.
He felt something different in the bleed, new emotions he wouldn’t have felt before, like nerves or anxiety, restless.

“I’m not just trying to get you naked, James, don’t worry.”

“What if I was hoping you were?”

Hartley’s heart ratcheted up. James had always flirted with him—whether the man would admit it or not, charm oozed off him and the way he interacted with Hartley was far from platonic as often as not. But he’d never said anything so overt, not outside of being drunk and horny in the middle of the night.

He swallowed to still his own anxiety. “We’re not—a couple, he wanted to say. But he wasn’t entirely certain what they were and weren’t.

“I want it, Hart, however you want it.”

“We’re not ready for that.”

“Ready? It’s not like we’ve never had sex before, Hart.” He was frowning and leaning against the counter, obviously pushing himself to talk about this, arms crossed and too tense. “I’m ready for whatever you want me to do.”

It was one thing to screw and pretend it didn’t happen in the morning, and entirely another to hold someone and look in their eyes as you gave yourself wholly into pleasing them.

“I’m not ready to let you use me again.”

James’s eyes, his heart, dropped and he nodded, “I’m sor—”

“Where’ve you been staying?”

“Wh—oh. The circus was here but left two weeks ago. I’ve been in a motel.”

Hartley nodded. “Get dressed into something less flashy. We can go grab your stuff.”

“You mean I can stay?”

Hartley rolled his eyes as he turned to find his keys. “Only if you don’t complain about the water filter.”

He felt the warmth reflect back in the bleed, felt contented with that sensation for the first time in over a year.

Chapter End Notes

Believe it or not, an earlier draft of this chapter was actually a lot more upbeat and had a lot less crying. But upon reading through it, I decided it was far too smooth and reasoned. So… crying it was!

Also, one thing I try to do as a writer, other than slightly change up the ‘voice’ in the
different character’s chapters (though I know Barry and Len’s end up sounding similar) is to use different literary devices when I write in different PoV. I am tempted to dub this chapter the “aggressive alliteration attack” haha. I don’t think I even wrote with alliteration in Hartley’s prior chapters but I found myself tweaking sentences to include it in this chapter for some reason. For the record, though I haven’t actually gone and counted this myself, I suspect you’d find more metaphor in Len’s chapters, more juxtaposition in both his and Barry’s, more simile in Barry’s than Len’s. Definitely more self-talk in Barry and Iris’s PoV, a slightly different style of self-talk than you got in Caitlin’s chapter. Henry’s chapter had metaphor as well, somewhat a step more broad/meta than you typically get in Len’s chapters, which tends to be a bit more overt in it’s delivery. Oh and James’s chapter had repetition and I was trying for irony, in that what he says was often the opposite of the truth of the matter (and readers knew it).

Anyway, I digress. I hope you enjoyed this. Lenny’s up next.

ps - I really missed my opportunity to use "Somebody that I used to Know" as a song for an earlier chapter in Hartley's PoV, didn't I? XD

pps - Symbolon is actually not a word I made up; it's a word I found researching Soulmates and it's originally Greek. It's also I derived the glossary term 'symbolonology' from. Apparently, it's a dish broken in two halves to symbolize the two halves of a whole that is a union/partnership (according to what my research tells me). So here, it was selected kind of to represent the two halves that are Hartley and James finally coming back into one another's lives.
Lyons vs. Gilligan (1974)

Chapter Summary

Don’t Let me Fall by B.o.B and Do I Wanna Know? by the Arctic Monkeys

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The drive back to Central was mostly uneventful.

Mostly.

Until the radio started reporting the news.

“Did that just—”

“Turn it up,” Len’s voice came out harsher than he intended, tensing. They both listened in terse silence for a minute while the radio host announced the attack on Rathaway Industries. When it cycled over to the next story, Barry turned the volume almost to zero.

“Please, just—please tell me you didn’t know he was—”

“What—going to attack his parent’s company? Again? No, Scarlet, Piper didn’t mention anything to me about it. He’s also not the type to jump out windows. That’s not his M.O.”

“You mean you don’t think it was him? Who else could it be?”

Len was already flipping through the possibilities in his head. The news had been vague on the details still and he was about to tell Barry to google it but—

“I’m gonna’ go check it out.”

“Barry don’t—”

Too late. Len swore quietly in the empty car and pressed his foot a little harder on the gas peddle, glaring at the miles of road before him. He snatched out his phone a second later, imagining the lecture he would get from Lise about talking on the phone while driving, dialing Hartley.

No answer.

So much for the quiet end to their weekend.

And what a weekend. Len was still processing all of it. He was pretty sure that all the sex—the afternoon, the night, that morning—had addled with his brain temporarily. He was wiped out and exhausted, more than a little impressed by Barry’s flexibility, more than a little turned on just remembering how it felt, how gorgeous he was, but also more than a little envious of his never-ending energy and youth.

Not to mention the recklessness that came with that youth, like rushing out of the vehicle to no doubt run all the way to Central just to check on something that would be cleared up by the time he got
there.

Less than an hour later, Len almost swerved out of his own lane as Barry reappeared in the car.

“Je-sus, kid! Some warning next time!”

Barry was in the Flash suit and a little out of breath. Len tried not to be too gratified by that as he slumped in the passenger seat.

“Sorry, just—thought I’d come back, report in, you know.”

Len just eyed him and refocused on the road. Barry didn’t feel anything too particular beyond energized.

“Well?” he drawled, pretending as if his heartbeat wasn’t still calming down.

“Right—definitely Piper, but I was way too late to catch him. According to people at the scene, he wasn’t alone. Some guy in a blue and yellow suit started blowing up the board room and Hartley actually swooped in and sort of stopped him?”

Len digested that. “Blue and yellow?”

“Yeah,” he could hear the frown in Barry’s voice. “Just like that acrobat.”

“James.”

“Right.”

Fuck. “Any more details?”

“Not right now?”

“You sticking around?”

“Uh—”

“It’s fine, go, run, have fun.”

He felt Barry’s relief for the split second before the other was gone again. Len was almost certain he felt the tingle of lips on his cheek but couldn’t be one hundred percent sure.

**********

He didn’t bother heading home. Instead, Len pulled into the warehouse with a scowl on his face. The news had reported more details eventually, including what was reported by witnesses—security, not board members—as a kiss in the CEO chamber, and he still hadn’t heard from Hartley.

“BOSS!” Shawna was at his side the second he was out of his car.

“Piper called you?”

“No! You? I left him like twenty messages but I haven’t got anything from him—it was him, right?”
“Without a doubt. And this little stunt’ll put him back on the Flash’s radar.”

Her eyes widened and he waved away her worry.

“I’ll deal with the Flash, and with Piper, soon as I’m ready to talk and not kick his ass over this mess.”

A rough voice came from behind him. “Maybe you should.”

“Mick?” Len looked up sharply as Mick came through from the back entrance to the restaurant. “What’re you doing here?”

“Try’n’a get a beer when all hell breaks loose downtown. You know the building lit on fire?”

“I heard.”

“I saw. Beautiful.”

“Where’ve you been anyway?” Shawna interrupted.

Len was getting a headache. “Nowhere that matters to you, Shawna. Mick, I’m busy with this Piper mess, unless you’ve got a reason to stick around?”

The other man narrowed his eyes for a second and Len recognized it as hesitation.

“Walk with me.” Len motioned to Mick to follow and headed back toward his car. “I’m gonna’ go knock down Piper’s door if he isn’t here.”

Mick slid into the passenger side then looked into the back seat. “Bags?”

“Me ‘n Barry took a little trip.”

“The place in Nebraska?”

Len’s headache intensified. “You aren’t supposed to know about it.”

“Lise told me where it was.”

“Lisa isn’t supposed to know about it.”

Mick snorted, “good luck with that.”

Len sighed. “So what bee is in your bonnet this afternoon?”

Again, hesitation. Len was becoming legitimately worried.

“I’d like to burn something.”

So far, that was nothing new, but the deliberate way he said it…

“More than usual?”

“You’ve got a text.”

He was deflecting. “Who’s it from?”

“Baez.”
“And?”

“Says Piper called her and told her to stop freaking out.”

Len resisted the urge to roll his eyes, halfway to Hartley’s apartment already.

“So nothing important. Mick…” he dropped the drawl from his voice, “what is it?”

“Days.”

“Days.”

“That’s how long the doctors give Pam.”

Oh. Shit.

“Round the clock watch.”

Len wanted to ask why Mick wasn’t there, but he understood. Mick had been there day in and day out already, the urge to burn and break things was probably unbearable by this point.

“New plan.” Len changed lanes.

Mick grunted.

“Piper can wait—sure he’s occupied with his s-ignificant other, anyway. You ‘n me have business to attend to.”

**********

Len watched the flames lick the structure with what could only be described as dispassion. It wasn’t something he’d ever cared for much, fire. It just felt like chaos, something that could be controlled and harnessed but which mostly resisted being corralled, always sought to burst out at the seams.

Mick reveled in it, entranced, standing just a fraction too close, skin glowing just a little too warm.

Sirens were blaring not far off. They had time, still, but not much.

“Time to pack up, Mick.”

His friend shot another jet of flames into the fray. Len was too hot, black jacket warm against his skin, the proximity to Mick not helping.

“We need to move. Now.”

The sirens had been audible for thirty-four seconds. Another sixty—give or take traffic—and they’d be here. Len really wasn’t in the mood to ice over any fire trucks. Or to wait for Barry to show up, an ever-present danger in this city.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Mick!”
He wasn’t moving. A growl of frustration escaped Len as he moved closer to Mick and grabbed him by the arm, forcibly hauling him toward the car. The car that still had his and Barry’s bags. Definitely time to move or else Barry would murder him for having his stuff show up at the scene of a crime. At the scene of a crime that happened to be a Santini holding facility with a safehouse next door—both in flames now, along with what was likely triple Len’s weight in cocaine and other drugs, plus the two corpses of low-level hired hands that were guarding it.

The body count was unfortunate and something he’d intended to avoid, but Mick was a force of nature and Santini’s hired hands had shot first, no questions asked.

He’d been tempted to just have Mick burn something innocuous and out of the way but Mick wasn’t content to burn dilapidated nothings when he was in a mood—needed true destruction, actual violence, and this was the closest thing Len could offer. And it was probably not the smartest idea to have gone so far in broad daylight, but it was something he’d been meaning to do ever since they moved their drugs back into his neighborhood. The ‘polite’ warning he’d sent already didn’t seem to have moved the Santini’s sentiments, so it was necessary to make good on some threats at this point.

Sliding behind the wheel, he debated whether it had been wise to go about it this way, but couldn’t find it in him to regret it as he watched Mick grunt and roll down his window to catch the smell of smoke and fire. The closest thing to a mother, not to mention his Soulmate, was dying, and Mick was feeling it every day. Len really wasn’t about to begrudge him a little chaos.

**********

He was still out for beers with Mick in Keystone when he got the highly expected call. Barry’s emotions were jumbled up and messy, anxious and angry and confused by turns, calculating and resigned. Len zeroed in on them when he’d started sipping his first beer, and two hours later, his phone finally rang.

“Ignore it,” Mick grunted, shaking his empty bottle.

“Go rack us up a game of pool, I’ll talk to you after.”

“He gonna’ lecture you?”

“He wasn’t at work today, maybe hasn’t even seen the crime scene.”

Mick snorted and left the table. Len sighed, knew Mick was right, and answered his phone. “Barry.”

“Please, please, tell me that you weren’t involved in the warehouse fire Joe just told me about?”

“Then I won’t tell you.” Len liked to think he was amusing, smirking as his fingers drummed the table.

“You were back in the city for less than an hour when you started up with the criminal activity?”

The same old song and dance? “We’ve been over this, Barry,” he drawled into the phone. “You do what you do, and I do what I do.”

“Yeah… yeah, I just… can we at least talk about this? Why did you and Mick—it was Mick, right?—burn down that building? Was it the drugs inside? Because two men died, Len, and I need to
know what happened.

“This really isn’t the place to discuss this.”

“Where are you?”

Len glanced over at Mick, getting another drink. “Keystone. A bar.”

He heard Barry’s heavy sigh on the other end of the line, could only imagine him scrubbing a hand over his face. “Right. Okay. Look, it’s not just the Rogues… there’s some stuff with the military, Eiling’s plans, Joe filled me in and… we should both get each other up to speed soon. In person, I guess.”

Len was tense, but nodded, “it seems… prudent.”

“Okay. Okay, good. I’m gonna’ go now. A few days out of the city gives me some catching up to do on crime stopping. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Soon.”

**********

Len knocked on Piper’s door early the next morning. There were the distinct sounds of tripping, something crashing noisily to the floor, and swearing, before the door swung wide open. Hart was in pajama pants and a t-shirt and looked tousled in a way Len could appreciate.

“Piper.”

“Leonard!”

“Who’s’t?” called a voice from inside and Len tilted his head to try to see around the door, which Hartley narrowed, standing in the opening.

“I wouldn’t have factored you as such an early riser. What brings you here?” He seemed nervous. Good.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Len played for casual, as if he were actually considering, “maybe something to do with the explosive entrance of your Soulmate into the downtown core yesterday, the fact that have you haven’t answered my cal—”

“You know it was James?”

“Not hard to put things together, Hartley. Between the reports of a second person, and not to mention ziplines aren’t really your—”

“Why do I recognize that voice, Pipes?”

The door was pulled wide and James Jesse was standing there, all blond curls and tanned skin and confused expression turning darker by the second.

“YOU!”
“Hello again, Jesse.”

“You fucking b—”

“You know one another?!” Hartley was in between them and genuinely surprised, an expression that pulled his lips into a confused ‘o’ even though he recovered quick and his expression turned to suspicion in a half second.

Len smirked. “We met. It may have involved fists.”

“What are you doing here?” James insinuated himself next to Hartley, who was halfway angry and halfway pouting now.

Len tilted his head. “Checking on my friend.”

“Trying ‘t steal my Soulmate is more like it!”

“Can the jealousy, blondie. I’m here to talk to Hartley.”

“In what way did it involve fists, Leonard?”

Len sighed and turned his attention back to Hartley. “The usual, fists, punches, some heated words, whatever.” He waved dismissively then curled his fingers to point at his Rogue, voice edging to a snap. “The point is, you haven’t answered my calls and this type of explosive foray wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I made you a Rogue, Hartley.”

“What’s a Rogue?”

“Nothing—” Piper started.

“We’re a merry band of criminals who work together and steal together, and Hartley here is one of us.” He said it with a deliberate and not altogether nice smile.

Hartley scowled. Len just arched an eyebrow at him.

“You’re a crook, Hart?”

The younger rolled his eyes heavenward. “Not a crook, James, it’s—you know what, I’m under no obligation to explain this to you.”

“A word, Hartley?”

Len didn’t wait, just walked down the hall and made Hartley follow him, cursing under his breath and slipping on shoes. Len could wait. James glared at them around the door down the hall before Hart waved him away and he closed it.

“Look, Leonard, I’m aware that I should have called you back, but I—”

“Didn’t want to tell me your Soulmate rolled into town and made a mess in my backyard?” Hart frowned and Len just nodded. “Mm, that’s what I thought. It’s none of my business who you fuck, Piper, but it is my business if you start with this radio silence crap because of it.”

Hart nodded, tight, but Len wasn’t done.

“It’s also my business to know what to expect of Gold Tights over there.” He waved down the hall. “So tell me—this blowing up your old man’s boardroom? That a one-off or should I expect this to
They were quiet for a moment, Hartley considering, and Len had his answer.

“I see. So will this create a—”

“No! Look, it’s unclear if this will become a pattern. There’s a single data point I’m working with, I can’t extrapolate from there. He was an acrobat, but now he’s… something else, for the time being. He used to run cons, I gather, but right now I… I don’t know.”

It seemed like admitting that was physically painful to him.

“Cons, huh?” Oddly, aside from blondie’s temper, Len could see it. “Fair enough. But you keep me posted, Hartley. I don’t like surprises, and I can guarantee that you and your Soulmate made the Flash’s radar for this.”

“The Flash didn’t show—”

“I don’t care if he showed—you’re on his radar, and this will only remind him what a problem you can be. Don’t give him an excuse to come after you—you or James.”

Properly chagrined, finally, Hartley curled in on himself. Len hesitated then sighed, his voice losing its edge as he glanced down the hall then back at Hartley.

“You sure this is a good idea, kid? After how he treated you before…” He waited for an answer and got none. “How do you know he won’t just go back to pushing you out of the bed, treating you like crap?”

“I don’t,” he snapped back, bitter and churlish, anxiety showing. “I don’t know anything. I don’t even know if we’re together, if I can let us be together. At this juncture, all that I do know is that he claims to want to be in an authentic relationship with me. I’m playing a waiting game to determine it that’s feasible.”

Len processed that. “He gonna’ come out?”

“He would have to in order to be with me. I refuse to be his dirty little secret ever again.”

“I hear that.”

Hartley looked at him with a question for a moment, but Len deflected the oncoming interrogation.

“Just keep me in the loop, Piper. I’ll come banging on your door for updates otherwise and it might not always be pretty if he hasn’t shaped up his act.” He waited for the nod. “Good. Now, with all that out of the way… I’ve got a job you might be interested in. Art gallery, could use your attention to detail. Bivolo flaked on it, the only one he’ll grab a beer with these days is Mardon, and Mick is… busy. But I like to work with a partner, and I figure if you’re gonna’ piss off the Flash anyway, might as well get something out of it.”

“I’m listening.”
Barry had suggested they meet somewhere neutral instead of Len’s house to talk about the Flash and the Rogues, whatever it was that that would amount to. Not that Len was keen to have that conversation in his living room, and STAR Labs was far from neutral, and apparently Saints and Sinners was off the table too.

Nonetheless, he wondered how they hell they’d ended up back at Chubbuck Park. At least it wasn’t as hot as it had been the first few times they met there, evening now and far enough into autumn for a proper jacket, waiting for Barry to arrive. Which he did, ten minutes late after apparently stopping a jewelry store break in on his way over. Len wondered if that was going to set the tone for their conversation and rather hoped not.

“D’you wanna’ walk? Rather than just sit here?” Barry had a bag over his shoulder than Len could only assume held the Flash suit. He arched an eyebrow but stood, falling into step beside Barry.

“Restless?”

Barry shrugged and smiled softly. “It’s a nice night for a walk. Lots of couples and people around,” he nodded over to a couple that had been on a nearby bench and giggling since shortly after Len arrived, taking a selfie together on a cellphone even though they had a proper camera on the bench beside them, presumably to catch some autumn colors in the sunset. Len’s fingers itched to steal it just because it was there and they were annoying him.

“You’re right, might be nice to get away from the people.” Len made sure his tone was a little insinuating, smirking.

“We’re not making out in the woods, Len.”

“Sure about that?”

Barry rolled his eyes and took Len’s arm in his as if it were a proper stroll. “Positive. There’s the bridge over into Keystone, it’s got some nice views. Though now that I think about it… last time I was on it, Eddie got kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped?”

“Eobard. He used Eddie as collateral, sort of. Except he couldn’t kill him because Eddie’s his great-great-great-and so on grandfather.”

What? “What?”


“And Detective Thawne knows his great-whatever grandson is one day gonna’ one day hop back in time and kidnap him?”

For whatever reason, Barry leaned into Len’s side and didn’t look at him for a minute. Len let Barry hold his arm a little tighter. “They almost… they weren’t planning to have kids because of it.”

Len wondered how the hell he’d walked into that one. He readied himself for the comment, the discussion, but it never came.

“Don’t worry about it, Len. I didn’t come here to talk about kids. We have more immediate fish to fry.”

“So talking about the military and my Rogues is supposed to be comforting?”
Barry stepped a little further out by his side with a wry look. “Like ripping off a band-aid.”

“Why don’t you rip first?”

They walked in quiet until they made it to the bridge. Wind from off the water was pulling at Barry’s hair, hands going to his pockets. They stopped walking halfway down, letting passersby amble along, the couple from earlier catching up and going past, stopping a good distance away for the boy to take a few pictures of the girl, grinning with the sunset behind her over the water. Len was reminded, for a moment, that he and Barry were far from a regular couple.

But Barry wasn’t similarly distracted, tilting his head back and leaning against the railing, closing his eyes to gather his thoughts. Len marveled at him. How easy and free he seemed when he was unguarded, how his movements flowed without the calculated precision of Len’s but stayed graceful nonetheless. The gloaming light really did look good on him.

“Sure,” he replied eventually, dropping his head back down to look at Len, “I’ll rip first. But be prepared for an earful about the military.” He dragged a hand through his hair, smile receding, and started to talk.

He told Len about Joe picking up information through the joint military-meta-human taskforce with the CCPD about Eiling motioning to create an official registry of meta-humans. STAR Labs had an unofficial one, Cisco maintained a lot of transparency of that information with the CCPD until recently when the military had stepped in, but the military had more than enough to go on by then. Apparently they were now trying to find metas all over the state, and Barry’s attempts to stay one step ahead and track them down first wasn’t keeping up near so quickly.

“And the registry itself? How’d you feel about that, considering the Flash would probably end up on it if they tried to make something like that official?”

Barry frowned, “yeah, that’s another thing. Not too sure how I feel about some government-style registration for superpowers. I mean… I get it. But metas are still human. Registering groups of people is… there’s a lot of bad stuff that goes into that.”

Len nodded, his own arms crossed as he leaned against the rail next to Barry. “It’ll get political at some point, but how things go forward from here might make a difference, Barry. Declaring a registry unconstitutional will be easier one day if there isn’t already a registry to point to.”

“That’s what Joe said. The more we can avoid an official registry, the better. He thinks it’s better to just mark down powers on any personal files of meta-criminals we take in. Just treat it like any other information we have on a perp and keep it out of any other system.”

Len nodded, couldn’t help but agree.

“Cisco’s abolished access to the one we have at STAR Labs, but that’s the other thing…” Something in Barry grew bitter. “Eiling wants to sue STAR Labs.”

“What?”

“Oh yeah. He said it wasn’t over and he meant it. I got a call from the lab’s law firm about it. The guy on the phone was… better than I expected, actually. I guess the lab pays them pretty well after all, and I’m now their client since I inherited it. But he told me that the military has ‘informed’ them about their intent to sue over the military contracts that fell through when the accelerator exploded. The firm’s been fielding cases ever since the explosion, especially some new ones since Wells’s press conference about how he knew there might be a problem with it before he turned it on. I guess
that’s the only reason the military’s case might hold water.”

“Why am I sensing a ‘but’ in there somewhere?”

“I figured there’s gotta’ be more to it, so called Laurel.” Barry’s face scrunched up as he spoke. “She thinks it’s subpoenas.”

“…witness statements?”

“No—for documents. Right now, he doesn’t have access to any of the ongoing research that was stopped when the accelerator blew, or any of the research the lab has done since then. But if he sues…”

“Then with the case open, he can get a subpoena to review the research he wants?”

Barry’s expression was sour. “That’s his angle, most likely. Not sure what he’s after, specifically, but something. Maybe a specific military research contract. Or maybe just all of it. Not that I think he could make a case for all of it, but probably enough.”

Len processed that, feeling Barry’s stress, the pain in his shoulders from tensing as he talked about it, the worry stirring away inside of him.

“What’s the plan?”

“Right now?” He let out a short laugh. “Keep swimming. Try to fight them legally, I guess. Weathersby and Smith—the law firm?—they aren’t interested in letting the military sue their client. They’re going to try and stop it sooner than that. I don’t know how easy it’s gonna’ be to keep Eiling out of it though, considering that the founder of the lab did go on record confessing to murder.”

“…and how is that plan going?”

Barry let out a sound that mimicked the frustration inside of him and dragged his hands through his hair and started to pace, voice agitated but controlled. “You know what the hardest part might be? I have a day job. A job that I love—at least most of the time, when I know I’m helping people. And I’m the Flash! And it’s the best thing that ever happened to me! But this? This is a sea of paperwork that I have to speed-read my way through every few days or every week—it’s running a lab and keeping the lights on and law firms and people at my actual job thinking I basically won the lottery or thinking that I’m Harrison Wells’s secret love child or—I don’t even know. I just hate it. I supposed to be the Flash—I’m supposed to be a CSI. But I can barely see straight thanks to everything recently and I just…”

Len wrapped him in his arms as Barry’s rant went from impassioned and pacing to exhausted. He melted into the embrace.

“You just?”

The noise Barry made this time was a little more contented, taking a second to tilt his head into Len’s neck. “I just wish I could be done with this crap and get back to my life.”

Len nodded, smiled a little, arching an eyebrow even though Barry couldn’t see it. “Wells’s secret love child? Really?”

Barry pulled back with a groan. “That’s not even the worst of it—don’t ask. I can see you asking. Trust me.”
He had to chuckle and the mood was lightened at least a little. They started to walk again, back in the direction of the park.

“Seems like you do have a lot on your plate. Lucky no one’s tried to blow up the city this month.”

“Yeah, no one’s even tried to kidnap any politicians since you and Mardon.” He said it with a deliberate eye roll, not quite lecturing, and Len decided to be amused, though he knew what came next. “And speaking of…”

Bingo.

“Now you want me to tell you about my Rogues, Scarlet?”

“Somethin’ like that.” Definitely smiling. That was something at least. And fair was fair, after all. So Len started, slowly and with careful consideration, to describe his setup.

He told Barry how many safehouses he had, but not where they were, other than the one he’d already been to during their Initial Communion. He told Barry he and the Rogues had a ‘home base’ at his restaurant and the attached spaces, but didn’t give up the name or location, and Barry didn’t seem like he especially wanted to drop in to the middle of the Rogues’ den for lunch anyway. Len was glad he didn’t push for more specifics, except to clarify exactly who was and wasn’t a Rogue, and what it took to be considered one.

That, apparently, was hilarious. “They have to beat me somehow? For real, Lenny? You’re basically painting a target on my back for anyone who wants in your gang!”

He frowned. “No one is clamoring at the gates to join the Rogues, Barry. You’re not exactly easy to tag, and we have rules that most of the criminal world knows about by now. ‘N we have a reputation for trouble.”

“Trouble like the Santini’s?”

“Not only,” but Len nodded and conceded the point. “But them too.”

“And about that…”

“Their hired hands shot first. Mick took care of them before I could give a no-kill order.”

Barry both frowned and relaxed slightly. Len knew that he knew that Len was more than capable of murder, but he wasn’t surprised that Barry was calmed slightly in the knowledge that Len hadn’t pulled the trigger this time.

“And you were there with Mick because…?”

“The Rogues have a type of… territory established. Not so much a gang territory but… just a part of town we like not to have to worry about the Santini’s or Darbynians making a mess for us. But the Santini’s were aiming to reclaim the drug trade near us and Mick was helping me send a message.”

He could tell it didn’t sit well with Barry. They walked for a few minutes in the quiet, circled back and passed their usual bench, but eventually the other man sighed and voiced what was pulling him around inside. “Your… territory—that comes at the cost of innocent people. Paying for protection, caught in the crosshairs.”

“Ah. I remember now—protection money. That bothers you. But no, Barry, not by my request. They want to pay because it’s their way of life and I won’t insult them by declining. We get special
treatment but I don’t send my Rogues around for taxation.” He knew his voice was crisp as the night air.

It was… enough, apparently. Barry nodded. “Okay. Thanks for telling me, Len. I don’t think I have any more questions right now, not unless you’re about to steal something next week.”

The moment dragged on just second too long, but it wouldn’t have mattered. Len’s suddenly tight chest would’ve given him away regardless.

“Barry—”

“Are you serious?! You’re already planning another heist? So soon after—I mean I know it’s been months since Mardon, but aren’t you only supposed to hit targets every six months?”

“Know my M.O., do you?”

“Between that and the museum…” he rubbed his temples. “Crap, I’m doing it—just what I said I wouldn’t. Okay. I’m not freaking out. Promise.”

Len snorted and Barry spared him a little, wincing smile.

“Seriously. I just didn’t realize you were already planning another… heist?”

“So if I tell you about it, will you steer clear?”

Barry dropped his hands, stopped walking and looked at Len, met his eyes when he nodded, “yeah. Yeah, I trust you.”

His voice kept the calculated tone, “In that case… I’ll be in Keystone at the Phan Gallery. They have an exhibit with some pieces I want.”

“Pieces?”

“Photography by a man named Sugimoto.”

Barry nodded. Len could feel him thrumming with electricity. “Are you going it alone? Or is Lisa—”

“Hartley, actually.”

Barry nodded, digested that with just a small flare of jealousy that Len didn’t miss. “Guess Mick would’ve just burned the place down?”

“In his current mood, most likely.”

“Right.”

It was awkward. He supposed he should’ve expected that. He offered, “I asked Bivolo first.”

“Prism? No wait, he goes by Rainbow Raider, right?”

“That’s the one. He’s an artist and a connoisseur.”

“And a bank robber,” Barry muttered.

“So am I.”

Barry took a slow breath and Len tracked the rise and fall of his shoulders. “So Bivolo said no?”
Slightly more relaxed, Len nodded and glanced at the trail in front of them again. “He’s been mostly off the grid recently. Doubt he wants to call attention to himself with the military poking around. I think he and Mark might have something in the works though.”

Len wasn’t sure if he was giving Barry a head’s up or if he was offering that as a show of trust. Both, it felt like.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“It’s not… any of my business, Len. I mean, I’ll stay out of it, your art heist. Just make sure no one gets hurt.”

“Our deal still stands.”

Barry nodded, and they were both too tense still.

“When I’ve got the Sugimotos…” his gaze flicked to Barry and then ahead, “would you like to see them?”

“You’re not dropping them straight off with the buyer?”

“It’s a personal heist.”

Barry repeated that statement in a flat voice and Len could feel that somehow, that made it worse, but then he rallied and shook his head. “Do you want me to see them?”

“There’s one in particular…” Lightning Fields 225, he could picture it in his mind, the image that had reminded him so ardently of Barry. “To be clear, it’s not a gift. I won’t give you anything I steal.”

And he still had a pile of gifts at home to consider offering to Barry again, now that they had an… understanding about that.

But the tension uncoiled inside Barry like a knot untwisting. “I—I’ll look at them, at it, that’s uh… fine.” He frowned. “What do you do with them after, the art you take for ‘personal’ jobs?”

Len shrugged, pleased with how this was shaping up. “Display them if I feel like it, sell them sometimes, store others.”

“But the tension uncoiled inside Barry like a knot untwisting. “I—I’ll look at them, at it, that’s uh… fine.” He frowned. “What do you do with them after, the art you take for ‘personal’ jobs?”

Len shrugged, pleased with how this was shaping up. “Display them if I feel like it, sell them sometimes, store others.”

“Do you ever think of… returning some of them? If it’s about the chase, I mean, haven’t you already got what you wanted out of it? For the ones you don’t sell?”

Len looked at him like he had grown a second head. “Return them? What kind of thief returns the loot?”

Barry’s smile had a little mischief to it. “A reverse thief? After they up the security from your original theft, you could make a game of breaking back in to drop the piece back off?”

Len was sure he looked horrified, given how Barry laughed at his expression. “I have a reputation, Scarlet.”

“Alright alright, it was just a suggestion. But if you ever get bored of hoarding priceless shit in your garage or wherever you keep it, just let me know and I’ll return stuff, and you can pretend like the Flash found your stash or something.”
Len rolled his eyes at Barry but Barry was smiling, and considering what they’d been discussing, he’d happily take it. “You know, we’re almost at the parking lot. Sure I can’t convince you to try your luck with an indecent exposure charge in the park?”

Barry actually laughed then, and they both knew Len was bluffing with it anyway. But then his eyes took on just enough mischief and before Len could predict his next move, Barry flashed right in front of him. He slowed down to normal speed just in time for Len to tilt his head, and Barry was kissing him.

Len wasn’t actually one for public displays of affection, but alone on the park trail, he couldn't find it in him to mind this one time, cupping Barry’s face and kissing him back, pulling him close. Somehow, the Rogues, the military, the lab, their history—even the deeper things, things he didn’t let himself examine too frequently, things they weren’t talking about—somehow none of that mattered whenever Barry kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title isn’t in the glossary and it's an actual historical legal battle, specifically about whether conjugal visitation in prison is a constitutional right or not. In our world, it was ruled that conjugal visitation is not a constitutional right, but in the world of AATJS, it would have been ruled that it's a right for anyone Bonded, and since then, laws would have developed to allow visitation for any criminals, so as not to discriminate against the Unmarked. But no, no one is going to prison, I just selected that as the chapter title because they're talking about criminality and Rogues stuff and it seemed fitting, more so than anything else I could think.

But seriously, considering I know absolutely zero about the law, this fic has grown a lot of legal mess -_-;;; what the f did I get myself into (I ask myself this everyday, tbh).

One thing I want to mention is that, I don’t know if you guys have noticed (subconsciously, probably) but I’ve noticed that my ‘voice’ for Len and Barry, but especially for Barry, has diverged a bit from canon in this fic. so I’m trying to pay a little more attention to how I write his dialogue; it’s important to me to be able to actually visualize the character delivering the lines as they would in canon, and I feel that sometimes I step a bit too far outside of that in this fic. I might be just being perfectionist, but in either case, if you have noticed, know that I have too and I’m working on it ☺

I gotta’ admit too, that this chapter grew unexpected plot. Like the original plan was for it involve…. Only one of the scenes it actually did? Like Mick? Mick was not expected. He just waltzed onto the page with his entering line and I was like “shit, that’s perfect, Mick is in this scene now”. Sometimes these things get away with you. So most of what this chapter was intended to be has now been relegated to the next chapter instead...

And for the record, I think I’ve got the plot entirely figured out from now until the end of the fic ☺️ The chapter number may change when I pencil in details, but some of the outline/mental holes in this fic have finally been filled in and I’m really excited about it. I’ve been turning things over in my head for a while now, trying different combinations for how to get the moving parts to best fit into a nice weave that builds in a reasonable
way to where I want this to go, and one piece kept alluding me (and it was a very damn important piece). That piece has finally finally revealed itself to me inside my brain. So with that in mind, the rest of this fic should actually start to flow easier than it has been for the past ten chapters (about the length of time I’ve been working away at this issue). And I’m very very stoked about where things are going to go and how it’ll all fit together 😊

Finally, shout out to @dragdragdragon for being SUPER helpful when it comes to honing and selecting Len’s art choices!!
**Bondiversary**

Chapter Summary

*Samson by Regina Spektor* and *Little Lion Man by Mumford and Sons*

Chapter Notes

Requested tag: bottom!Len (first scene; transitions from a tickle fight to sex)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That tickles,” he mumbled, sleepy.

“Mhmm.”

Len didn’t exactly stop though, and Barry’s neck was *definitely* ticklish where Len’s stubble was rubbing against it, arms hooked around his waist as Barry was slowly waking up. He was laughing in seconds and started to squirm, “ha-hey, c’mon, that—”

“Mn?” Len’s fingers started to dance on his sides and *oh* the bastard was doing it on purpose. Not that Barry could do much about it as he devolved into giggles, squirming until it was full blown laughter, Len’s own chuckle near his ear, teasing Barry with deft fingers along his ribs and stomach, arms tighter so that Barry couldn’t escape his nefarious embrace.

“Ha—Len—come—hahaa—no, it’s—ah!” he couldn’t stop giggling, flailing now, neck and ribs and all of him too sensitive, laughter escalated in volume to a half-shout, twisting and writhing but no elbows had accidentally landed in Len’s face yet so that was something. But Barry wasn’t going to stand for this kind of unwarranted cruelty, no sir, so the second Len let him catch his breath, he flashed around and rolled over the other man, pinning his wrists to the mattress with a grin.

“You know, two can play at that game.”

Len’s morning smile was all mischief and quirked eyebrows. “That so, Barry? I’ll have you know I’m not ticklish.”

“Oh? We’ll see about that.”

Barry cheated, because Len had started it. He used the speedforce to skim his fingers along Len’s sides and arms and knees and the bottoms of his feet and the sides of his neck until Len was laughing loud, twisting under Barry, who was still straddling him, keeping at it until Len grabbed him around the waist in retaliation and flopped Barry onto his back with an oomf.

“Now *that* wasn’t fair, dear.”

“Hah, you started it.”
“Not my fault you always sleep in.”

“Oh so this is the new way to wake me up on weekends? I can see the honeymoon phase is over, my days of pancakes and breakfast in bed are clearly behind me, I see how it i—”

Len kissed him, obviously to shut him up, and Barry felt so warm all over, so warm in the bleed, kissing back.

“You know, Scarlet,” Len pulled back to complain, “I’ve never made you breakfast in bed.”

“You’re right—well, that’s always an idea for the future?”

Len kissed him again and Barry grinned and rolled them over again, settling between Len’s legs. They were both in their underwear in Len’s bed, morning light streaming in through the blinds. And he felt relaxed, happy, and knew Len did too, with arousal chasing the joy, skin on skin translating quickly into heat.

It was crazy to think that it had only been a week since the first time they had had sex—well, penetrative sex at least. They’d had it a few times at the cabin, Barry a little too eager after the first time to try different positions, and then after his walk with Len the other night, he’d let Len whisk him back home and press inside him, rushed and excited by the time they’d made it to a bed.

This morning felt slower, easier, less frenzied but no less hot, hips rolling against one another’s, erections straining. Barry was up on his elbows, kissed down Len’s neck, his chest, the patch of hair there, the tattoos, teasing with his tongue as he got lower. He palmed Len’s cock on the outside of his underwear and felt the small wet spot from precum already. He smirked up at Len through his lashes before sucking his mouth over it, over the tip of Len’s cock trapped by his underwear, earning a gasp.

“Well good morning to you too, Barry.”

He had to laugh, kneeling up to tug on Len’s underwear.

“Might I suggest…” Len started, shifting so he could slide his underwear down his legs, looking at Barry with something like appraisal, but there was something almost… nervous, in the bleed.

“Yeah?”

Len’s hand moved to Barry’s waist, thumb near his navel, and he looked up at Barry who was still kneeling over him. “Now that you’ve had a chance to see how you like being on the receiving end, I thought you might like the opportunity to pitch, hm?”

Oh. Oh. Oh hell yeah. “You’re sure? Like right now?”

That earned him a chuckle, that and no doubt how much excitement Len was picking up from him. “Yes Barry, right now.”

It was Barry’s turn to press Len back with a kiss then, unable to stop himself from taking Len’s face in his hands and kissing deep, pressing their bodies together before he refocused and moved to grab the lube out of the side table, settling between Len’s thighs.

They both always enjoyed this part, Barry fingerling Len. He’d learned how to read the way Len’s breath hitched, how to read the bleed for tight and hot jolts of arousal, but his mouth still went dry when he pressed a finger inside Len and watched his lips part, his eyes flutter closed, his legs fall open just a little further. It made Barry too eager and he reminded himself to take it slow,
rhythmically sliding in just one finger and then two, stretching them before he moved on to
vibrations. Len’s hands clenched the bedspread and he swore, groaned and Barry leaned down until
he could lick the underside of Len’s cock while he thrust his fingers in, reveling in the surprise and
arousal coming off Len, in the sensations being transferred back to him in their Bond.

It was a little harder to multitask, but with a little effort and some help from his other hand, Barry
managed to suck Len’s cock and finger him at the same time, a third finger pressing into the tight and
sick ring of muscle to vibrate and massage along Len’s prostate with the other two digits. And Len
was panting now, thighs almost trembling and needy moans welling up from somewhere in the back
of his throat. Barry echoed them more quietly, moaning around Len’s cock in his mouth because he
could feel it still, however phantom it might be, and it was all pleasure.

“Better—*ah*—hurry up Barry or I’ll be—*mmm*—” Len started and Barry pulled his mouth off with a
pop “—done before you start.”

“Oh, I’m started.”

He earned a chuckle that turned into a gasp when Barry scissored his three digits inside of him.

“Well we don’t all have a magical refractory period and I would *much* rather cum with you inside
me.”

Barry might spontaneously combust if Len kept saying things like that. He thrust his fingers
experimentally. “Are you ready?”

“Mm—yeah.”

He felt hot, almost too hot, embarrassingly eager and exceedingly glad he’d worked Len so close to
the edge before they took the next step, because he knew he wasn’t going to last long anyway once
his cock was in Len. Trying to be gentle, he pulled out his fingers and double-checked that Len was
okay with him not using a condom.

“Absolutely, but before we start…” Len shifted while Barry was sliding out of his underwear,
moving onto his front and glancing over his shoulder. “This position okay?”

“You mean the position where you try to pretend I can’t see you blush?” he teased, working lube
onto his cock, flushed and hard without having been touched.

Len didn’t even deny it, just nodded decisively, “yes, that position.”

Barry laughed, “whatever feels best for you, Lenny.”

“Mm.” Len shifted until he was up on his knees and down on his arms and all Barry could think was
that Len looked like he was presented on a platter for him. He idly considered what it would be like
to *lick* the ass on display right in front of him, tempting on so many levels, but he checked the urge
for a later date. Then he exhaled, a little nervous but in the best way, and lined himself up, breath
catching as he pressed against the tight muscle, puckered just for him, and watched—oh *god*—as the
ring started to stretch and swallow the tip of his cock.

“*Fuck,*” he groaned, eyelids heavy, one hand guiding his cock further in and the other clutching
Len’s hip, thumb pulling at the flesh of his asshcheek.

Len’s voice was an appreciative rasp when he said, “you can go faster’n that, Barry.”

“*Mmm,*” he was barely past the tip, eyes fixed on the sight, the intense and tight feeling. “Don’t want
He never thought going slow could feel so good. He couldn’t have compelled himself to go faster had he tried, sliding in gradually and watching, both hands on Len’s hips now, before pulled most of the way out no faster, back in no faster, just slow and steady. He could see, feel, Len tremble, knew there was sweat sliding down his own back, not from exertion but the sheer heat. The heat of Len’s tight muscles around his cock, swallowing him in like his body was greedy for it, the heat of how good this felt, of the fire deep in the pit of his belly.

“Never—ah—would’ve figured you for—fuck that feels—”

“’m not trying to tease, Lenny, I just—” Barry sighed as he pulled mostly back, a little faster, and then in again, “I just can’t believe how good you feel.”

It wasn’t a feat of self-control that he was going slow, he couldn’t pretend like he had any self-control left at all right now. It was pure hedonism. He was going to come from this, from going slow, from memorizing every detail about how Len’s body felt, how it felt to be inside of him, the tightness stretching around him.

He kept going slow, dragging his cock in measured thrusts, gasped each time. It was too much, too good, and Len was groaning but Barry could tell he was getting impatient. He finally rocked back and up against Barry, sharp and fast and deep, moaned into the sheets when he did, “fuck, c’mon Barry, I’m—”

“Yeah, yeah I’ve got you.” Barry shifted and forced Len to shift with him until Len wasn’t up on his elbows but lower, a more pronounced dip to his back so that Barry could line up the angle and reach around to take his cock in hand, stroking it in time with his thrusts. Moving faster now, the slap of skin on skin filled the room with their panting and Barry’s eyes started to roll to the back of his head, Len’s moaned ‘yes’ and ‘fuck yes’ filling his ears along with the other sounds. He was deep now, could feel it, knew the position made his cock slide along Len’s prostate and it was all he could do not to cum already, to hold back, fingers darting off Len’s cock to the lube and back in record time, slick so he could vibrate his hand on Len, moaning aloud at the same moment Len did.

“Faster.”

Oh, Barry could do faster, especially at this angle. He drilled into Len, control—or what semblance of it he’d had before—slipping into oblivion. It was too much after that, for both of them. Len clutched the sheets and thrusted back and made the most delicious noises, half-captured by the mattress under him, until he spilled over Barry’s hand with a shudder. Barry could finally let go and it hit him hard and sudden, overtaking him, feeling Len’s ass so tight around his cock, so hot, emptying himself into it with stuttered thrusts and moans.

“Wow,” he panted after.

“Mm.”

“That was amazing.” He pulled out, still mesmerized by the sight, leaning back and watching Len roll over with a groan. “You sore?”

“Not in a bad way.”

Barry laughed and crawled forward to kiss him. “For real, that was so good.”

“Agreed.”
“Guess it’s my turn to make breakfast?”

Len smiled and collapsed back to lay, arms splayed. “You did say something about breakfast in bed…”

“Mm and anytime you want to swap that for some of my sad attempts at cooking, just say the word.”

Len managed to swat his ass on his way out of bed and Barry was still grinning by the time he was cleaned up, dressed, and frying the eggs.

**********

If his Saturday had started perfect, it didn’t end that way.

Barry got a call from Cisco midafternoon while he was back at Joe’s, hanging out with Iris and catching up. Cisco told him Eiling was at the lab and Barry’s stomach dropped. He was out the door in an instant after a short reply to Iris, who just waved him away and already had her phone out like she was used to this—hell, she probably was—and told him to let her know if he would still make it home for dinner.

“Mr. Allen, so glad you could join us.”

Barry had barely stomped into the cortex—slowing in the hall before coming in just in case Eiling had guests—before he was greeted. Eiling was alone, at least, with Cisco and Caitlin tense on the far side the room, glaring.

“General. You know, since you’re trying to sue us, I’m sure it’s some infringement of some sort to have you show up here. Conflict of interest?”

Barry had already had an earful from the personal lawyers of half the lab’s board members and a few of the members themselves, so he was pretty sure that any contact between him and Eiling at this point was probably some sort of foul play. At the very least, awful manners. Unfortunately, Eiling had never cared too much about foul play or courtesy.

“Now now, Mr. Allen. I’ve said before that I have great… respect for you and your colleagues here, and the work that you do.”

“If by respect, you mean kidnapping half of Firestorm,” Caitlin’s voice rang out from the other side of the room, pinched in anger. Eiling looked surprised for all of a second and then he raised a hand placatingly.

“Dr. Snow, as a scientist, you must understand that I was only doing what was in the best interest of —”

“Don’t you dare say ‘the nation’, General. Torturing anyone, let alone American citizens, has never been in the best interest of our nation.”

Barry had to feel a little proud of her, and even Cisco was giving her the ‘damn girl’ look. Right now, Ronnie and Martin were back in Pittsburg training some more since Martin wasn’t teaching this semester, making frequent trips to Central and back, and it had to stress her out, not having him nearby when Eiling was up to his old machinations.
“I hope you won’t argue that I have a better idea of what is and is not in the best interest of the safety of the American people, Doctor?”

Oh, she had her uptight look on. Time for Barry to intervene. “I think it’s safe for us all to agree that whatever else you’ve done, we don’t agree with what you’re trying to do now, Eiling. You want a registry of metahumans? And what—to sue STAR Labs? To bankrupt us? Or is it to steal our research?”

Eiling eyed him carefully before he spoke. “You know we don’t have to be so at odds—the military and this lab.” He glanced at Caitlin and Cisco as he continued. “You know we’re interested in pursuing our understanding of military-relevant meta-assets and I know you want to keep your streets clean. Aside from the… unfortunate incident with Dr. Stein, I don’t see why we can’t work together.”

“You mean aside from that fact that ya’girl almost killed Barry and you’re suing us?” Cisco gestured with a pen in his hand, eyes narrowed, and something in Eiling shifted. His posture was the same, but somehow he felt… taller.

“Very well. Apparently appeals to reason won’t work with three scientists. And I won’t insult anyone in this room with a bribe—I know no sum of money would interest you three, let alone any other gifts my institution could provide. So why don’t we talk brass tacks, Allen.”

“Oh yeah, like what?”

“You want this lawsuit business to go away? Or would you like to be dragged into a legal battle for the next several years, dragging your name and picture through the news? I don’t want more attention drawn to this than you do, but eventually editors will stop taking kindly to my requests to leave stories about this lab, about Wells and your inheritance, on the back page instead of the front one.”

Barry felt a jolt of surprise. Eiling had done that? He hadn’t known, but it felt true almost immediately. Barry’s coworkers had caught wind of it, but the whole controversy with Wells murdering his mother and taking Barry under his wing, his father getting out, inheriting a billion dollar company, all of it? Barry knew well enough from Oliver’s life that things like that didn’t tend to stay so buried, and he didn’t know quite what to do with the knowledge that he had Eiling to thank for his continued low profile, for the lack of reporters on his doorstep. Ollie thrived on hiding in plain sight, but Barry’s secret survived by him blending into the background, unremarkable.

“So you’re what, threatening to expose me?” He asked after a minute, trying to get a feel for Eiling’s intentions.

“I’m saying neither of us want that, Allen. This lawsuit will cost us both money and resources and there are easier ways for us to come to an agreement.”

“So that’s it, then—you’re gonna’ tell us what you’re really after with the lawsuit? Because if it’s not the lab itself…” he glanced around, arms out, “what are you after, General?”

“And we’re not gonna’ sell out the metahumans to you in a registry, man!” Cisco interrupted, moving around the console and coming forward. “We’ve spent all month chasing down leads of people and no one wants their rights violated by being put in a registry for their genes.”

Eiling’s shoulders straightened and Barry didn’t miss it, how his gaze pinpointed on Cisco then flicked to Caitlin. Barry might as well be invisible for the moment with how he was focused.
“That implies that it is their genes we’re registering, Mr. Ramon. Of course, we’re interested in keeping files on people who have demonstrated powers—nothing beyond what you have here, or the police force in this city already has, or even what military and intelligence agencies keep on any viable assets.”

“Then don’t push for a registry,” Barry interrupted. “Just let things stay the way they are, with criminals’ powers being listed by the CCPD, with the FBI or ARGUS or whoever keeping access to… whatever they have access to. But let people who just want to live their lives stay that way, and stop trying to recruit them as superpowered weapons.”

Eiling turned enough to face him, “you think there’s any difference? There won’t be some national registration list, Allen, not in our lifetimes—we’re not trying to undermine the Constitution here. But we do need to recruit and study meta-assets. War is changing, and we need to stay at the head of the curve.”

“We don’t care about your curve, Eiling. We just want to know what you even want from us? We already knew the lawsuit’s a sham, so what research are you after? Is it the files on Grodd?”

Hard and angry, Barry didn’t regret playing his hand, forcing Eiling out into the open. Whatever he was dancing around, Barry had had enough. If he wanted a file or ten on Grodd, he could have them for all Barry cared, if he was willing to drop this lawsuit and leave them alone.

“On Grodd? I would certainly expect those, but that’s pennies. What I want is access to the STAR Labs research, full disclosure, every file you have.”

He didn’t glance away from Barry as he spoke, but Barry was used to watching hands at this point—he was always watching Len’s hands, because when he shut down his face, his fingers told more stories than his expressions—and Eiling’s fingers twitched as he spoke, flexed to his left, where Caitlin was standing.

But then he registered the words themselves and barely managed not to drop his jaw at the audacity, but Cisco didn’t maintain the same composure.

“All our research? Are you kidding me?! Do you have any idea how much that is—how many contracts, patents, how much you could steal—”

“Afraid I’ll weaponize your little toys, Mr. Ramon?”

Cisco spluttered and looked angry, “you’re damn right I’m mad! My inventions were never meant to be used in war, Eiling, to hurt innocent people!”

“The military doesn’t harm innocent people, Ramon. When will you three get that in your stubborn heads?”

“Maybe we’d believe if you if you hadn’t tortured Dr. Stein and then—”

“As I said—”

Barry stepped forward with a hand between them, aiming to intervene before Cisco or Caitlin went off again. “Look, whatever you are or aren’t threatening, we’re not giving you full access to everything from STAR Labs. There’s no way that’s happening. Stick us with a lawsuit, see if we budge.”

Eiling sized him up. “You might want to reconsider that. I’ve been playing nice so far, but I could make your life very difficult, and do it without exposing your identity.”
“If you even think about going after my family—”

“I told you I won’t hurt innocent people, Allen. Joe West may be my liaison and I plan to keep him there, but I’m not aiming to deprive Central City of one of its finest detectives.”

“Then I don’t care what you threaten. Bring it on.”

“You might regret that. You’re careless, and reckless, but you’re young and you think you’re invincible. You’re wrong.”

Barry scoffed. The last thing he needed was another lecture from someone trying to act like some messed up ‘mentor’ to him. “I think we’re done here.”

Eiling stared at him for another moment, then nodded. “Perhaps in a few days, you’ll reconsider my offer. You know where to find me.”

He left, finally, with a nod to Cisco and a more congenial one to Caitlin, and Barry’s eyes didn’t leave his back until he was out of the cortex, didn’t relax until his footfalls died down the hallway and Cisco checked the cameras to confirm he was in the elevator. Only then did he let his shoulders sag.

“Shit.”

“Wow, dude, that was intense. You stared down Eiling like a boss! And you, Caitlin, oh you were scary! I thought you were gonna’ go full ice queen and glare holes into him right here!”

“Well,” she wrung her hands, “I do not like that man.”

“That’s an understatement.” Barry dragged a hand over his face. “Did you guys catch how he was staring at her though?”

“Staring? At me?”

“Yeah—he kept glancing at you, and he was trying really hard not to turn and look at you when he talked about research. I don’t think he’s after your tech, Cisco—at least, it’s not his first goal. I think he wants something Caitlin was working on.”

“Me? But—what? What could I have that would interest the military?”

Barry shrugged, “all the research on Grodd was biomedical or biochemical, wasn’t it? Maybe Eiling wants to make psychic supersoldiers, still.”

She frowned though, shaking her head. “It was deemed impossible at the end of that project anyway—the chemicals that affected Grodd only worked because of the particle accelerator explosion. And if Eiling isn’t trying to get the lab, then we can rule out the idea that he’s trying to turn that back on.”

“well, it’s something. I don’t know what. Maybe that’s why he asked for everything, so we couldn't guess.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Cisco pointed between him and Caitlin. “And in the meantime, we’ll just have to keep him and his goons as far from our files as possible.”

“Yeah, well… I’ll talk to the law firm on Monday, I guess.”

They all nodded and were quiet for a moment. Eventually, Caitlin announced, “I think… I’m going to call Ronnie.”
They nodded her off, Barry trapped in his own head, and Cisco came over to lean against the table Barry was standing next to. “You okay, man?”

“Huh—oh, yeah, just… really tired of Eiling, you know? And whatever he’s up to with all this.”

“You don’t think the law firm can outmaneuver? ‘Cause if not, we can always call up the Black Canary and—”

“I don’t think Laurel can help us with this one. But nah, man, it’s more…” he shook his head, a little quieter. “It’s Thawne.”

“Wellsobard?”

Barry nodded. “He and Eiling knew each other. You don’t think… maybe Eiling knows something we don’t know? About Dr. Wells’s private research?”

Cisco shrugged, “who knows? My tech, Caitlin’s biomeds, and Dr. Wells’s, well, everything… just sayin’ though, I bet it’s not tachyons. If it was, he’d go after Mercury before us.”

Barry laughed, and at Cisco’s enquiring glance, explained, “can you imagine him trying to get in a legal battle with Dr. McGee?”

“Oh dude, she’d shred him.”

They shared a smile, picturing it.

“So uh, how’s everything else? Y’know, how’s Cold and your little vacay last week? Feel good taking a break from superheroing?”

“You mean aside from the Pied Piper and this new guy trashing Rathaway Tower?” Barry rolled his eyes a little, then nodded and leaned back against the table too. “It was good. I mean, I don’t have too many recent vacations to compare it to, but it was nice to just spend time with Len. I feel like I got to know him better, you know?”

“I can see that. Supervillain who makes Harry Potter references? Clearly the man has layers.”

Barry snorted, “you have no idea.”

Cisco’s smile faltered for a second and Barry winced.

“Sorry, you…” he dragged a hand through his hair. “I don’t know if I ever apologized, not properly, for hiding the fact that he’s my Soulmate.”

“Nah man, it’s no big deal. It’s not like you decided to make Snart your Soulmate, and I get you wanted to protect your Bond or whatever. Caitlin kind of explained it to me while you were out cold, and I get it—I’m Unmarked, so there’s just some things I’ll never understand.” He shrugged, but didn’t look at Barry, and Barry was shaking his head.

“Hey, no, it’s not like that, it’s not because you’re Unmarked. You’re my best friend. I just… I was a mess, back when it all went down. And I know he kidnapped you, hurt your brother and I… a lot went into it, keeping him and everyone else separate until I knew what I was doing. I didn’t want you guys to reject him but I didn’t know what I was doing and I didn’t want him around you until I could trust him not to…” Barry looked down. “Things were really rocky at the start.”

“You know that’s what friends are for, right? To help you through the hard times?”
Barry nodded, feeling a little stupid about it now, about hiding it. “I know. And you’ve been really
great about everything, more understanding than I had any right to expect, and I need you to know
that it means a lot—you trying to get along with Len, even when I know he still freaks you out.”

“Hey now, ‘freaks me out’ is a little harsh. Let’s go with ‘makes me cautious,’ alright?” But he
smiled in a tired way and nodded. “You’re my best friend too, you know. If he’s your Soulmate,
there’s gotta’ be more to him. Least I can do is put in a little effort.” He nudged Barry’s arm. “And
besides, he does have a super hot sister, so maybe he won’t kill me for having a massive crush on her
now.”

Barry laughed, “Lisa is scary, dude. Waaay scary.”

“I can chill, I got moves. And Lisa digs me. I'm like…. 72% sure.”

Barry shook his head, laughing it out, but stepped away from the desk. “C’mere man,” he motioned
for a hug, and Cisco returned it.

**********

Barry called Len later that evening. It was after dinner with Iris and Eddie and Joe, and then after a
round of cards, and a game, and just general ‘family bonding’ time that was, objectively, fun, but
Barry’s heart wasn’t quite in it. He knew he was probably being clingy, considering he’d spent last
night at Len’s, but he wanted to see the other man again, fill him in on the situation with Eiling. That,
and having a family dinner without Len made part of him feel like he was betraying him, like Barry
should push Joe harder for Len’s presence in his life to be acknowledged.

And, if he was being honest, some part of him was a little dejected, listening to Iris complain how
morning sickness should be just called ‘all the time forever sickness’—it was stupid to be jealous of
that, but with how things were about kids between him and Len, reminders that he’d be ‘forever an
uncle, never a father’ stung. He’d get over it, and couldn’t be happier for Iris and Eddie, but it made
him want to get out and run somewhere. So even if they didn’t talk about kids again right now, or
even this year, Barry still wanted to go and see his partner, the man who could make him laugh and
smile and forget his stresses for an hour or two.

But even before he hit dial, he realized something was wrong. Len was tense and angry and worried,
and as soon as Barry tuned into the bleed, something that had been in the back of his mind over
dinner, he started to get worried too.

Still, Len answered on the fourth ring. “Now isn’t a good time——”

“I caught that. Is everything okay? Anything I can help with?”

“Not this time. This is Rogue business.”

Barry tensed, standing on the porch, not knowing where their new lines were, what it could be if Len
wouldn’t tell him, but before he could think of what to say, Len continued, a little more subdued.

“Mardon’s missing.”
Ohmygod I finally updated the glossary. Bondiversary refers (colloquially) to the anniversary of IC, and this is roughly Barry and Len’s 4 month anniversary of IC in the fic, so it seemed as good of time as any to use that word.

This was the last ‘happy’ chapter ever for a while. That ending cliffhanger is just the start. And I was gonna’ have a surprise narrator next, but it works better to have Len’s next then the surprise narrator after that. And then Barry again, and then… well, some more stuff is gonna’ happen. Some things. Things will happen.

And then as more things happen, we start to move into the multi-chapter climax of the fic. Yaaaaay (ﾉ◕ヮ◕)ﾉ*:・°°・°°*: (disclaimer: please don’t murder me when you figure out where I’m going with the climax)

PS - Don't forget to come visit me on tumblr if you like!
Len was out in his yard as sun was going down, raking leaves (someone had to do if he was gonna’ own a house) and thinking about his territory, his Rogues, how to stabilize his operation, Mick and Pam, the old lady from the bakery near his restaurant complaining about the racket of men stomping around in the apartment above hers now that she’d had to move from the fire, wondering if he was going to have to drop by and give whoever it was a ‘friendly visit’ to help her out. It was a short walk across the road from Len’s apartment anyway, but he couldn’t help but think about Lisa’s comment about how he was too protective. She was a little old lady though and her pies were to die for, and with her bakery condemned from the fire, living on the insurance money right now… Lisa was right, he wasn’t great at knowing where to draw the line. He wondered if it was just because she reminded him of Pam, or if he really was just too soft.

The colorful leaves were sorted into three neat piles in the yard when his phone rang in his pocket.

“Baez?”

“Le-Leonard—”

Something was wrong. Her voice—

“What happened?” He was alert instantly, rake dropped, already moving for the house.

“It’s Ma-rk—he’s gone,” she sobbed. Len’s blood ran cold and he stopped in the door to his garage.

“Gone?”

“Not—he’s not dead.” Her voice was too sharp, to clear, but she sniffed after, sobbed. “He can’t be—my Mark is—it’s not black. He’s not d-ead.”

Len breathed in deep through his nose and resumed his pace, making toward his gun, his parka, his bike.

“What happened?”

“I c-can’t find him—”

“Shawna—”

“I can’t feel him—”

“Where are you?”
“He’s just gone—”

“She choked out a sound.

“Where are you?”

“The warehouse.”

“I’m on my way.”

Hartley made it there before him by the look of things, but he lived in one of the nearby apartments so it made sense. Lisa was practically behind Len in the door since he called her on the way as well. He left Mick out of it for now, until he had more information—there was no need to layer this on to him right now, or to call him away from Pam’s side.

Shawna was sitting curled in on herself, a blanket around her shoulders, no doubt from Hartley. He was sitting across from her, looking stricken, and she had tear tracks down her cheeks still.

Len was never good at approaching these types of things with any sense of poise. For a moment, he wished he had some of Barry’s delicacy, his empathy.

“Shawna,” he started, as good an opening as any. “What can you tell us?”

She sniffed and Len squared himself for more tears, but they never came. “He went for a drink with Bivolo tonight. Wanted to stay out late and play darts after they got food. Mark was excited, hasn’t seen Bivolo in a while. But he wasn’t even gone an hour when I felt it.”

Len shared a glance with Lisa. “Felt what?”

She steadied herself, harder, angrier when she looked up at Len and he remembered why she was a Rogue. “Someone took him.”

“You’re sure?”

“He felt fine and then he was panicked, so sharp in our Bond I felt panicked. Scary mad, too. He started to use his powers, I know what it feels like for his feels because they mess with his emotions and it gets weird in our bleed. But then he was just out. I can’t feel him.” Her voice caught on the last word, eyes suddenly watery again, if no less hard, no less angry. “I can’t feel a damn thing.”

“So he’s unconscious.”

She shook her head, wiped her tears and stood, paced. “No—no this doesn’t feel like sleep. It’s nothing.”

It was Hart that Len looked to this time.

“It could be that they drugged him with someone to put him under, the same as is used for surgeries. It’s documented that the NeuroAffective Bond is interrupted when people are anesthetized;
anesthesia is what lead to modern NAB Blockers. So it’s that, or else they put him on a Blocker.”

Len processed that, suspecting Hartley was right with the first one. A good way to cancel out a metahuman like Mardon’s powers would be to knock him out with something powerful.

“Retaliation.”

Len glanced back at Lisa, who’d said the world. She looked… he nodded. She looked calculating, ready, angry and powerful. Dangerous. His baby sister, the most dangerous person he’d ever met, and someone had pissed her off. Excellent.

“Sis?”

“Retaliation for that warehouse Mick knocked over, the fire. How much money went up in flames when he burned those drugs? We knew the Santini’s would snap back, we just didn’t think they would bare their teeth against Mardon, of all people.”

“The Santini’s have my Soulmate?”

Len ignoring Shawna’s question, thinking it through, tense. If this was how the Santini’s chose to respond, they’d hit hard and fast and smart, but it was bold, too bold, and dangerous. Weather Wizard wasn’t someone to mess with, especially not if he was—

“Have you tried to get a hold of Bivolo?”

Shawna’s look dripped acid. “You think I’m an idiot? Yeah, I tried. Nothing. They must have him too.”

That was a heavy blow to his Rogues. Len knew he was gonna’ have to call Mick, hit back just as hard and fast—preferably while Mark and Bivolo were still alive—if he ever wanted to maintain his territory after this. At the very least, they needed a plan before the Santini’s decided to cut off limbs or heads and mail them to his bar.

His phone rung in his pocket. He glanced at Barry’s number on the screen. “This is unrelated, presumably. A moment.”

Lisa gave him a strange look as he walked to the door to answer it, but neither Hartley nor Shawna gave him pause, discussing theories with Lisa as he opened the phone once he was outside.

“Now isn’t a good time—”

“I caught that. Is everything okay? Anything I can help with?”

Of course he’d caught that. Len didn’t need this right now. “Not this time. This is Rogue business.”

He felt the hesitation, felt his own frustration mounting, not wanting the Flash—not wanting Barry—involved in this mess. The last thing he needed was him knowing Len might have started a mob war. But then… he almost sighed, but didn’t.

“Mardon’s missing.”

Barry would find out anyway once there was a body count, and Len had learned the hard way that keeping Barry too far from this was far more ugly than feeding him scraps.

“Missing?”
“The Santini’s took him.”

“Shit. What can I do to help?”


“Wh—Len, Weather Wizard getting kidnapped by the mob is probably—”

“None of your business. I told you as a courtesy, not so you could do something about it.”

“I…”

“We keep this separate, Barry.”

“Right. I know that, I just… if you need help—”

“I won’t.”

“Well, is there anything else I should know then? Like are you about to put yourself in danger?”

Len clamped down on his urge to snap, too tense by a mile with the situation unfolding, not Barry but all of it. “No, not yet. I appreciate a plan.” He thought for a second. “They have Bivolo too, we suspect.”

“You suspect?”

“No one but Mardon has really been in contact with him anyway, not since Grodd and the military rolled into town and spooked him—” Len stopped talking, drew in a breath. Fuck.

“Len?”

“Something just occurred to me. I’ve got to go.”

He hung up and marched back inside, more important things to worry about than Barry’s concern right now, pushing aside the bleed.

“We have a problem!” he announced in a loud and angry drawl before the door had even closed behind him, all eyes snapped to him.

“Another one?” Hartley looked dismayed. Lisa arched an eyebrow. Shawna looked scared.

“A bigger version of this one. Bivolo’s a mole, and the Santini boys don’t have Mardon. The military does.”

**********

They wanted to know how he put it together, of course. Each of them had given him a look like he was crazy when he announced it, but Len was sure. It clicked, strange puzzle pieces about this situation lining up. Bivolo withdrawing from the Rogues but not fully skipping town, right when a new power rolled in. Dodging Len’s calls, backing out of heist plans, maintaining contact with only the most powerful meta-Rogue, the one he should be trying to avoid if he really wanted to stay under the military’s radar. The military had been recruiting, and Bivolo was the type of guy to flock to the
biggest fish in town.

“But… what does the military want with Mark, or with Roy?” Shawna asked, perplexed, looking between him and Lisa.

“Meta-human assets.”

“Assets? What, like the Flash?”

Len winced. “Not exactly. They want soldiers working for them. The Flash operates solo.”

“The military almost bought STAR Labs and you know that’s where he held us—”

“I don’t think this was the Flash, Shawna. It’s not his style.”

“It is exactly his style! And it makes more sense than the military trying to take my Soulmate!”

In her eyes, that was probably true.

“Bivolo wouldn’t work with the Flash,” he pointed out.

“So he has Roy too! That doctor the Flash works with—Snow—she could definitely make something to knock out both of them.”

This wasn’t good. He couldn’t let her get convinced, not when he was certain—“The military is targeting meta-humans all over the city, the state really. Ever since that gorilla attack, they stationed themselves near Central. Add that to how Bivolo’s been acting strange and now he and Mark disappeared in broad daylight? The Santini’s haven’t sent us a message, no news of a shoot out from any of the bars, nothing, and you know Mark and Raider would defend themselves if they could. If it was the Flash, then why? He only shows up when crime is going down, and you said yourself they were just out for a drink.”

That speech earned him a careful glare from Lisa but Shawna shouldered on. “Mark said he was just in a safehouse when the Flash found him and brought him in.”

Len tried to be gentle. He was awful at it. “Mardon would fight, Shawna. You know he would fight. The only reason he wouldn’t is if his guard was down enough for Bivolo to…” Len wasn’t sure. Maybe Rainbow Raider had whammed Mark, or maybe slipped a drug in his drink, or flat out stabbed him with a needle. It didn’t matter. “… send him for 40 winks. Mark wouldn’t let anyone he didn’t trust close enough to do that, and the Flash isn’t going to get the drop on him twice.”

She looked confused and upset but it was Hartley who piped up next. “It makes sense objectively that the Flash would seek out these Rogues. Revenge for the police gala job. Which would make you the next target, Leonard. Conversely, other than knocking Mark out, the Flash has no motive for using anesthesia on him. Caitlin Snow, cold as she is, would make something more elegant, less dangerous.”

Len quirked an eyebrow at him, appreciating the assist. “So not STAR Labs?”

“They have no reason to block the Bond. Neither does the Santini crime family.”

Shawna shook her head. “But why does the military want to block us? I still don’t get what the military wants with Mark at all. He’s a criminal, he’s not about to sign up to be a soldier. That isn’t Mark.”
Lisa stepped closer, heels clicking on the concrete floor of the warehouse. “He’s a one-man weather machine. It’s no wonder they would want him.”

Shawna shuddered, “what the hell is the military doing kidnapping citizens? I don’t care if we are criminals. They can’t just use us.”

“We won’t let them.” Mark was a Rogue, and he wasn’t about to let the military just take him. Not to mention he’d like to go a round with Bivolo, next them they saw one another. “We’ll get him back.”

Shawna looked at him, and rather than question how they were going to find him, how they would manage to pull any of it off, she nodded. There was fire in her eyes. “You’re damn right we will. I’m never letting me or anyone I love rot in a cell ever again, not with these powers.”

**********

They were up half the night. Len called Mick and filled him in on the broad strokes, told him he didn’t need to come but he did anyway. Len had always suspected he had a soft spot for Shawna since they met.

They started at the beginning. Shawna gave details about Mark’s powers and what the military might want. Len shared what he knew about the military and its metahuman ‘program’, which wasn’t much yet but he promised more information soon. He filled them in on the asshole that was General Wade Eiling, catching Lisa nodding. She’d been privy to some of this but not as much as him. Neither Hartley nor Shawna questioned where he was getting his information, though Hartley’s glances edged toward surprised and calculating more than once. Mick looked downright suspicious but no one would be able to tell except Len so he didn’t worry about it for now.

“Why the blockers?” Mick asked when they hashed out what likely had gone down between Bivolo and Mark. “Why not just knock ‘em out?”

“That… is a very good question.” Len provided helpfully. It was 4am, sue him. They were all quiet for a minute, the coffee wearing off. Shawna looked the worst, eyes red and dark at once, puffy but hard and angry. Someone should hug her. Someone who was better at that sort of thing.

“James.”

What? “What?”

“James, I can always find him, or could.” Hartley blinked up at Shawna. “Could you do that, with Mark? Feel how near or far he was?”

That was a thing?

“Right now?”

“No, not blocked, I mean before.”

“I never tried.”

Hartley nodded. “Soulmate remote sensing. It happens in different ways for different Bonds, and not everyone can do it. It might be linked to having a physical bleed, the science of remote sensing isn’t
“Wait Hartley,” Lisa cut in, “are you saying that Soulmates can just find one another?”

Of everyone in the room, Lisa was the only person not Bonded, Unmarked. It was a strange ratio, considering the population, and Len had never quite realized before how much of his social circle was Paired.

“Not like that,” he snapped his fingers to demonstrate, “but after a fashion. I can feel how far James is, set to a… mental map, I suppose you could call it. I know if I’m close or near, and the longer we were apart, the better I became at estimating distances. I used to google his Circus act’s location to verify my guesses.”

Everyone was staring.

“That’s not normal, right?” Lisa looked around, a little alarmed.

“No,” Mick rumbled, “it ain’t.”

Hartley shifted uncomfortably, “it’s not as uncommon as you might think. People experience the ability to remote sense differently across Pairs. Some can smell or hear where their partner is if they strain, some people have even reported being able to see what their Soulmate can see.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s possible, Mick,” Len supplied. “Especially with prolonged suppression or separation in a Bond.”

Hartley looked at him with what felt like x-ray vision, “right. So if someone wanted to abduct people who were potentially Bonded and make sure their Mate couldn’t find them through one of the methods we mentioned—blockers. It’s the easiest solution. Anesthesia to knock them out, then pump them with NBs.”

Mick looked like there was a sour taste in his mouth at the thought. Len had to agree.

“It’s a reason for sure, but it doesn’t get us any further to finding Mardon,” he voiced. “We need more information, and a plan. To get that, we need to disperse. Shawna, you need sleep.”

“How can I sleep while—”

“Because you have to. He needs you to sleep. You have to be at the top of your game, and right now, you need to have energy to think, to fight. But we won’t succeed at tracking him tonight, not with our current tools.”

“So we should just sit here while—”

“My brother’s right,” Lisa said, more gentle than Len knew how. “He’ll get the information we need to start planning. And the military wants Mark’s powers—they’re not going to kill him tonight. He’s safer there than with the Santini family anyway.”

She was churlish, but Lisa had an arm around her shoulders and was already ushering her toward the door, heading back to Lisa’s place for the night.

“Hart, you need a ride home?”

“I’ll walk. James has been texting me, wants to walk me home.”
“Snart, a word?”

Mick nodded toward the back of the shop and Len followed, setting the security alarm on his way out.

“You seem to know a lot about what the military is up to these days. Any particular reason?”

At least Mick didn’t beat around the bush, voice rough and face dark in the pre-dawn light. It was way too late to dillydally anyway.

“Barry knows a lot about it. His foster father, the badge? Military’s liaison for the meta taskforce down at the station.” If Mick didn’t already know Barry had inherited STAR Labs, Len wasn’t going to tell him. Mick was a helluva lot smarter than most people gave him credit for, and if he was going to spend time around Barry, the less pieces of the puzzle of his identity Mick had, the better.

And Mick just grunted, placated at least for the present, and made his way to his car.

For himself, Len went home, convinced himself to try for an hour to sleep, and wondered if Barry was going to pissed or excited when he came around asking for help with this one.

**********

A text from Lisa two hours later asked him if he had any more information yet, and Len knew that Shawna must not be able to sleep. He didn’t blame her, and wiped the sleep from his eyes, sitting with his legs over the side of the bed.

Barry answered on the second ring.

“’Morn?”

“Sorry to wake you, Barry.”

“Len’y, hey, mm,” he could hear Barry stretch an yawn, feel his brain coming online, “what’s u—everything okay?”

“I could use a favor.”

“Yeah, ‘course.”

“We tallied up the evidence. Pretty sure that your pals in the military might be responsible for Mardon’s capture.”

“Wh—oh shit.”

“Mm.”

“I—yeah. That makes sense, a lot of sense. Eiling was at the lab last night and—yeah. Kane wasn’t around. Bet she was taking in Mardon. But Eiling’s not gonna’ give him up just because I ask nicely.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, there’s no need to advertise your connection to the Rogues any more than Eiling already knows about it.”
“So what do you need?”

“Information.” He explained his list of requests, Barry murmuring agreement, interjecting with any quick answers, and then they were off the phone and he could feel Barry running not long later. He sighed and texted Lisa back.

*Working on it.*

***********

Barry swung by later in the morning, gave Len and update, and was off again, headed to STAR Labs to give his pals a heads up about what the military was up to, now that they were sure it was a military issue, making it Flash business as much as a Rogue problem. It was tense ground, but Team Flash knowing that Eiling had Mardon wasn’t a threat to Len’s operation, so he’d allow it.

And they were certain it was the military. So far, Barry had checked every Santini storage facility, house, and safehouse Len knew about to send him to; he’d wanted to definitively put a nail in the coffin of the Santini retaliation theory. If the Santini’s wondered about the lightning trail zipping through their buildings, at least they wouldn’t trace it back to Rogues interference. Barry didn’t know where the military could be keeping Mardon though, unfortunately. He’d run out to their outpost outside the city and back with apparently no luck, as with the facility where they’d apparently held Stein upstate.

Barry also had an insight to share on the Nab Blockers while he was there. He clapped his hand to his fist and said “of course” when Len told him, and at the quizzical look, he explained. “When they had Stein, Ronnie was able to track him down through their psychic connection and we saved him. Their Firestorm bond isn’t quite like the bleed, it’s more physical and just different, atomic somehow, but Caitlin thinks it works on a lot of the same basic principals. I bet he’s the reason they’re more careful now.”

Ah, that explained that, at the very least. He could pass it on to Lisa, if no one else.

Before Len could thank Barry though, he was rushing out the door, promising to follow up with Len’s other information requests. Len spent the morning making plans and sharing information with his Rogues, but there wasn’t much he could yet do, not without more information on the military movements and knowing where they were keeping Mark. Lisa sent out feelers for information in her usual channels, Hartley doing research in his own way, and Shawna spent her time alternately going over information and huddled in the corner that was Mark’s favorite spot in the warehouse. Len couldn’t fathom what missing her Bond, that connection, must feel like.

“Turn anything up online, Hartley?”

He sat back in his chair, laced his fingers behind his head. He looked exhausted too, and Len was relatively certain none of them had slept last night.

“Not yet. I don’t have equipment necessary or skill to hack into most military systems right now, so there’s a limit to how much I can figure out.” He was on a laptop, a good one, but Len could see his point.

“Keep digging for now. If there’s any equipment you think will help, let me know and I’ll throw the money at it.”
“Sure thing. In the meantime, is there any equipment you think you’ll need? If the plan is to rescue Mark from the American military, it might take more than the guns and my gloves, even with Shawna’s powers.”

Len nodded and glanced over Hartley’s various workbenches, the half-finished projects, stolen tech from Mercury like the neural decoupler, some explosives and projectiles in varying states of construction, back up and different versions of the gloves. “Anything you can come up with, for now. Until we know where he is, we won’t know what we’ll need to infiltrate, but stealth is always a better move than guns blazing. Ideally, we won’t have to bust down the door to get Mark back, just sneak in the side.”

Jailbreaks always took a lot to plan, but at least you normally knew what prison you were breaking into. Mardon might have to be patient until they figured out how to go about this, and he wasn’t sure how long Shawna would last before she snapped and did something rash.

Hartley nodded and titled back toward the computer, and Len went to check on Shawna.

***********

Barry called him again in the afternoon, while Len was out meeting with old contacts and asking for information on the military. So far, they weren’t letting anyone know Mardon was missing, just asking about the metahuman asset program, but the quicker information got back to them, the better, because the Santini’s were bound to find out that at least one of the Rogues had been captured sooner or later.

“Barry, do you have anything for me?”

“Not much, but Joe’s on the weekend shift right now and I stopped by the precinct to talk to him. Since he’s the liaison, he might be able to dig something up, either on Mardon or Bivolo.”

It was good thinking, not that Len was keen to owe West any favors. “And?”

“Won’t know until he has a chance to do some digging, ask some questions. But at least it won’t look too suspicious coming from him, right? I’m pretty sure Eiling just thinks I want Mardon dead at this point and Joe doesn’t have any connection to him or Bivolo.”

“Just be careful, Barry.”

“I am. I didn’t tell you, but Eiling sort of… threatened me. I don’t know what he’s up to, but he definitely said something about making my life difficult without exposing me as the Flash.”

“Isn’t he already suing you?”

Len listened to Barry explain his encounter from the previous evening, apprehensive. It didn’t tell him anything they didn’t already know except that Eiling was impatient enough to make threats, which wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

“Keep me posted.”
Barry looked almost as exhausted as Len felt when he showed up later that evening.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” Len resisted the urge to outright demand an update. “There’s take out in the kitchen.”

“Hallelujah,” Barry sighed, but didn’t head straight there. Instead, he dropped onto the couch, laying with his head in Len’s lap. “I ran the whole state, checked every military facility on their main records. Nothing that looks like a metaprison from what I can tell.”

That’s what he had been doing all day? All evening? “How many miles is that?” Len couldn’t keep the surprise from his voice.

“I didn’t count. Let’s just call it a few protein bars worth. I swear Cisco needs to make a food pouch in my suit or something, I doubled up on calories today after that.”

Tentatively, Len reached forward and ran his fingers through Barry’s hair. He could feel the reaction immediately, felt Barry melt into the sensation, body relaxing from tension into a marshmallow-like state of comfort after less than a minute of it, sighing, eyes drifting closed. It had an effect on Len too, Barry’s sudden comfort, like some of the tension was easing out of his own shoulders.

“Thank you.”

“Hm?”

“I know you hate Mardon, so thank you. You didn’t have to do all that, not for someone who’s hurt you, your family.”

Len tried not to think about Barry’s amazing capacity to have sympathy for people who hurt him, tried to murder him, kidnapped his loved ones.

Barry blinked up at him, “it’s the right thing to do.”

“It’s not something everyone would do, not for someone like Mardon, and I appreciate it.”

“I know I stuck Mardon in the pipeline, and I know that wasn’t… we didn’t reform him or anyone, it didn’t work. But we never wanted to hurt anyone, we were trying to protect people. What Eiling’s doing? He wants to abduct people and use them, hurt them if he has to, and make them weapons.”

His face turned dark, “I don’t want to see him force anyone to be a weapon for him again, not even Mardon.”

“That’s because you’re a good person.”

Something sharp twisted inside Barry, something tense and uncomfortable, worried and hesitant. He swallowed and Len could already feel him trying to suppress it.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You can tell me.”
“It’s not—it’s my head being stupid. It doesn’t matter, not right now.”

Len looked down at him, met his gaze, his own eyebrows drawn together.

“It’s nothing, really. Just… let’s drop it for now, okay? Focus on Mardon and everything else going on.”

“If that’s what you’d prefer.”

Barry’s chest eased a little and Len relaxed by a fraction as well, hand returning to his hair. Whatever it was, Barry was no doubt right, they had bigger fish to fry. He couldn’t help feeling that between Shawna, Mardon, Bivolo, the Santini’s and the military, Barry and the lab and the lawsuit, something was going to give, had to give, he just wasn’t sure what yet.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, how many times have I started an author’s note with “well that wasn’t in the outline”? I mean, Mardon getting abducted by the military totally was in the outline. Or at least, the updated outlines. That’s a plot point. But I wasn’t going to show so much of the reaction and planning and fallout. I’m not 100% sure, from the standpoint of efficient writing, if I needed to show so much of it either. I find it drags on a bit, personally. But if I didn't include this Len chapter, it would have been ages until his PoV again, and this does set up some of the challenges the characters are facing / will face and sets up some more of my foreshadowing for various things, so at least some of this was necessary.

Poor Shawna ☹

Next up is a surprise narrator, and no, it’s not Mark. I’m not gonna’ confirm or deny any other guesses, but I suspect that almost no one would be able to guess right anyway, and that’s part of why I’m really excited about the next chapter. Part. Because there are a lot of reasons I’m really excited about the next chapter. Not sure if you guys will like it as much as I do, but it was super fun to write. Again, not the most efficient writing, but hell, I write for pleasure so I can take a winding path if I want. ☺

Oh and PS - the notion of Soulmate Remote Sensing was teased as far back as chapter 10 when Barry is trying to track down Len after the gala heist, he just couldn't remember the name for it. I use Hartley as a partial expert on symbolonogy (maybe Caitlin got him into when they worked together) because it makes my life waaaay easier as a writer haha.

Okay that's all from me. Also all the editing happened after midnight so if there's typos, I'm not the least surprised.
Chapter Summary

**Sinnerman (shorter version) by Nina Simone** and I’m a Wanted Man by Royal Deluxe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

David knew it was going to be a long day from the moment he tasted his morning smoothie. Rob was experimenting with flavors and the results weren’t that pleasant. But he muscled his way through it and sipped the blended green muck on his drive to the precinct anyway. He was gearing up for a long week, because no week was ever quiet when you were the captain of the busiest police precinct in Central City.

Still, what David had come to expect from a long day was some new metahuman terror for his taskforce to deal with, a headache over the tail end of construction in the atrium of the precinct’s building, or, recently, some concocted issue from the military for him to run paperwork circles around.

What he didn’t expect was an unmarked envelop on his desk with *this* in it.

“Donna,” he picked up his direct line to his assistant, proud that his voice was under control. “Get me someone from Internal Affairs. Someone discreet. And let me know when Barry Allen gets in to work.”

At this rate, given that it was only first thing Monday morning, he suspected it was going to be a long week.

**********

Barry knocked tentatively on the door to his office at ten past nine. “Allen, come in,” David stood and motioned him forward. The young man’s eyes fell right away on the other occupant of the room.

“Allen, this is Patty Spivot. She’s with Internal Affairs.”

“Hi.”

“Uh, hi.”

“Patty’s going to be recording our conversation.”

They shook hands, and David had a second to wish that IA had sent someone who wasn’t quite so chipper as Spivot, smiling brightly at Barry despite everything. Most of the IA group were somber at their *best*, so he wasn’t quite sure how she managed. He blamed her youth, mostly—they’d sent over their rookie. A rookie beat a blabbermouth, but still...
“Have a seat, Barry.”

Barry looked nervous, which was definitely earned in this case, but David was pretty sure it was the use of his first name that set him off, scratching the back of his head and not sitting.

“Can I ask what this is about, sir?”

David sighed and pushed the envelop to the edge of his desk, tapping it with one finger. “Sit.”

Barry sat. And took the envelope. David sat too, and tried not to dread what was coming. He had already looked at those pictures, knew what was on them. But the conversation he was about to have was one he really never thought he would have to, not with Barry Allen, and not over something like this.

With a last nervous glance at David—Allen was way too easy to read for someone who did what he did, but maybe that was exactly how he got away with it—he pulled out the photos.

The exact moment recognition hit his face was also obvious. He was pale anyway, but he went white as a sheet, a sort of sick color. He’d only seen the top of the first photo and he already knew.

“Look through them all, Allen, and then maybe you can explain them to me.”

Explain to David why he’d received an unmarked envelop on his desk that morning with no traces on the surveillance of who put it there. Explain why inside the envelop were pictures of Allen holding hands in a café with Leonard Snart, gazing deep into the man’s eyes like it mattered; a snapshot of them smiling and walking arm in arm together; of them on a bridge, Barry’s face tilted back, Snart’s eyes focused on his neck in a way that made David’s hands clench; and the most damning, three shots of them kissing in the park, the kind of kiss that almost made him look away because it felt private even though the photo was taken from far away, a little grainy. There was one photo of after the kiss, Barry’s face adoring while he looked at Snart, who was actually smiling.

Those pictures told a story, and it was one that made David sick to his stomach, left a worse taste in his mouth than any swamp water smoothie ever could.

Barry looked similarly ill when he finished flipping through the photos, clammy, a tense set to his jaw. He started to stand. “I’ll go clean out my stuff from the lab,” he whispered, voice tight.

“Sit down,” David’s voice was far from quiet. Allen sat.

“Are you arresting me?”

It had certainly crossed his mind, but David really didn’t want to do that. “Not for the time being, Allen. But you are going to answer some questions.”

“I’m not—I won’t tell you about Len, nothing that could be used against him.”

‘Len’, huh? David rolled that around in his head, mouth twisted down. “You’re that loyal to Snart?”

Barry didn’t respond. He just looked at his lap, looked close to tears, and David couldn’t blame him. He was hoping Allen would talk, would make sense of this for him, but he knew the kid could be stubborn as hell when he dug in his heels and he was just sitting, face set and stiff. David supposed he was probably just trying not to break down, but clamping up wasn’t going to save him from this conversation.

He rejected the next question he wanted to ask, which was whether Joe knew. He couldn’t ask that
in case Barry was stupid enough to yes, and then he’d have to fire his best detective. Off the record, he’d ask, but Spivot was sitting there with the recorder, taking notes.

“Let’s just start from the top. I'm willing to tell you that I have no idea where these photographs came from, that they were here when I got in and no one's quite sure how. This wasn't the CCPD tailing you. So while your reaction speaks volumes, I need to hear you say it. You don’t deny that these photos are authentic?”

Barry shook his head. “No, sir.”

“And you don’t deny that you and Leonard Snart are in a romantic relationship?” He should have called a spade a spade and said sexual, but the evidence was them smiling and kissing, and he would work from that.

Barry shook his head. “No, sir.”

David sighed, temples throbbing. “Barry—he could kill you. What are you thinking?”

Barry dragged in a breath, shook his head.

“Is this ongoing?”

He nodded.

David’s frustration was growing. “Never would’ve figured Snart for a PDA kind of guy.” His voice was a little bitter. He was losing his best CSI (his ace in the hole, really) thanks to 'Captain Cold' and he didn’t even know why.

But Barry let out a half-choked, single laugh. “You don’t know his possessive streak.”

David arched an eyebrow and leaned forward. “Is he forcing you into this, Allen? Hurting you?” It was the only explanation he could think of, and one he’d cycled back to more than once that morning.

“No.” It was raspy but vehement, stronger than anything else Barry had said so far. “Len wouldn't—look, I’m fired. I know that. If you’re not arresting me right now, then I’ll just go pack up, okay? I’ll sign whatever you need me to sign. Just…”

David sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Spivot, put down the pen for a moment.”

She looked to him with eyebrows raised then placed the pen at her side, making a show of turning off the recorder, nodding at him. Barry looked between her and David, eyebrows down, shoulders down. The essence of a kicked puppy. David wasn’t sure he would ever get it, the confusing and ever-changing enigma that was Barry Allen. Just as soon as he thought he had the kid’s secrets all figured out…

“Off the record, Barry, just tell me why? How did this even happen? You know who he is, what he’s done and what he’s capable of,” better than maybe anyone else in the precinct, really.

Barry looked at him, watery eyes but set, determined. “Because he’s my Soulmate.”

Oh shit.

David swore, slammed a hand on his desk and the other two in the room startled at the noise. Then he pinched the bridge of his nose, beyond frustrated. “You have got to be kidding me.”
Barry shook his head. David’s eyes were closed, but he knew that’s exactly what Barry was doing—shaking his head with that little confused and worried expression of his. It made a strange, perverse sort of sense. Only Barry Allen could have this type of luck.

“Excuse me, sir?”

He didn’t even open his eyes, too consternated. “Yes, Spivot?”

“I just wanted to make sure it’s clear that you can’t fire Mr. Allen. If he’s willing to go on the record with that, I mean. And if he can prove that Captain Cold—sorry, that Leonard Snart—is his Soulmate.”

“I—wait, what?” Barry asked and David opened his eyes and leaned his elbows on the desk.

“Know your rights, Allen. Soulmates get Pair Exemptions. Nobody, including police and civil servants, can be fired on account of who their Soulmate is, regardless of that person’s actions or activities. Nor can you give testimony or be required to provide information on him, no obstruction of justice charges for withholding, you can’t be held criminally responsible for harboring your Soulmate, and more. You took criminology classes, I’m sure you know most of this, but Spivot can give you the details.”

He probably could fire Barry for hiding it or find a loophole somewhere, but he really didn’t blame him for doing it, and didn’t genuinely want to fire him over this, not over something he couldn’t control. The sick expression was back on Barry’s face but now David knew he was sick with hope. That somehow made it worse.

“I can.” Spivot moved closer. "There’s a whole section to the laws and legislation governing Soulmate Bonds that is specific to Bonding with criminals. Regulations for civil servants filter down from the federal level, with extra protection from the state of Missouri. There’s going to be a small mountain of paperwork if your Soulmate is Capta—Snart, but your job won’t be at risk.”

Barry looked between them, sitting up straighter, halfway out of his seat with the burst of energy, “for real? I can come out about my relationship with Len and not lose my job or go to prison for it?”

“If you can prove that you and him are Soulmates,” Spivot said easily, and Barry relaxed back into his chair like he was melting, running hands over his head. His relief said more than enough. It was real.

“What uh, what constitutes proof? Because obviously Len can’t just waltz into the precinct and show you his Mark?”

If there was a God, she was laughing at David right now. Or at Barry Allen, and David was just along for the ride.

“Not like charging him with anything would be too easy, considering the loss of evidence and files in our system pertaining to Leonard Snart,” David’s eyes narrowed on Barry and he watched the other swallow.

“Ah—Mr. Allen, when did you say you and Snart achieved Initial Communion?” Spivot followed the unsaid accusation in David’s statement, but he shook his head at her before Barry could answer.

“Allen’s not a suspect in that. We have the Flash on camera doing it.” Which was rich, really, and honestly this explained a lot.

“Ah, right.” She smiled and nodded pleasantly, like the loss of those files wasn’t a perpetual
frustration to David. “But we will still need to know the date of Initial Communion for the paperwork.”

“Uh, it was late June. He had just robbed the museum that caved-in? Wait, shit, don’t put the robbery part on record. But, uh, he ran into me while he was getting away—I was kind of in his way and it—it was messy.”

Barry openly admitting his Soulmate had robbed a museum in front of him and Spivot was either the high point or the low point of David’s day. It remained to be determined which.

“Spivot, what’s the regulation on burden of proof in this case? Does it rest on Barry or the CCPD, and what’s the time frame?”

“Ah, it rests on the individual to prove that they are indeed Soulmates with the criminal or wanted party, and as of two years ago, proof can be in high-resolution photographs of both Soulmates with the Soulmark and the face both visible, witnessed and signed by a notary-at-law. Or in the case of the individual in question being a member of a police division, including CSIs, it can also happen with a visible examination of both Marks side-by-side by the person from Internal Affairs assigned to the case with a similar signature by that individual. Which would be me.” She smiled brightly. David’s eyebrows shot up, as did Barry’s. “Oh, and the time frame is ten business days from the date when the case is opened unless there are extenuating circumstances, in which case we could file for an extension. But so long as Snart is in Central City right now, that shouldn’t be an issue.”

Barry was looking at David with bright eyes. “I can do that. We can do that. No problem. I’ll call Len and me and Spivot can meet him today and—”

“Whoa, whoa, Allen—you want an officer from the CCPD to go and meet with you and Snart? You realize he has ten days to get a photograph signed, sealed, and delivered, right? I don’t see any reason why Spivot needs to put herself at risk for this.”

Why Barry looked crestfallen and Patty looked disappointed was beyond David. These were the strangest two people in his precinct, he was pretty sure.

“I…” Barry sat up straighter, “look, Len won’t submit a photo of himself, especially not something as private as his Mark, for the CCPD to have on file.”

“The state, actually,” Patty interjected, then set back when David gave her a look. “Right.”

“Are you telling me that Snart would rather meet with a cop and all the mess that comes with that, rather than just submit a photograph?”

Barry nodded, still looking half-panicked.

“I have a hard time believing that.”

“Please, just trust me on this. Len is not going to give you a photo of his Mark. Especially not one with his face in it.”

“You realize it’s your career on the line.”

“He’ll meet with someone. Seriously. I can get him to today if I have to.”

David’s throbbing headache was back in full force. Even with the green smoothie as an omen, he had underestimated just how long this morning (surely, this week) was going to feel.
“You can get him on the phone?”

Barry hesitated and David thought he might actually say no but he pulled out his cell. “You want me to just…?”

“Might as well, Mr. Allen.” Might as well get this whole mess settled as quickly as physically possible.

Barry didn’t look any less clammy, and now David’s dread morphed into something else entirely as well. He had no idea what to do but move forward here and try to process it all later. The phone was ringing.

“H-ey, Len…I, uh—we—shit, I am not having a good day.” He let out a little laugh, the laugh of a person at the end of his rope, a little too choked up and David couldn’t help but feel for him, just a little. “No, no, I’m fine, no, no one’s hurt, don’t worry, it’s just uh…” he sniffed, dragging a hand through his hair to hold himself in check. “God this is so stupid… Yeah, I know I am, you really don’t have to tell me… No, I’m… It’s—I’m about one step away from getting fired. The CCPD found out about us. They found out we’re Soulmates.”

David was having a hard time believing his ears, just the casual way Barry talked to Snart, the obvious familiarity.

“I don’t know, Len—they have photos… of when we met at Terracotta Coffee before opening Wells’s will? And last week, in Chubbuck park…”

Those photos were from last week? He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“What? No, Len—I wouldn’t let anyone trace this call, relax. I won’t let anyone use me to get to you… No, I’m in my Captain’s office, with him and someone from IA. That’s…yeah, I know… I mean, obviously someone is stalking us because these photos just showed up on my Captain’s desk this morning.”

There was a pause and Barry’s expression darkened, “probably. But that’s not why I called. I need a favor… no, you’re really not. I don’t suppose you’d get a notarized high-resolution photo of your Mark that shows your face?” He sighed, deflating, a nervous glance at David then away, down. “Yeah, no, I didn’t think so. Uhm… okay. The only other option if I want to keep my job is that you have to meet with me and a person from Internal Affairs… yeah.”

He winced then listened to the other end, and his voice was softer, quieter and more personal, less panicked when he kept talking. “Hey, hey, I know, but the officer from IA seems nice enough and if you just meet with us… I don’t know, somewhere neutral? …I—oh. Uh. I mean you know I—uh huh. That’s…” he looked at David. “Are you sure?”

He held out the phone to David.

Oh hell.

“This is David Singh.”

“Hello, Captain.”

It was actually Leonard Snart. Not that David had any reason to doubt, but if he had, this was more than enough. His stomach was tight and he felt a little sick.

“Snart.”
Patty leaned forward in her seat, attention rapt.

“I understand I have to meet with someone from your side of the fence to help ensure Barry’s continued employment?”

David supposed that it was good, in a way, that Snart was even considering this. Some people might’ve just let Barry get fired. Awful people, but David didn’t put much stock in men who terrorized the city for their own amusement.

“That is correct, Mr. Snart.”

“At a neutral location.”

“Ideally.”

“And how do I know some of your detectives won’t take it as an opportunity to try and catch me?” His voice was so smug and sardonic at once, it was strange to imagine him and Barry side by side.

“I could ask you the same thing—how do I know you won’t ambush anyone I send and use this to your advantage?”

There was a pause before he eventually drawled, “that’s fair. But something tells me we’re going to have a hard time taking one another at our word.”

David really didn’t like this guy. “I don’t trust you as far as I could throw you, Snart. But I trust Barry. So how about this. Barry, myself, and our officer from Internal Affairs will come to meet you.” As much as he'd rather send Joe West, the man would be liable if it ever made it onto a record that he'd known about this in advance. Barry couldn't be culpable in being Bonded to a criminal, but West was a totally different story. "And you will come alone, because I’ll allow you to choose the location. No abandoned warehouses.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Put Barry back on.”

David handed the phone back to Barry.

“Hey… I—should be, yeah. We're good. Got it. Wait, right now?” he addressed that to both him and Snart, from what David could tell, and David nodded. He’d cleared his morning for this, and this was top priority for Spivot. “Right, okay. So. Meet you there?”

He hung up, and David could almost see the weight of the world pulling at his shoulders. He couldn’t dwell on it, he had a precinct to run.

“Where to, Mr. Allen?”

**********

The drive over wasn’t as awkwardly quiet as David was anticipating. Getting out the precinct had been. It hadn’t escaped anyone’s attention that David had Barry Allen and an officer from IA into his office first thing that morning with the blinds drawn. Joe had come up as soon as they exited the office but David had just held up his hand. “Later, Joe. Barry has someone he needs to introduce us to.”
The man’s eyes had widened and he stepped out of their way, and Eddie had looked alarmed beside him. Why was the entire West-extended family so bad at plausible deniability? Though he supposed it didn’t matter. Everyone was going to know as soon as the paperwork was filed anyway, there was no way of hiding it now, and he tried not to feel too bad about Barry’s secret being out. At least, not about this secret. David would protect the ones that mattered.

For his own part, Barry was holding up better than David had expected on the drive, and David was reminded just how much mettle Barry really had hiding under his flailing awkward… persona. Or whatever it was that he was at work. But Patty was helping with drawing him out of his shell right now. She’d started with easy topics, about moving to Central, about forensics, about the metahuman taskforce and how she’d almost joined it before the military swooped in and she transferred to Internal Affairs instead. By then it was an easy transition back to the issue at hand and she had actually brought the paperwork, had started asking Barry questions along the drive. Details of the date and time of Initial Communion that Barry fudged his way through in typical fashion when he was called upon to lie. David was curious about the truth, but not that curious. Not curious enough to ask. Then other details, names, ages, birthdays, all things that Barry told her ‘Len’ wouldn’t want the CCPD to have on file again.

“Snart will deal with it if he wants you to have a job,” David snapped eventually, blood pressure too high. He was on his way to meet one of the most notorious criminals his city had ever produced and he wasn’t even going to arrest him. He was being sorely cheated.

Patty put away the paperwork and started asking Barry personal questions. “What’s he like? Captain Cold? Have you see the cold gun? Does it really freeze things to absolute zero?”

Barry laughed in discomfort. “I—yeah, yeah it does. It’s a mean piece of technology.”

“But you’re a scientist—I’ve read so many of your reports. It must be fascinating from that angle?”

“You read my reports? Umm… well, I kn—have met the guy who made it. Cisco Ramon, from STAR Labs? He helps out with the metahuman task force at the precinct sometimes.”

And David remembered that Barry’s true skill was deflection. Patty was dogged in her questions, Barry expert in his defusing of them, and David was just incredibly glad when he pulled into the driveway at Joe West’s house. It was a curious place for Snart to pick, but it made a helluva lot of sense from a tactical standpoint. Barry’s home—neither of them were likely to try anything while they were in there.

Barry unlocked the door, “so, welcome to my—Len! How’d you even get in here?”

David resisted the impulse in every fiber of his being to go for his gun. Leonard Snart was leaning against a wall in the living room, arms crossed and casual with a mug of coffee in one hand, parka on and cold gun holstered on his thigh.

“You think locks are an issue for me, Barry?” He sounded almost insulted, in an amused sort of way. By David’s side, Spivot looked a little too star-struck for his liking.

“Let’s get this over with, gentlemen.”

Snart pushed himself off the wall and deposited the mug on a side table while Barry moved over to him. David stayed by the entrance.

“Thanks for doing this,” Barry’s voice was soft and David, somehow, became even more tense. This room, this house, Snart here. Barry, having to thank his Soulmate for something that Barry shouldn’t...
ever have to go through in the first place.

“Not too much choice, was there?”

Barry sighed and David hated Snart for that. Then Barry turned to Spivot.

“So, uh, Officer Spivot, what’d you need us to do?”

“Where are your Marks located?”

Barry lifted up the side of his shirt, and huh. There it was. David couldn’t help but look, curious despite himself. It was big, bigger than most, probably six inches in diameter, a circle surrounding an intersection of jagged lines with smaller lines coming off them too, almost like an octagon someone got fancy with. It sort of reminded him of a spider web.

“Oh wow,” Patty stepped closer and knelt down to examine it. With Snart standing next to Barry, that put her much closer to that gun of his than any sane human would want to be. “It’s so intricate, and large. Have you read any of the Soul Signs literature on—”

“Yeah, we’re Vitalis.”

David didn’t miss that Snart arched an eyebrow at Barry, but Patty was engrossed. “Of course, that makes sense. It’s so close to the organs and the lines are jagged. Does that mean your bleed—”

“Are you done?” Snart snapped. David’s eyes narrowed but Barry shot him a look and Patty finally looked a little frazzled.

“Right. Um. Just one…” she pulled a magnifying glass out of her kit bag she’d brought for this. “I just have to check the microstructure. Most people don’t even know a SoulMark has a microstructure, but if you zoom in, they aren’t made of solid lines but actually each line will be formed of much much smaller lines, often similar to a crystalline structure in two dimensions. That’s why tattoos and falsifications can’t perfectly mimic their look.” She grinned and David’s headache was coming back. But then she seemed to realize the lack of reception to her enthusiasm and held up the tool to examine Barry’s Mark, getting close with latex glove-covered fingers pressing lightly against Barry’s skin and David didn’t miss that Snart’s fingers twitched closer to Barry for just a moment. Possessive streak, indeed.

“Oooh it’s heptagonal, you don’t see that too often. But it’s very real. Okay,” she leaned back and looked up at Snart. “You next?”

He pursed his lips for a moment, eyes flicked to David who tried to look put upon. It wasn’t hard. Then he shrugged out of that parka and rested it on the couch before he looked back down at Patty and slowly lifted up the side of his sweater.

“Wow,” she breathed, and for the first time, David wanted to echo her sentiment. Snart had tattooed a pattern around his Mark, so seamless it was almost impossible to tell it was a Mark except for the white color to it, and even then he had white tattoos in the mix to obscure it, other snowflakes disappearing up above the line of his shirt. “This is quite the obfuscation design. I’ve never seen one so clever, or so big. Is there more?”

To David’s extreme surprise, Snart actually looked pleased for a half second. “Much more.”

“May I—sorry, that’s inappropriate, I won’t—” she cut off talking when Snart began to pull up his shirt to his chest, revealing more of it, and it seemed like it might bridge down his arm. Even Barry looked surprised by the movement, but then, Captain Cold had always been a bit showy. Something
about Snart enjoyed a captive audience, and Spivot was unwittingly providing, jaw slack.

“That’s some ink, Snart. How much of that did you get done in prison?” David couldn’t help the comment. It was petty, maybe, but he didn’t get to arrest the man so at least he should get to piss him off a little.

“You ought to know I haven’t been to Iron Heights in fifteen years, Captain. Maybe if your detectives were a little faster…”

David’s eyes flicked to Barry then back to Snart. “Something tells me speed isn’t the issue with the man who slows things down.”

Snart snorted and David hated the feeling of being dismissed. He looked back down at Patty though, “just about finished?”

“Right! Right, sorry, I was just—it’s remarkable, hah, and it’s covering your Mark, sorry.”

Snart’s face actually softened into amusement again and Barry dropped his head back to quietly whisper, “please don’t encourage the puns.”

David could only imagine. But Patty had her magnifying glass out and then was done, stepping back and letting Snart pull his shirt back down.

“Anything else?” the man asked, looking at Barry, who looked at David, who looked at Patty.

“Oh! Um. Paperwork, and signatures? And, ah…” apparently asking Captain Cold to basically strip was just another day for Patty Spivot, but asking him to fill out a form was impossible. “Barry wouldn’t tell me your birthday. Or age. Or, well I could guess your gender, though if you identify differently—and we normally take finger prints to verify—”

“Not happening.”

“Errrr…” she looked at David for support. He sighed.

“Fill out her forms and we’ll leave the finger prints. Your birthday isn’t a state secret, Snart.”

He tilted his head to the side in that cocky, acknowledging way he had and took the forms from Patty, strolling to the couch like he owned the place and sitting down, unholstering the gun and putting it on the coffee table while he completed the forms, still but for eyes his scanning the pages. Barry wrinkled his nose in distaste, staring at the gun. David could only imagine.

But he was satisfied Snart wasn’t about to hurt Patty and this was above board, so he turned to Barry. “Mr. Allen, a word?” He nodded at the door. Barry, who’d been standing there with one hand at his mouth, worrying his thumbnail in his teeth, the other hand cupping his elbow—so many easy tells of his anxiety—looked startled, then nodded.

He touched Snart on the shoulder before following David out to the driveway.

“You okay, Barry?”

The other blew out a long, heavy sigh. “Honestly, Captain? This is not how I planned to spend my day, but… it beats being fired?” He said it with a smile, clapping his hands together, a sense of flowing energy about him now that he was outside.

“I have to say, it floored me—you and him.”
“Ah, yeah,” he scratched the back of his head, kinetic, always moving. “Surprised me too. And everyone else I know. But… it’s good to have a little faith.”

“How long has Joe known?”

“Just over a month… but zero days, if he’s not supposed to know.”

David sighed. Joe had an unfortunate habit of covering for Barry, but he could understand, in this case. “It’s off the record…” he paused, picking his words. “He treat you okay? Snart, I mean.”

Barry looked surprised, and a little vulnerable at the question. “He does. He’s… I know what he’s done, I know who he is, I’m not—I know. But he’s also not who everyone thinks he is. He’s good. There’s a lot of good in him, deep down it seems sometimes, but it’s real. And I believed in that before we Bonded.”

Allen was both very good and very bad at hiding things. It almost made David cringe sometimes just how bad, and yet somehow he managed to get away with massive secrets. Plain sight. But a wake up call might help remind him to choose his words more carefully. “So you knew him before you Bonded?”

The deer-in-the-headlights look was almost too much. David had seen Barry’s ‘oh shit’ face enough times though not to bother relishing in it, so he just ploughed on.

“Is that why you erased his records all those months ago? Or did you actually Bond before June?”

Barry’s face froze, as expected. “I—wh—you uh, you said it yourself, the Flash did that.”

David just stared at him, seeing the alarm grow on his face, letting him stew before he took pity. “You’re right. It was the Flash. Though I’ve always suspected someone helped him hack into our systems.”

He could almost see Barry sweat. “I Bonded with Leonard in June, Captain, and I didn’t know him before that. I just… processed evidence on his cases, saw his fight with Flash, and thought… there might be more to him. But I don’t know anything about the Flash erasing his records.”

David had to hand it to him, he was a better liar than he used to be, at least. “Had to check.”

“Of course, sir.”

He wondered if there was a way he could ask Allen to stop slipping so much extra information into his reports, information it would be impossible for anyone who wasn’t at the scene to know, but he doubted it. After all, plausible deniability was very important to David.

“Relax, Allen. You’re not on trial.”

Barry sagged a little, nodded and dragged a hand through his hair, collecting himself. It was alarming, how vulnerable he could be as Barry Allen, and how indestructible he seemed as the Flash, how fearless and reckless he seemed in that red suit.

“How about, the records—I’m sure the Flash had a good reason. There’s more to Leonard than just…” he waved, vaguely. “I’m sure there was more to it. Lives to save or something.”

David nodded. He’d always hoped there was some bigger purpose to it. Knowing both sides of the coin that was Allen meant he was more likely to give either the benefit of the doubt, which could be a slippery slope but… at the end of the day, he actually did trust Barry. Even after all this.
“I’m sure it was something like that. Now, if that’s everything, go tell Patty to hurry up, it’s getting close to lunch time and I had half a green swamp water mix for breakfast.”

He moved to the car and Barry moved back to the house. Neither said thank you, for the implicit trust, for not trying to put Leonard Snart in jail and for not making this any harder than it had to be. And as he sat down and let himself relax by a fraction, David realized with a sinking feeling that he’d pretty much just lost all hope of ever seeing Captain Cold brought to justice. It was bitter, but well, at least the Flash would keep him in line.

Chapter End Notes

AHAHAHAHHAAHAAHAAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA DID ANYONE CATCH ANY OF THE FORESHADOWING?! :D:D:D:D:D I tried to be SUPER sneaky, but I made sure to mention a woman taking pictures in the café where Len and Barry met before he found out about the inheritance, and then the couple taking pictures were there for Barry and Len’s stroll. So it was there, if you know my fondness for Chekhov's Gun, you might've been suspicious, but honestly I suspected it would fly under the radar, and that was the point – the characters themselves didn’t see anything out of the ordinary, not really, so the audience shouldn't either.

For the record, this is what Eiling was talking about when he threatened Barry about making his life miserable. But that'll come up next chapter and you’ll start to see that I have a plan for how this plays out.

And if nothing else, I hope I've made some of you worried about what *other* foreshadowing I've been sneaking in, and the different *ways* in which I’ve slipped it in. Because oh, some of it is there, and once this fic is over, if you ever reread and catch it, I can only imagine some of you will stop, stare at the screen, and just steeple your fingers and shake your head in bitterness. :D That's my sincerest hope about parts of this fic, to be 100% honest. I grin whenever I go back to check details of some part and accidentally come across the foreshadowing I snuck in. This is how I get my kicks, sorry folks.

For the record, it’s also a personal headcanon that David Singh *must* know that Barry is the Flash, all things considered. So I really wanted to slide that in too 😊 And I wanted to have Barry and Leonard being found out in this fic, at Barry's job. Because now, if nothing else, it’s not hanging over them. It’s shitty for now, but it’s out in the open, and I hate the idea that they would have to lie forever about their Bond to everyone forever, that they might have to always worry about being seen in public together. Barry has enough secrets in his life, enough on his plate, so even though there’s a new type of tension (you’re bonded to a criminal?!), he at least gets to be himself about this, and I (and they) value that authenticity. Chronically suppressing emotions (i.e., hiding emotional reactions), and hell even incidental suppression, is really not great for a person – for their blood pressure, social functioning, emotional well being, coping, long term relationships, and felt authenticity. I’ve read the research on this one, a whole lot of it actually, and I just like to find work-arounds to lower how much lying they have to do...
ps - shout out to @daughterofofscotland who actually did guess who's PoV this was going to be on tumblr, but I'm like 85% sure she intended the guess as a joke :P

pps - David is super fun to write and I love him. Here, he pays so much attention to body language, wraps his head around things in ways I like to portray, spends half his time annoyed at other people, and doesn't get paid near enough to put up with the shistorm that is Central City.

ppps - I actually have like a chronology (in weeks) of this fic written, and given that their IC was in June, that's like a month after Len betrayed Barry at Ferris Air. Not sure if that helps put in context some of the emotions at the start of the fic, but just so you know.
Glancing

Chapter Summary

This Too Shall Pass by OK Go and Stressed Out by Twenty One Pilots

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barry had managed not to panic, and as far as it went, he was pretty proud of himself for that. He made it all the way back to the precinct and into his lab before his hands started to shake and he had to sit down and process what had just happened.

It was out. The Captain and Patty Spivot would keep it under wraps until she filed the paperwork, but that would go through by the end of the day most likely, and whatever person filed it, whoever looked it up—because people in IA or the requisition office had to know what forms had been requested, if not the details yet—the rumor mill was probably already going, even if no one else would know Barry was Bonded to Len until… probably until 4pm today or however long it took to get it looked over and approved.

His hands were still shaking and he took a deep breath. He could run back in time. He'd run into a black hole. He'd faced down a telepathic gorilla and survived. If he could do all that, then he could do this. It was just his day job, and he wasn’t even fired. It was just—

He heard footsteps. He just wanted a private moment to break down in peace.

“Barr?” Joe was in the doorway, “what the hell was—are you okay?”

Barry nodded, swallowed, shook his head. “He knows, Joe,” he managed to choke out.

“That you’re the Flash?” Joe’s voice was hissed and quiet and he cast a glance over his shoulder just in case.

“That you’re the Flash?” Joe’s voice was hissed and quiet and he cast a glance over his shoulder just in case.

“No—that—he knows about Len.”

Joe’s eyebrows shot up and he stilled, “oh. Well that ain’t good.”

Barry sniffed, almost laughing despite himself. “You don’t say.”

“How did it happen?”

Barry calmed down enough to explain the photos, voice darkening, and how he was sure it was Eiling who took them and made sure they found their way to Singh’s desk.

“Eiling? Why—‘cause you’re helping track down Mardon?”

Barry took a second to even process that. “Mardon? No, this is about the lawsuit—the research. He told me he’d ruin my life if I didn’t give it up and I guess this is what he meant.”
“Why would he wanna’ expose your Bond to Snart?”

Barry ran his hands through his hair. He could feel Len in the bleed, knew he was all sorts of pissed, had been since Barry had phoned him that morning, no matter how cool and calm he’d played it at Joe’s house. But he couldn’t do anything about that right now. “I don’t know. I think… maybe… he thought I would get fired? If I didn’t come clean? Or maybe he didn’t know we were Bonded?”

Joe sighed and ran a hand over his mouth, crossed his arms and leaned against a desk. “So what happened? Where did you go?”

Barry finished explaining, to Joe’s ever-increasing surprise and alarm (“my house?!”) but he was nodding by the end, looking sympathetic. “Captain’s gonna’ have my head over this.”

Barry winced, “he didn’t seem surprised you knew.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure he wasn’t. I’ll have to find some way to make it up to him. In the meantime, how’re you doing?”

Barry shrugged, looking at his hands. They weren’t shaking anymore. “Everyone’s gonna’ know.”

“Okay. So they know.”

“What am I gonna’ do?”

“Work at STAR Labs?”

“Wh—I’m not fired!”

“I’m joking, Barr. Not very funny, I know, but look—that sucks, and it sucks big time. But you’re gonna’ be alright.”

Barry dropped his head into his hands, gripping his hair. “How do you know that? Everything I do will be under scrutiny now, everyone will stare at me. I get enough weird looks because of my dad and the Wells thing and now they know my Soulmate is Captain Cold.”

Joe came and sat beside him, one hand on his back. “Eventually, it’ll be yesterday’s news. And in the meantime? You muscle through it. I’m not saying it’ll be easy. But you hold your head high. Snar—Leonard is important to you. You don’t have to talk about him or flaunt that at work, but now you don’t have to hide that part of you.”

He nodded, tense, chewing on the end of his thumb. “This can’t sit well for him either—I’m sure it’s just a matter of time before people in his circles hear about this.” And wouldn’t that be a mess. Barry was pretty sure being a Soulmate to a cop was about the worst treason possible to some circles of organized crime.

“One step at a time, Barr.”

He nodded, reminded himself to buck up. One step at a time.

**********

He made it until the end of the day without anyone asking (except Eddie, from whom he got a tight
hug and promises of support), even if he got a weird look or two, and he flashed to Len’s house as soon as he was done with his final report of the day. Len wasn’t home. Of course he wasn’t home, he was still dealing with Mardon crap. Barry felt like shit, flashed home, and called him.

“Barry.”

“Hey…”

It was awkward.

“I’m sorry—”

“Not your fault.”

“I shouldn’t have antagonized Eiling.”

“What’s done is done, and it can’t be on you that he tried to get you fired.”

“Still I…”

“It’s fine, Barry. I’m pissed at him, not you.”

He nodded, inside his room. “Any luck with Mardon?”

“Not yet.”

“Joe is meeting with the meta taskforce right now, so he might have some information about Bivolo or Mardon tonight.”

“Noted. I’ve got some time now but I’m meeting up with the Rogues later tonight to go over things.”

“Do… you want to come over?”

“Over… your house?”

“Joe should be back in about two hours and if he has something to tell you about then you might as well find out before you go to your… meeting, if the timing works out.” He wondered if it was weird, but he also couldn’t help but remember the other night, wanting Len to be able to come here, to fit into his life. “If you don’t want to, it’s no big deal.”

“I’ll be by shortly.”

**********

Barry called Joe to give him a heads up to expect Len in his house when he arrived home. Maybe it wasn’t fair to push it, not when Joe must be feeling the strain at work too from this, but Barry felt like he needed to see Len, and need for Len to be welcome in his life, to know that he was.

The other man knocked on the door and Barry was almost surprised that he’d bothered to knock at all before letting him in. No parka this time, though the cold gun was still strapped to his thigh.

“I’ll likely be heading straight to the Rogues from here.” Len offered when Barry stared at the gun
for a little too long.

“It’s fine, but maybe drop it up in my room? We’re trying to play nice with Joe, remember?”

Len nodded and followed up him up the stairs.

“And how long until he’s back, exactly?”

“I dunno’, over an hour still, his meetings normally last a while.”

Len nodded, glancing around the room, unholstering the gun while he did, “and you told him we used his house this afternoon?”

Barry nodded, “I think he’s more worried about the Captain breathing down his neck than he is about your theatrics.”

Len gave him an unamused pout before dropping the gun and his jacket on the bed. “Don’t suppose we have time to break this in,” he arched an eyebrow at the bed and Barry almost laughed.

“Time? Probably. But I don’t want to be the one caught red-handed having sex in Joe’s house on the off chance he’s home early.”

“Figures.”

Barry rolled his eyes and dragged Len back toward the stairs, “didn’t figure you’d be in the mood, what with everything going on.”

“She touched you.”

It took a second for that to register. He could feel something inside Len, familiar but hard to place. “Huh—who?”

“That woman—Spivot.”

Jealous. Len was jealous, that’s what it was—but of Patty Spivot?

“Today was the first time I met her, why on earth would you be jealous of her?”

Len stalled on the landing of the stairs and put his hand on Barry’s waist and oh—

“She touched your Mark,” Len smoothed out his fingers, “no one should ever touch it but me.”

Barry barked out an abrupt laugh. “That’s what this is about? How old fashioned are you?”

Len pouted again and it was almost too good, Barry couldn’t conceal his grin. Because that’s what it was—Len had an issue with ‘glancing,’ the old word for showing people your Mark or letting anyone but your Soulmate touch it. It used to be taboo, and he was pretty sure it was illegal in medieval times even, but no one Barry’s age really cared about that stuff. No wonder Len had an obfuscation design if he still thought like that, if it was enough to make him jealous.

“I’m not old fashioned.”

“Sure you’re not.” Barry moved down the last few steps, toward the kitchen. “But you should know, she’s not the only person who’s ever touched my Mark.” He couldn’t even count how many other people had touched it at this point, really. Nowhere near as many as had touched Iris’s Mark either, since she liked to wear shirts cut to show her collarbone to display it.
“I’m not,” Len complained, but came up close and sudden behind Barry and wrapped his arms around him, possessive and warm at his back. “I just don’t like the thought of anyone else touching it. Or touching you. No one but me.” Len punctuated that particular statement with a kiss to Barry’s neck, one that made him shiver.

“Right, got it,” his voice was a little strained. “No one but you.”

“Mm.”

Len pulled back and Barry turned in time to see his pleased smirk. He wished his pants weren’t a little tight and contemplated if it could count as ‘living on the edge’ if he kissed Len in full view of the door to the house, but hell, he had superspeed after all. So he leaned in and stole a kiss as payback, making it count, and then smirked himself and turned to the kitchen.

“Want a beer?”

He could feel the warm tension inside Len that gave way to amusement. “Offering me West’s beer, Barry? That wise?”

“I’ll just tell him you stole it.”

Len snorted but accepted the bottle and they both made their way back to the living room with beers in hand.

“Joe just texted me,” Barry piped up from the couch after checking his phone, while Len glanced around the photo frames with care, taking in each detail. “Should be home soon.”

“He say if he learned anything about Bivolo?”

“Not yet, he’s driving now.”

Before long, Len moved on to skimming over Joe’s collection of music, mostly records but a few CDs. Cisco was still trying to convince him to go digital, to no avail.

“Feel free to put something on.”

“I’ll pass.”

Barry shrugged and sat down. He could feel Len’s curiosity, fascination, and something pleasant he couldn’t name, while the man glanced over the records, pulling out and examining specific ones with almost a smile before putting them back.

Something a little strained replaced the feeling though, and Barry had to ask. “Not a fan of that one?”

“They’re one of my favorites.”

“Then why the…” Barry waved vaguely, feet up on the coffee table.

“Don’t suppose any of these are yours?”

Oh. “No… all Joe’s.”

“Never expected to have too much in common with him.” Len put back the record. “I forget, sometimes,” he drawled, coming to sit next to Barry on the couch, “that you and I are so apart in age.”
“Me too… you’re almost Joe’s age.”

Len winced and Barry did too. They were quiet for a second, but Barry continued.

“It’s not a problem though… or, it hasn’t been. So I don’t see why we’d make it one?”

Len glanced at him, something searching about his expression, but just as he opened his mouth to say something, they heard the sound of a key in the lock. Joe was home. They were both standing before he came in. He took in both of them and Barry hoped his expression didn’t look too much like a child caught with his hands in the cookie jar.

“Snart.”

“Detective.”

Joe nodded slowly, as if fully coming to terms with Len in his house. He hung up his jacket. “I hear you made yourself cozy in my house earlier today.”

Len didn’t look—or feel—apologetic. He actually looked amused. “Needs must, at times.”

“Uh huh.” Joe came into the room, “have a seat, I suppose.”

They sat. Barry tried not to feel too excited that everything was going cordial so far. Joe took the chair.

“Shall we cut straight to business?” That was Len.

“Mhmm. S’pose you want to know about the taskforce meeting?”

“If you’d be so kind.”

With the tension and the drawl, Barry felt less like he was sitting between Joe and Len and more like he was between ‘Detective West’ and ‘Captain Cold’ and the dissonance was unnerving, but it was still better than he’d hoped.

Joe leaned back and Barry could tell he was reluctant, but… “I put out some lines. No word on where any of their facilities are, that’s not the type of thing they’ll tell me, and I’m not too sure all of them know. But I can confirm that they have three metahumans on their payroll right now—Kane, this guy Fells, ‘n Bivolo, but they’ve got their eye on a few more.”

“You’re sure about Bivolo.”

It wasn’t a question but still, Joe’s look was unimpressed. “They all have aliases, but Bivolo ain’t that creative—they’re calling him The Painter.”

Len snorted, and even Barry thought Caitlin’s name for him had been better than that.

Joe went on and described a bit about the military’s movements, the abilities of the other meta so far as he knew—the Fells guy who could create mini and localized earthquakes. That would be fun… no wonder the military had their eye on him.

“Oh nothing about Mardon, then?”

“Pretty sure Bivolo taking him was ‘Operation Rainy Day’ but I don’t have much more’n that on him. They’re looking to take and convert any metahumans who they can get their hands on, but we already knew that.”
Len asked about why they took Mardon, if there was any connection to Barry being the Flash, but Joe just shook his head.

“They want to round up known metas but they’re looking for powerhouses right now. Any other Rogues you got that can play ball—”

“No one else who’s looking to make any waves.”

Joe nodded, “that’ll be for the best, Snart. Might want to keep it that way ‘n let your meta-criminal team fizzle for a while.”

Len didn’t seem too impressed. “Thanks but no thanks. I do plan to get Mardon back, and recruit anyone else who’ll play by my rules.”

“Is there anything else, Joe?” Barry cut in before they could go for each other’s throats. “Maybe about their plans for metas once they have them?”

Joe glanced at him and Barry could see a little of the frost leech off him. “All I heard was some talk about a doctor.”

“Caitlin?”

“Hard to say. One of the guys, little friendlier, let leak they have some big thing coming up but they’re waiting for something. Thinks it’ll blow us all away if it works.”

“Whatever they need her research for, I bet that’s it.”

Len glanced at him then back at Joe. “Well. This has been informative, and I appreciate it, West. But I have places to be.”

“Uh huh. One more thing, Snart.”

Barry tensed, but Len glanced at him. “Barry, do me a favor and grab my jacket from upstairs?”

Barry swore internally but stood to comply. As soon as he was out of sight he sped to grab the leather jacket and gun—it was heavier than he’d ever thought with the way Len waved it around—and was back at the head of the stairs to eavesdrop a moment later.

“I owe you an… apology, Snart.”

Barry could feel Len’s surprise in the bleed, but his own was probably just as strong.

“Don’t mention it.”

“You came through for Barry today. Today and before, ‘n I… I may not be comfortable with any of this, but I recognize you care about my son.”

“I do.”

Barry felt warm, and after another pause, decided he’d stalled long enough, coming down the stairs with plenty of noise, trying not to smile too wide. He saw Len out the door and smiled after. He could tell the other man felt… good. At least for a little while, he was glad that in all of this, Len could feel good for a little while.

“You’re not subtle, son.” Joe interrupted his thought process. “Next time you wanna’ eavesdrop, at least speed around the house and do it from the window or something.”
He laughed, refusing to be deflated. “Fine, fine. But—thank you.”

“Uh huh. I told you I’d make an effort.”

“You know I appreciate it.” He sighed then, expression turning dark. “But now that he’s gone… I should go track down Eiling. I’m sure he’s pretty pleased with himself over what happened today.” He definitely had a few choice words for the General.

**********

Eiling wasn’t hard to find, despite the fact that Mardon was impossible to. He was at the outpost Barry had found before, outside the city. He also didn’t seem surprised when the Flash showed up at the door to the trailer that was his office there.

“Flash. I was expecting you hours ago. That reputation for being late is earned then, I take it?”

Barry had no patience for Eiling right now. Not with everything, not with Len’s own frustrations once again starting to boil away again inside of him, his own anger manifesting as he thought about the situation he was in. Eiling was next to a chart showing formations for the drills his soldiers were running and Barry slammed the picture of him and Len holding hands against it, next to Eiling’s head. Singh had let him keep the photos, at least.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” he snarled to Eiling’s impassive face. He received a derisive snort for his efforts and Eiling brushed his arm away from the boards. Barry bristled. “Do you have any idea—”

“How lucky you are? Immensely. It never ceases to amaze me, Allen. Perhaps that’s a meta-ability in and of itself. I was aiming to get you fired. Even I wasn’t outlandish enough to think a criminal like Snart was your Soulmate, son.”

Barry took a second to process that. It only made him angrier. “Outlandish?!”

“The hero of Central City, a man who’s tried to kill him and kidnapped your mayor. I assumed it was,” Eiling waved a hand, moving to stand by his desk, “an error in your judgment, some attempt to ‘save’ the man. I must say though, this does make things a little more interesting. I suppose that’s why you’ve been running around the state? Your lightning trail hasn’t gone unnoticed. You helping his little band of thieves find their friend?”

“You disgust me.”

“Criminals like your Soulmate and Mardon disgust me.”

“Mardon is a person and you just kidnapped him to use him—”

“Mardon is a murderer and a liability running free. He deserves to be behind bars. I don’t expect someone as soft as you to understand, Allen—not with your upbringing and your Soulmate. But I’m giving him more than what he deserves—an opportunity.”

“Opportunity?” he hissed.

“To be an asset to his country. I’m giving Mark Mardon purpose.”
Barry almost gagged. “Is that what you did with Kane? You gave her ‘purpose’? Because from this side of the fence, it looks a lot like brainwashing.”

“I gave Kane—just like Bette, like Mardon, Roy Bivolo, and the rest of them—I’m giving them all what they were made for, Flash. You know, you ought to understand—you use your ability to serve the people of this country. I’m inviting these metahuamns to use their genetic imperative to fight for something greater than themselves.”

Something tickled in his head, but he wasn’t sure what. “To fight for you, you mean. That’s what you want, isn’t it? You’re abducting them for what—to be a metahuman army for you? ‘Assets’? But you wouldn’t need Caitlin’s research just to brainwash people.”

Eiling’s eyes went harder, something in his jaw went tense.

“Oh does that make you sweat? Yeah you see,” Barry couldn’t help but feel a little smug, moving a step closer with a little laugh, “we figured that one out. Whatever you’re trying to subpoena, we know it’s in her research, and we will find whatever it is.”

The court had ruled on it that afternoon, his lawyer had left a voicemail. Only ongoing military contracts had been shared with the military as preliminary to the actual case, and none of them had been biomedical projects Caitlin had been part of. Eiling probably knew that verdict was coming; no wonder he’d decided to ruin Barry’s life that particular day.

“So why won’t you just tell me what is it that you’re after, Eiling? Maybe then we can skip a lot of this back and forth.”

That got the man’s interest. “If you’re offering to give it to me, Allen, I just might tell you.”

“So it is mind control?”

Eiling actually snorted. “In case you’ve forgotten, we already have Grodd in custody.”

“Then what?”

“Ponder something with me for a moment, Allen.” He visibly relaxed his stance, maybe trying to aim at something neutral. “You don’t like that I’ve… taken Mr. Mardon into custody. That I’m attempting to gear his understanding toward a higher purpose. So I ask you… what if we didn’t have to? What if we already had metahumans who were willing to fight the good fight?”

Barry rocked on his feet, trying to piece things together. “You mean… people who already agree with the military? As metahumans?”

“Soldiers as metahumans.”

That thought tickling at the back of his brain started to scratch in earnest. His heart started to pick up it’s pace.

“No need to scrape the dregs of society for people with powers if the brave men and women already willing to fight could gain those powers and—”

“No.”

“No?”

“No you can’t—no!” Barry stepped back, horror leaking into his voice, not quite sure why yet,
thoughts catching up to him as they tumbled out of his mouth. “You said—genetic imperative, about Mardon’s higher purpose. Is that what you—you want to what? *Create* metahumans?! Are you insane? That would—you would—you’d make a black hole if you tried to—” The General’s eyes were getting wide. Barry was spiraling. He needed to get a grip. He didn’t need to know about black holes or any of the rest of it. “Look, even if you find a way around the physics, around the need for dark matter, or around the damage it cost when the particle accelerator blew, the number of people who died, who suffered—even if you could find a way *without* all that—what do you think it would do to society?”

“Don’t you see your powers as a gift, Allen?”

“I’m one of the lucky ones! D’you know how many people have suffered because of what the accelerator did to them? How many… and even if you managed to find volunteers, only people who wanted powers to fight for the military, how many would that be? How long until people, bad people, around the world were pushing for powers—”

“Which is why the American government has to stay one step ahead—”

“Which is why no one should have technology that can do that!”

“The future *is* coming—”

“Well not if I have any say in it!”

“I take it that you’re against me.”

“You’re damn right I’m against you.”

The room felt electric. Barry was breathing heavy in his anger. Eiling was like a stone wall, hardened rough lines in his face, deep groves as he glared at Barry.

“You will regret that. Just think about your life, and think about what you know I can do. What are you willing to lose?”

“To save people from what you want to create? I don’t care. I won’t let you do this.”

“Then I think we’re done here.”

Barry didn’t look back.

**********

He stopped by the lab to fill Caitlin and Cisco in, mollified slightly when they were appropriately appalled. He was glad it wasn’t just him overreacting, that they agreed there was no way that any person should be able to make metahumans at will. He still couldn’t figure out what Eiling needed Caitlin’s research for, but she knew, and she looked ill at the thought.

“The meta-gene,” she whispered, falling into a chair.

“The what?”

Cisco glanced between them and filled in the gaps, “the metahuman gene. Wells first posited it
existed—Wellsobard, I mean. You know. He suggested that some people have a gene that reacts to the dark matter and some don’t. The people who do turn into metahumans, the others either don’t feel the effects or…”

Die. Right. Barry pulled a hand over his face. “This gene… have you found it?”

Caitlin looked at him, a little wide-eyed. “Y-yes.”

Shit.

“Dr. Wells… Eobard, he had a lot of ideas about it. I thought it was just a passion, but now I understand he had knowledge from the future so of course he knew, but… I’ve isolated a few genes, actually, that work together. In conjunction I call them the meta-gene. I haven’t published anything on it, and didn’t plan to, not for many years.”

Barry nodded. “Private research?”

“Yes. Private reports of mine and personal notebooks of Dr. Wells, that’s all there is on it.”

“And it’s… you know it works?”

She nodded. “It hasn’t been wrong yet, the multiple gene interaction we uncovered. It’s predictive power for the metas I’ve tested so far is almost exact, which in retrospect is way too high for exploratory research… I just thought we were lucky, at the time.”

She glanced at her hands, but it wasn’t her fault. It was good, really, except that it was… not good. He sighed. “Okay. Well, so long as Eiling can’t get his hands on that…”

They all nodded. Barry changed focus, before he forgot. “Cisco, any luck tracking Mardon with the satellite?”

“None yet, man. You’ll be the first to know.”

Barry nodded and geared himself toward home. He couldn’t quite shake the feeling of being hunted. He didn’t know what he was missing, but he was sure it was something.

**********

The next day, he was late for the first time in at least a little while. He couldn’t help but drag his feet on the way there, actually stopping and standing in line at Jitters for his coffee, anything to delay the inevitable. And it was about what he expected, maybe even not quite so bad, even if it massively sucked.

There were a lot of uncomfortable stares as soon as he walked in, a few comments in stage-whispers between cops that made him bite his tongue not to snap back in the elevator up—finally in use again after the hole Grodd had punched through the floor next to it—and more than one glare and sneer in the hall outside the bullpen. He mostly ignored all of that though, headed straight up the stairs, and heard the Captain behind him telling the guys coming out the elevator to “clear up the rumor mill” because “Allen’s business is his own.” As if that would help. He was elbowed deliberately at least once in the hall to his lab.
His refuge was invaded in under ten minutes. Great.

“Well?” one of the other CSIs poked her head in, two others following behind. Barry knew them all, worked with them and dropped by their lab often enough to use equipment he didn’t have in his own (which was only ‘his’ because no one else wanted to work in a leaky retrofitted storage room where lightning had struck and almost killed someone, especially not with the faint mildew feel and the chemical after-scent that had existed ever since the lightning strike).

“Well what?” Barry snapped, just not in the mood.

“Did you actually take the Captain and some woman from IA to go meet with Snart yesterday?”

Might as well admit it. “Yeah, yeah I did.”

“And?”

“And what, Lacy?”

“And is he really your Soulmate, Allen?”

And so it went, all day. When he went down to drop off a report to a detective, he could feel the back of his neck burning, as though every eye in the bullpen had x-ray vision to him; he felt it all the way back up the stairs to his lab. He went down to the break room for a cup of coffee, attempting to show he wasn’t gonna’ hide in his lab because of this.

“Is it true?”

He glanced over at voice and it was of the detectives, Sargent Ramirez. Barry couldn’t help but remember his partner, Morillo, dead because of Grodd.

“Yeah.” He said, voice quiet, pouring himself some coffee. Others were staring.

“You and Leonard Snart?”

He sighed and turned to face him, coffee in hand. “Yes.”

“But how?”

He aimed for disaffected, shrugging. “Ask fate. Neither of us really picked this.”

“Do you and him…”

“I doubt Barry wants to talk about this,” Eddie cut in, standing in one of the two doorways to the room. “It’s his private life, so why don’t we leave it.”

Everyone else was looking at Eddie now and Barry took his chance to escape the break room, nodding his thanks to Eddie before sneaking out the other door, sipping his coffee, ignoring the glances, the words that followed him when they thought he was out of earshot, making his ears burn. Cops could be crass.

He just wanted to get off work and go see Len, wanted to finish some of the backlogged evidence he had to process and just get out of there. He wanted to curl up in Len’s bed and kiss him and pretend the past day hadn’t happened, that hadn’t outted his secret (or one of them) to his entire precinct.

Just four hours left of his shift. And then three more days of work to go before the weekend.
Chapter End Notes

Okay, so originally this chapter and the next one were going to be combined, but it got too long and I had to decide “do I cut most of work stuff (and some of the stuff in the next chapter) to make it all fit in a longish chapter, or do I just split it into two?” And I just decided “fuck it” and kept it all. So some of this stuff isn’t really important to the overall plot, but I always get frustrated when shows move too fast for us to really see the emotional fallout of things, and I thought it would be good to actually include that type of thing in my writing and pepper it around the actual ‘plot’ of the chapter.

Also, I don’t know if anyone guessed Eiling’s motive. I was hesitant to reveal it here and not in some long villain monologue later on, but ah, there’s more to come, and a thing or two up his sleeve still. Some of you, especially if you know the comics, might know what I’m planning, as it starts to become a little transparent here. I mean, I also feel a little unoriginal in that this isn’t really ‘groundbreaking’ as a villain motive, but the dude is a General and I had to give him a motive and a scheme that fits with who he is and what his concerns would be. Mind control is still something he’s interested in, but yeah, there was/is more to it, we now see.

Anyway, Barry’s life is a little tumultuous right now. Next chapter has some feels and angst, but if this hasn’t been too long and winding for you already, the chapter after that is Hartley’s PoV, and then after that… buckle in 😊

PS - I only proofread this once and I made some changes during that read-over so I hope I didn't screw anything up but if any words/grammar/etc seems out of place, don't hesitate to let me know!
Len could feel frustration coming off Barry all day while he was at work. Len echoed the sentiment wholeheartedly, if for a different reason.

Freddie Santini had come around for a quiet visit, came to talk to him in private. Len had waved off Lisa and Shawna, each of whom had been around and looked ready for a fight, both with a hairpin trigger right now. It was a good thing Mick wasn’t there that day, but also poignant—Pam was on around-the-clock watch, not waking up and with a DNR. Mick was counting the hours, and Len kept falling into counting seconds whenever his own brain was left idle for too many minutes at a time. Pam, Mark, Bivolo, the military, this shit with Barry’s work, the mess of dealing with his own little territory, all causing him a headache.

But Freddie Santini? Len could handle Freddie Santini, and he appreciated a distraction. So he had his sister and Shawna clear out and sat down for a meal with the other man, the place to themselves.

“Not like you to drop by for private chit chats, Federico.”

“Pulling out the full names, huh? You know, there’s a reason you don’t have a lotta’ friends.”

Len cocked his head to the side, “and here I thought it was my charming personality.”

“Oh that helps too, Snart.” He sucked back some of his whiskey and then eyed Len. “S’ttrue, then?”

“Do tell?”

“’Bout the badge?”

Fuck. Len wondered who the Santinis had in the CCPD, but there were probably several, and honestly, it didn’t matter. The damage was done. “What’s it to you?”

“Nothin’. Never gave a shit who you made time with. Boss might care though.”
Len arched an eyebrow. “You haven’t told Frank yet?” Was he offering to sell Len his silence?

“He’ll hear it before the day’s out.”

Len leaned forward on his elbows, hands clasped and eyes hard. “Why do I get the feeling you didn’t just happen to drop by for a companionable head’s up?”

Freddie looked at him hard enough that Len almost wondered if that was what he was there for, but they didn’t have much history together, and all of it felt like a million years ago anyway.

“You know, I like you, Lenny. You gotta’ lotta’ freaks as friends but you know how to do business, even if you did cap Vincent, God rest his soul. Your little show at the warehouse? That pissed off the boss. He gets it, you know that—it’s business. He offered you an olive branch, you declined, he moved in hostile, you got hostile back. Mr. Santini respects that, pissed or not.”

“Glad we’re all on the same page,” Len said, not without some sarcasm.

“If it was just that, I think he might actually back off, leave you’n your pals with your own little slice of…”—he looked around derisively at the bar—“heaven.”

“But the badge thing throws a wrench in it?”

“That’s one way t’ put it. Your freakshows know?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

Freddie just nodded and turned his glass. “Sure, sure. Always played your cards close to your chest, huh, Snart? Think they’re gonna’ stick around when they hear boss is doing more than just killing time with a pretty little fuckboy from the CCPD, getting’ cozy enough to meet with the captain?”

Len clenched down hard on the urge to shoot Freddie, but he couldn’t stop the snarl that escaped, “call my Soulmate that again and you’ll have a face full of lead.” It wasn’t an idle threat.

“S’your funeral, Snart. Your pals, Mr. Santini, Mr. Darbynian—no one takes kindly to a major player with a Soulmate as a straight-shooter, ‘n I know your boy’s no mole.”

“I can handle myself.”

Fred’s eyes narrowed, he leaned a little closer. “You know… Mr. Santini, if I put in a good word, might take kindly to taking some of this territory off your hands in exchange for a certain degree ‘o protection from the unwanted attention that’s gonna’ be coming your way. You could keep this little bar, your toys out back, but leave the rest of the operations ‘round here to—”

“Like I said—I can handle it.”

He looked almost disappointed, like he’d actually hoped his insinuation might come to something. For a moment, Len thought he was about to say something more on it, but he clearly thought better of it and shook his head. “Do whatever you gotta’ do, but watch your back, Lenny… city’s going ‘t shit these days even without this crap.”

He stood up and Len did too, following him to the exit. He limbs were stiff, stiffer than Freddie by the look of it, but kept his gait smooth anyway, his smirk in place, if not reaching his eyes.

Of course, the man had to get in a parting shot, turning back to look at Len in the doorway. “One more thing… y’pals Mardon and Bivolo? Not sayin’ nothing, but Mr. Santini is aware that no one’s seen ‘em around for a while. So if they are around, now’d be a good time to tell ‘em to take a, uh,
visible walk around the city.”

He arched an eyebrow and Len made sure to keep his face impassive. “Thanks for the tip.”

“See ya’ around, Snart.”

**********

He filled Lisa in on the details, later, stomach tensing as he thought about it all. He didn’t mention it to Shawna or, when he showed up later, Hartley.

“So do you plan to tell them, then?” Lisa asked when she brought him dinner in the more private workspace and storage area down in the basement under the warehouse, looking over a map of the country, trying to figure out if Eiling had moved Mardon out of state. He wasn’t in a mood to look at Shawna and think about his own failure to find Mark.

“Tell who, what?”

“Tell the Rogues about Barry.”

He looked at her sharply. The plate of food she was carrying mollified his gaze somewhat. “It’s none of their business.”

“But they will find out.”

“Piper already knows half of it. Mick’s met Barry.”

“Shawna won’t want to hear it from someone else, and Hartley’s smart enough that if you leave it to him, he might put two and two together about… you know.”

He did know. There was a reason he’d never told Hartley his Soulmate’s name. “Shawna has enough on her plate, which I’d rather focus on.”

“Well you might consider letting them know anyway, in case Santini’s men decide to knock down the door instead of on it, next time they show up.”

He mm’d and returned his attention to the map.

“I mean it, Lenny.”

“It’s none of their business, Sis, ‘n it doesn’t matter. Santinis aren’t really a match for me ‘n Mick ‘n your guns, not to mention Piper’s gloves. We may be short some meta-power but I’m not worried about what Frank Santini’s men can do to this place.”

“So it’s business as usual until that happens?”

“That’s the idea. I’ve got a heist planned with Hartley in two nights—”

“Two nights? You’re still doing the Sugimoto job, with everything going on?”

He glanced at her and came around the table, taking the plate of food and setting it on the edge of his desk. “Why not? Santini thinks we’re weak right now, and this is one way to let him know I’m not
concerned. Might drop him off ones of the seascapes I don’t plan to keep, just to piss him off.”

“You really plan to peel yourself away from obsessing over Mark?” She looked skeptical and he glanced at the table with maps strewn over it, different types layered over one another, looking for a pattern.

“If I get a lead on him in the next 48 hours, that takes priority. If not…”

He didn’t say what they both knew—finding Mark was going to take months unless something drastically changed. They needed to get some new contacts and information, a grapevine of trickle-down insights they were waiting for. He knew they were looking in the wrong place, somehow, but unless the metahumans were being stashed out of state, he had no idea where else to even start, every lead already shriveled.

“Whatever you say, brother.” That meant she didn’t agree in the slightest, and the slight flip she gave to her hair on her way back toward the stairs cinched the point. “I’m going to rejoin the land of living upstairs. When you get bored of your maps, you’re welcome to join us.”

**********

He never did end up spending time with the Rogues that night. He dropped by Keystone to check in with Mick at the hospital and stayed there for an hour, leaving in (almost impossibly) an even fouler mood than when he arrived. But Mick liked to be alone when he was in pain and Len wasn’t going to stick around and make it harder, so he called up Barry to let him know he was on his way home.

“How staying up till all hours with the Rogues again tonight?” Barry smiled on his way in, but looked worn and tired under it.

“No point,” Len was a little too bitter, motioning Barry to follow him into the kitchen. The other had gracefully given Len time to actually arrive home before appearing on his doorstep. “We’re ready to move the second we get a lead on Mardon’s location, but we’re coming up dry on every front.”

Barry nodded. “We’ll find him.”

Len didn’t respond, passing him a beer and heading back toward the living room, watching Barry collapse onto the couch. He stood in the wide entrance the two rooms, leaning against the wall, his own beer in hand, watching. “You seem tired.”

“Work sucks. I’ll get through it.”

Len could only imagine, and didn’t really want to. He entertained the notion of telling Barry about Frank Santini, but there was no point. It would only make him worry.

“You okay?”

“Peachy.” He took a pull from his beer, a twist to his mouth. Of course Barry would be able to feel his anxiety.

“We will find Mardon. I mean it—I’m not gonna’ let Eiling win.”

“And if we don’t find him, Barry?” He found himself growing more, not less, sour. “If the next time
we cross paths, he’s the military’s new shiny lap dog?”

Barry winced and Len realized how sharp he sounded, how angry. He took a deep breath, and then continued, more calm.

“Long day. This situation has me on edge. Between him and Shawna and… everything,” he waved vaguely, but Barry was already shrugging, leaning forward as Len finally approached the couch.

“It’s okay, you know. I get it, you don’t have to explain why you’re so tense.”

Len considered that, debating if he should correct Barry, but he knew that enough of this was on account of the Rogues. “It’s Mardon, but… Shawna, Lisa, everyone is tense. And Mick… looks like Pam will pass tonight or tomorrow.”

Barry nodded, “I’m sorry. Pam, Mick, the Rogues—they’re all like family to you.”

“Family?”

Barry smiled, a little levity in it. “Sure, a little family of criminals. You’re papa Rogue, Lisa can be mama Rogue, Mick is… crazy uncle Rogue, and Pam would be like the grandma Rogue. And the rest of them are like your little gaggle of misbehaving kids. Even Mardon.”

Len tensed, unsure why, but Barry continued aimlessly, “maybe that metaphor doesn’t work. Lisa’s gotta’ be an aunt. But then there’s no mama Rogue? I mean, maybe I could be mama Rogue but that really doesn’t fit the metaphor unless I’m a pretty absent parent so I—”

Len could barely contain the white hot swell of anger, grinding out, “did you have to turn this into a conversation about children?”

Confusion muddied up the bleed for a moment, Barry shaking his head.

“Wh—no—oh—Len that’s not what I meant. Where did you even get that? I was making a joke. Or trying to, anyway.”

“About having a family.” He snapped back, nursing what was turning into a perpetual headache. He didn’t want to fight about kids, or anything else, but he was the one on edge, being a dick and he knew it.

“About the Rogues! Jesus. Sorry. I was just trying to make you smile.” Barry eyed him and Len sipped his beer in retaliation, knowing it wasn’t Barry’s fault at all. It was Eiling and Bivolo and Frank Santini’s, Fred Santini’s too. It was his own fault for not suspecting Bivolo. It was anyone but Barry’s fault. But he felt helpless and he hated that more than almost anything, and the only thing he’d ever known what to do with it was to let that feeling suffuse in a cyclical flow until it became tight-fisted anger. Knowing the process didn’t stop it from happening.

“Just drop it.”

Barry sighed, and in the bleed he could feel some of the frustration abate, no doubt Barry making a conscious effort to relax. It just made Len feel even more like an ass. “Len, look… I understand what you’re feeling. I’ve been there. I’ve had people I care about kidnapped, I know what it’s like to worry.”

Len tried not to flinch, thinking of tying Caitlin Snow to a chair rigged with explosives, of watching Cisco Ramon clutch his injured brother.
“It’s okay that you’re on edge right now,” Barry murmured, oblivious, no doubt, of where his thoughts were. “Between work, the military, and Mardon… you don’t need to worry, though, I’d never bring up a conversation about kids during all this.”

“But you do plan to bring it up?” Sometimes, he wished he could stop himself when he was in the mood to pick a fight. Normally he had common sense.

“For real? You wanna’ do this right now?” His voice had more of an edge back into it.

Len glared into the lip of his bottle. He didn’t want to do anything, but here they were, and it was easier to fight about kids than to think about what Barry was saying, about his friends being kidnapped. He didn’t respond, and eventually Barry continued.

“Fine. Okay. We’re talking about this, great. Do I plan to bring it up? One day, yeah. I’m sort of hoping it’s not a completely closed door, but I’m not trying to force you into anything and I don’t understand why we have to do this right now.”

He set down the beer. Drinking right now would be an even worse idea than picking this fight had apparently been. He made sure to look Barry in the eye when he spoke next, voice quiet but cold. “Then close it, Barry. I have zero desire to have kids with you.”

He felt it, a twist in his gut, an uptick and tight spot in his chest, and knew Barry would feel it too. He tensed. They both did. Barry’s eyes went wide. Len tried to figure out what had just happened.

“I just felt—Len are you—do you want kids?”

“I just said—”

“But you felt—”

“Are you calling me a liar, Barry?” His voice was soft and dangerous. He was too tense. Too tight. He didn’t want children. He’d never wanted children. He hadn’t.

Until that was a lie. When had that become a lie?

“No,” Barry said slowly, apprehensively, chest too tight and Len could feel it. He’d never let himself think about kids, couldn’t risk that, couldn’t—he pushed himself forward, pushed the sudden images of a baby out of his head, of Barry laughing with little children aside.

“Then we’re clear?” His voice was ice. It had to be.

Barry’s was bitter. “That I’m not allowed to say the word ‘child’ in a ten mile radius of you? Yeah, apparently crystal clear on that one.”

“I’m not trying to be an asshole, Barry.” Another lie. He hated that Barry could tell, that they both knew he was lying.

“Honestly, Len, I just don’t get why I’m the bad guy for trying to make you smile. I’m not sitting here cracking jokes to coerce you into raising a family with me.”

“But you want that.”

It was, apparently, the final straw. “Of course I want that!” Barry half-shouted, half-stood, arms out and a little too loud with the emotions roiling up inside him, “I want a family, I want to be a father! And I was supposed to have that!”
What? “‘Supposed?’”

The second passed too long. Len zeroed his entire focus onto Barry’s hesitation, deflation. But Barry was too honest by a mile, standing now, looking down at him, looking stricken.

“I…You heard Eobard in that video—married, children, ‘firstborn,’ implying more than one?”

“And you think that means what exactly? That you and I aren’t meant to be together?”

Barry took too long to respond. “I…”

Len’s stomach dropped. Fuck.

“What?” His voice turned from ice to steel. Barry shivered.

“It’s not that we’re not meant to be. It’s that we… weren’t supposed to be.” Len didn’t follow, and Barry sat back down, ran a hand through his hair, nervousness filling the bleed between them.

“D’you remember when I explained… about Eobard coming back in time? And about me creating that black hole, the one I went back and erased?”

He nodded slowly, apprehensive. Barry exhaled and continued, “since then I’ve been… carrying it around. The question. Did I make the right choice? Should I have changed the timeline back. Should I have sa-ved her?” His voice cracked on the word, and he looked at Len with too-red eyes, swallowed and forced himself on. “I try not to think about it, about letting her die, knowing it was my fault, second guessing… I chose this life over her and I knew that it wasn’t just her. There was a whole life—a life that I was supposed to live but never will.”

It started to click, “the life that would have happened if Thawne hadn’t come back in time and killed her?”

Barry nodded, feeling a half-second of relief before it was swallowed by more misery. “I was just finally starting to push it aside when we first Bonded. That was only weeks, not even two months after all that had happened. I was trying so hard not to think about it that I didn’t even realize it then, but part of me was feeling that loss, every day. Her, my dad, that life… I couldn’t shake it, knowing that it was my fault this time. I felt so guilty about letting her die, about letting my dad stay rotting in Iron Heights, about everything that happened. But I was just shoving it away, trying to focus on the next step, on my friends and family, trying to get my life back in the direction I thought it was supposed to be heading, trying to get it back on track. And then we Bonded, and I... freaked out.”

He paused to take in a breath, to wipe his eyes, and Len tried to sort through his own feelings on that, remembering how Barry had panicked, had pulled away and pushed so hard.

“I want you to know, Len, it’s not… it was never about you, not really. I just felt… like my life was off the rails. Like I’d made the wrong choice, like I had let her down, let dad down, let them all down. And then, after everything you’d done before we Bonded, I thought…” He stared at his hands.

“You thought you needed to protect them from me.”

“And you from them.” He winced, and Len couldn’t even fathom Barry being worried about protecting him. “Like if I let myself care about you, someone would get hurt because everyone I care about gets hurt because of me.”

Len wanted to reach out and touch, feeling a deep and hollow ache in Barry. He held himself in check, didn’t want to derail what Barry was saying, and he couldn't even begin to know what to say.
“And I felt… trapped, like my hands were tied, I just… until the day we Bonded, I had this idea in my head that it was all supposed to go one way, a script. But every step I took, I felt like I was walking farther and farther from it. Bonding with you was like… proof, somehow, that I’d screwed it all up. Like it was final, and I had to really close that door for good.”

And you felt cheated, Len thought but didn’t say, leaning back. Of course Barry would’ve felt cheated—knowing he was supposed to live a life with his parents and a happy family, ending up Bonded to a man who’d tried to kill him and hurt his friends when his biggest fear was losing his loved ones. He tried to sort out where to go from that, landing on: “I understand that grief. But in any life, we’d’ve been Soulmates. You seem to think if you’d saved your mother, you’d be married and having kids with someone. Someone not me? You couldn’t have known any of that ‘til Thawne’s little video message.”

Barry went tight and tense, turning his hands over before glancing to the side at Len. “That’s the thing… I did know, some of it anyway. There was… a newspaper projection, in the Time Vault room of Eobard’s I told you about. It had a date—April, 2024. The headline was about the Flash, and the byline, it was written by Iris West… Allen.”

Like breaking a bone, Len cut off the bleed. It was instinct, anything to stop the flood of feeling from reaching Barry. The sudden, blindsiding hurt, the sick taste of bile in his throat, the shudder he couldn’t suppress. Barry was shaking his head, whispering Len’s name, moving closer but Len wouldn’t look at him. He didn’t expect to react like this, but Barry marrying her, Barry knowing he was going to marry her… Barry supposed to be with her, have kids with her, wanting her… and getting him instead.

“Len, Lenny, hey, come on, it’s not like that.” Barry’s voice was so soft, hand gripping Len’s shoulder, cupping his neck. “It’s not. The future, timelines—they change. You know that’s not the future, that’s not my future, or our future, Len. It’s different now—I’m with you. In that timeline I… I don’t even know when I would’ve met you. When Iris would’ve met Eddie.”

“But you married her.” It wasn’t really a question, but Barry grimaced anyway, tight around the eyes, and half-nodded. Len averted his gaze again, pulled away from his hands. “And had kids.”

Barry exhaled but didn’t try to touch him again. Len could still feel him, his emotions, a one-way street right now, so much pain and worry bubbling around inside him.

He went on, putting it together, all the ways it must look and feel to Barry, all the signs. “And Thawne was referring to those kids and that marriage in his little head-trip video, and you knew who it was already. And now… she’s having a child with someone who isn’t you.”

Barry blew out a breath. “Look Len, I’m—”

“Don’t be.” He didn’t want to hear that Barry was sorry.

“I—”

“You weren’t just grieving your parents, were you? You were grieving not being with her.”

Barry shuddered, “I was grieving not having any of it, Len—my life was totally out of control and I felt like I’d skipped tracks and yes, I lost a chance to be with Iris, but I also screwed up everything I thought my life was supposed to be, and I was scared because I didn’t want to lose anyone else I cared about.”

“Anyone else you loved.”
“Exactly!”

“Are you still in love with her?”

There was a pause, a rapid heartbeat, dewy and red around Barry’s eyes. He looked Len in the eye, “no, I’m not. Not anymore.”

It felt like the truth. He closed his eyes for a moment, relaxed his breathing. When he opened them again, looking down, his voice was quieter. “But you aren’t in love with me either.”

Barry felt cold. Len shivered.

“I’m sor—”

“I don’t want an apology.” He shouldn’t have even asked. He’d already known the answer. Barry felt so lost but Len couldn’t bear to reopen his side of the bleed yet.

“I just don’t know why I can’t say it, Len—I don’t. You mean so much, you mean everything to me, I would… I would die for you. And I know I feel this deep connection, these feelings, so I don’t know why I can’t just say it!”

“Because you aren’t in love with me.” Finally, something he could focus on. Something in this tangled up web of a conversation that made sense to him. “And that’s okay.”

“What? No it’s not!” Barry had the same feeling he had the other night when Len had called him ‘a good person’. The same hurt, trapped, bitter feeling, and it made sense now. Because Len loved him and Barry didn’t love him back, and any reminder of that was bound to be painful.

“It is. You won’t ever love me and … I understand.”

“Well I don’t!”

It should be obvious. They’d just been talking about how cheated Barry had been to have seen his future with a loving wife, ending up with a murderer instead—Barry had said it wasn’t about Len but of course it was. Intrinsically, it had to be. He just had to word it in a way Barry could accept that.

“Because,” he started then considered, sighed, and forced himself to let Barry back into their Bond, so that he’d understand. He wasn’t great at heart-to-hearts, but this he could do, for Barry. This, he could handle. “You never had a choice, Barry. And you won’t ever. You think of love as something… perfect. Pure. That people choose who to love, or fall in love freely in some perfect way. You’re a romantic. ‘N there’s nothing wrong with that, but you want to fall in love with the good or the beauty inside someone. There’s none of that inside me, and we both know it. You would never choose to be with me.”

Horror struck up inside Barry. “Len—”

“I know what I am, Barry.” His voice was soft. “I don’t deserve you, I’m selfish for… wanting this, bad enough to take it. The Bond pushed you here, forced your hand. Without the bleed, you’d never’ve been forced to be with me. Without our Mark you wouldn’t have spared me the time of day. You can’t love me because I forced you to be with me.”

Barry’s stomach dropped but Len just smiled a little, no mirth in it, voice a little more sardonic and steely. “Don’t worry, Scarlet, I don’t plan to give you up despite that. But I don’t expect you to love me, so there’s no need to push yourself into it.”
Tears slipped down Barry’s cheeks. His hands shook. “That’s not true. That can’t… you didn’t force me to do anything…”

“The Bond did, if I didn’t.”

“But then it would have forced us both, Len,” he tried.

“I’d have jumped at the chance for you, Barry. Can’t say the opposite is true. Even if I wouldn’t’ve been interested without this Mark, we are Marked.” He tilted his head to the side, no reason to lie. “You’re my Soulmate. For me, that’s enough.”

“You can’t be right. You’re my Soulmate. It can’t be impossible for me to love you.”

He felt a flare of something like anger almost bubble back up. “I’d rather it were.”

“Why?”

He swallowed back the swell of emotion. “I’d rather you not love me because you can’t, not because you won’t.”

Barry felt sick, Len could taste it. Maybe he felt sick. But Barry was the one shivering, swallowing, shaking his head and letting out the slow breath. After a minute, Len sighed quietly out his nose and moved to take Barry’s hand in his.

“It’s okay, Barry. You’re with me, and here. I’ll do my best to make you happy, despite all of the things I can’t truly give you.” He arched an eyebrow down at where he’d turned Barry’s hand over, thumbs splaying over Barry’s palm. “Just being with me is more than enough, more than I deserve.”

“You deserve to be loved, Len.” His voice cracked.

Len met his eyes. “We both know that’s not true.”

“It—”

“You’re here. That’s enough.”

“It can’t be.”

“It has to be.”

Barry’s mouth worked for a moment, shaking his head. “It’s not. Maybe for now, but not forever. And it won’t be like this forever—I won’t let it stay like this. It will be so much better, Lenny. But even now, being with you—it makes me happy. I need you to know, even if it wasn’t the life I’d live in a different timeline, I like this life, I like being with you.”

Len was honestly relieved. For some reason, he could tell that his relief hurt Barry all the more, and he tried to reassure him. “I want you to like it. I want to make you happy.”

“We’re really good together.” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. Len didn’t fault him for that.

“I don’t disagree.”

Barry gathered a breath and Len could feel something changing inside of him. His voice was quieter, with more purpose behind it. “You’re wrong, you know. You’re not… selfish. You have no idea how unselfish you are, and how much you deserve someone to choose you and love you and let you
know just how loved you are. And I can’t say it yet, and if I did right now I don’t know if you’d even believe me. But I swear one day I will, and when I do you’ll know it’s true.”

Len didn’t know what to say to that kind of promise. He couldn’t let himself hope for something like that, but part of him wanted to anyway, was caught between accepting and suppressing that painful little niggling feeling in his stomach and his heart. He knew Barry meant it, but Barry was so earnest, so driven, that he couldn’t accept that Len really was okay with this. He had no illusions about himself.

Barry surprised him though, caught up in the mire of emotions. He leaned forward and kissed Len, gently but more than just a brush of lips. “No matter what, I’m your Soulmate, Len, and you’re mine.”

He was torn between the aching, horrifically painful feeling of hope, and something else, something darker, more true to his nature. He followed it, the easier pull, low in his gut, let it lead him to move closer. He leaned in and recaptured Barry’s lips, deeper, harder. Barry was his Soulmate. His. He was uniquely Len’s. Barry belonged to him.

The truth of that, the insistent need for Barry to be his, lit up something in his veins. The feelings turning around inside him welled up, fierce and possessive. The feelings that plagued him at the thought of Iris West winning his affections, the one that had made him tight and tense when that policewoman touched Barry’s skin, his Mark, looking at it and touching what only Len should touch—the feelings that made him want to claim and show the world that this beautiful man was his.

His hands found their way to Barry’s jaw and hair, clamping down, pulling him in, licking into his mouth. Len sucked on his lip and moved his hand down from his jaw, kissing it instead, leading with his teeth. He pulled Barry forward, into his lap, feeling Barry’s own desire and impatience start to mix up with his, no complaints, only compliance, submission. Barry was breathing heavy, legs framing Len, swallowing each kiss and coming back for more, offering his neck, rocking his hips down when Len sucked on it.

“You belong to me?”

“Yes.”

“You’re mine?”

“God, yes.”

Barry tugged at his shirt but Len stood instead, taking Barry with him. Barry got with the program fast, snapping his legs around Len’s waist, letting himself be carried—“fuck, you’re strong”—to the bedroom, Len depositing him on the sheets and following him down. He kissed Barry on the follow-through, pressed him down against the mattress and thrilled in the way Barry pressed his body up against his.

Then he started in on the buttons of Barry’s shirt, pulling it open before sliding his hands up and under the tee beneath it, along the warm skin it hid. Barry’s shirts came off seconds later and Len captured his wrists, pressed them to the mattress on either side of his head, spread far enough that it didn’t impede his access to Barry’s neck, which he sucked on hard enough to bruise this time, while Barry whined and writhed beneath him.

“Leave them there,” he whispered into Barry’s ear, giving his wrists a gentle squeeze.

“Fuck,” was the quiet, hoarse reply, “yeah.”
Len could feel how hard Barry was, both through his jeans and in the bleed, could feel the way that command sent something dizzyingly deep and tight through his gut. It only made Len more impatient, kissing down Barry’s chest, divesting them of both their clothes, moving back up to kiss Barry and suck more bruises onto his skin, marks to last, onto his collarbone while his hands were busy elsewhere, slick and finger ing Barry open, reading the bleed enough to keep him on the edge of orgasm without letting him cum. Barry clutched the sheets and whined and moaned and Len couldn’t help the possessive cant to his actions, to the things he whispered.

“You’re mine.”

“Yes.”

“No one else can touch you like this, see you like this.”

“Only you—*god*, Len, only you.”

Len kissed him deep when his cock pushed inside Barry, stretched him out, made him groan as he opened for Len. Barry gave up holding the sheets to clutch Len’s back, pulling him closer, fingers digging in when Len’s cock pressed against his prostate on each thrust. He could feel it, phantom in the bleed, each shockwave of pleasure that ran through the other man, and Barry kissed him deep before breaking off to moan.

“Only yours, Len, just you. No one else.”

Len rocked into him and when Barry moved a hand down between them, he captured it and pressed it down above the mop of brown hair. Barry rocked his hips up and squeezed tight around Len’s cock, a fire burning low in him at the movement.

“I’ll take care of you.”

“*God*, please, Len—” he keened when Len squeezed the wrist just a little.

“You like that?” he teased.

Barry made an even higher noise in assent and moved his other hand back, above his head, spread out and just taking, tightening his legs around Len’s waist. He was on the edge of orgasm but holding on, holding back, and Len could feel that shaky resolve. But then the hand still in Len’s grip moved to capture Len’s hand instead and guided it down. He was confused for half a second but then—

“*Fuck*, Barry.”

Barry had guided Len’s hand onto his neck, his throat, leaving it there. Barry’s own hand receded back above his head and gripped the headboard, the picture of supplication, spread out and willing. His stomach went tight with desire, impossibly hard inside of the tight heat of Barry, hand on that long, pale, exposed expanse of throat.

Barry’s pupils were so blown his eyes looked black. “*Please.*”

Len wasn’t about to say no. He squeezed, gentle enough not to bruise or cut off his airway entirely, but enough that he’d feel it. And *god*, the sound that Barry made, eyes rolling back in his head as he shuddered, hands clutching the headboard, body tight, so tight so good so hot, around Len. A vibration wracked Barry and Len let out a moan.

“*Har-der,*” Barry rasped out, and Len tightened his grip just a bit more, aching with how good it felt,
how goddamn hard it was making both of them, the way Barry’s breath was a thin rasp but he felt nothing but pure pleasure. Len thrust inside of him, pressed deep as he could go while Barry clenched around him, and with Len’s hand still on his throat, possessive and tight, Barry came.

Fuck fuck *fuck*—Len moaned, hand snapping back, watching Barry gasp in air as his orgasm quaked through him. He gripped Barry’s hips and slammed into him, Barry gasping in new air with each thrust, but then he was shivering again—“*fuck, Len, yes, I’m gonna’—*”

Len swore long and low as Barry’s second orgasm hit him, leaned forward to kiss his neck, to suck over a mark he’d made earlier, freshly red from his fingers, driving his cock in deep as Barry’s body contracted and vibrated around it and he was done, moaning against Barry’s skin, coming so hard his vision went white, filling Barry with himself, shuddering and groaning until he was spent.

They were both breathing shallow and heavy a minute after. Len was collapsed mostly on top of Barry, sweaty and unwilling to move yet.

“Fuck, Barry,” he rasped when he caught his breath enough to say something.

“Yeah,” Barry sounded a little dreamy. He was drawing slow circles on Len’s back with his fingers.

“That was…”

“Something, hmm” he laughed a little, and Len finally moved out of him and off, rolling onto his back.

“Wouldn’t’ve guessed choking was one of your things.”

“It, uh… yeah it felt amazing. I’ve wanted to try it for a while. I kind of like how possessive you get, sometimes.”

“That so?”

“Mm. Makes me feel less crazy for how possessive I feel of you.”

Len thought about the first blowjob they shared and smirked just a little. “That’s fair.”

Barry rolled onto his side, and up onto one elbow to look at him. Len felt slightly amused at the screwed up expression on his face for a second when the movement no doubt caused Len’s cum to slide out of him, “I’ll just…” he disappeared and reappeared at lightning speed, and when he was back there was a warm cloth in Len’s hand and Barry was sitting up casually in his boxers.

Len couldn’t deny that that was handy, cleaning himself up and pulling on his own underwear, laying back and leaving out an arm for Barry to tuck himself under it, which he did a moment later.

“What I was gonna’ say is… I’m yours, now and forever, Len.”

It was enough. It had to be. “Good. Same goes for me.”

They kissed again, gentler, and Len pushed all other thoughts about their conversation away—thoughts about children, timelines that he could barely fathom, about the Rogues and the military—and finally fell into a doze.
Marked and Married refers to people Marked who aren't Soulmates to each other but get married anyway.

*DNR – do not resuscitate, for when someone wants to be allowed to pass one and not be revived by artificial means
**Len is stealing work of Sugimoto’s lightning series and his seascapes series

I’ve written this author’s note three times. There’s so much I want to say, but this note would get longer than the chapter itself. Which is, for the record, the second-longest chapter so far. I could talk about conversations that just ~spiral~ out of control, about Len’s feelings about having kids (more on that later though), or write basically an essay about their possessiveness and how they use sex as a means of affirming their connection to one another and the way in which Barry comforts Len via physicality and submission. But I have other things I want to highlight here.

Some of those highlights:

Like this author’s note, I wrote at least three versions of the conversation between Barry and Len and then edited the final product like 5 times after that. I don’t know if I’ll ever be fully satisfied with it. I’m dealing with some complex stuff, and I don’t know that it all translates yet. There is repression, self-deception, self-worth, free will, and grief, all mixed up into one. And those themes have been there the entire fic, but this is the first time they become explicit in the text; things start to come to a head here.

I had this notion, early on, that Barry was going to struggle a lot in this fic due to the nature of what being a Soulmate to someone really means, especially when you have no choice in the matter, and because of who his Soulmate happened to be. But because of the nature of self-deception and repression, he’s unaware of all the ins and outs of his own struggle, the grief and identity and protection and fear, and so he sometimes doesn't appear to be struggling as much as he is, or then he snaps. And because he's repressing thinking about certain things, we don't always *know* the full extent of why it's happening, or we get 5 different reasons that are all partly right, and because self-deception is inherently something only witnessed by those around you.

So it’s like... when Caitlin explained to Cisco that Barry was protecting Len from everyone else. Barry himself hadn’t figured out yet that protecting Len was one of his own motivations for hiding it, but it *very much* was one of his motivations, from the first second that he was in that hallway with Joe and Len and they pulled guns on one another, Barry felt an intense need to protect Len. It was compounded (a lot) the night of the gala. Joe was hurt that night, but Len came, in Barry’s eyes, very close to being shot. And everything got so much worse for a while in part because he was self-deceiving, externalizing, and dealing with the wrong issues.

And Barry’s also been quietly grieving for half this fic, but mostly about things he’s been repressing. Guilt, loss, loss of identity, and loss of things he doesn't even feel a right to grieve because they've never even been his. As he comes to term with his relationship with Len, you can see him going through the stages of grief, back and forth, micro and macro throughout—denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance. It’s layered in but not exactly linear. But you don’t get a clear picture of what he’s been feeling because so much of *why* he was feeling certain things was repressed and it
didn't translate (and there's another step to go on that).

But anyway, he’s finally in a place with Len where some of that can rise to the surface and get talked about, but he’s not yet in a place where he’s 100% sorted through the heart of the matter that’s stopping him from saying those three little words for now.

I just wanted to let you all know that ☺ And know that it was with intent that I wrote it this way and gave it a lot of thought, and it wasn’t just “Barry doesn’t love Len and that’s a source of conflict” but rather “Barry spends the majority of the fic with this ongoing internal struggle about a lot of things, all of which play out in some way through his relationship with Len”. I mean, I’m still an asshole, but I’m an asshole with intent! (that’s meant to be funny but also true).

Anyway, next is Hartley’s PoV ☺
Symbosexuality

Chapter Summary

Renegades by the X Ambassadors and Stubborn Love by The Lumineers

Chapter Notes

Extra trigger warnings for this chapter: homophobia that gets called out, biphobia that gets disputed, internalized homophobia (past), and a reimagining of some of Catholicism to fit with a universe with Soulmates

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Not for the first time, Hartley felt he should have known something awful was just waiting to happen to him. He was smart enough that he should have known. If not his intellect, his pessimism could have perhaps given him a proper head’s up, something of the sort. Anything, really.

But no, life had simply become altogether too good, and a false sense of security had managed to instigate itself. Perhaps because there was bad with the good, he mused, toes to knees numb, fingers too. Mark was captured, and that was bad. The Santini family were getting more aggressive, another check for the ‘unpleasant’ category. Unpleasant enough that he hadn’t reflected on how much worse it could be.

Maybe it was because the good was so short lived? He contemplated that while his eyes started to droop, body numb. So very short lived. A few tenuously positive weeks with James, some real development. How easily he’d been placated.

His vision was dark at the corners and blurry. It had been, what? Ten seconds, give or take.

How good it had been, while it lasted. How embarrassing it was to get caught red-handed. Somewhat literally, a print still in his hands when the tranq dart hit his neck, when Leonard shouted and it all started to fade.

How embarrassing indeed, not to have a back up plan…
The first evening James stayed with him, the man slept on the couch. Hartley knew he wanted to complain but clearly thought better of it. When Leonard arrived in the morning to chew him out, he was rumpled and more frazzled than he would like, having run smack dab into James on the way to the door. He was still putting on his glasses, so that was firmly the fault of James, who had been standing at the time, tangled in a mess of blankets.

It turned out perhaps for the best though, considering the look Leonard gave him when he’d finally answered the door.

But after that, he’d had to cope with some of James’s not wholly unfounded but nonetheless brutish jealousy. Which amounted mostly to pouting, attempts to cook breakfast that burnt because he tried to do ten things at once, and commenting loudly about how nice it was to be young and spry instead of old and grey.

It was a shame it was so amusing, because the bleed was really not hiding how much he was enjoying James make a fool of himself, and that just seemed to egg him on.

The afternoon involved going out to get James some clothes that weren’t an eyesore, and a decision to be made when Shawna texted to ask how he was doing. An awkward decision, given that he had yet to tell her he was Bonded. As far as she—and most of the world—was concerned, he’d travelled with the circus because of an asshole ex, not his Soulmate. Leonard only knew the truth because they’d been drinking when it had first come out, and because Hartley had had such a crush.

He told Shawna to drop by, because it was imperative to test James’s newfound… dedication. Hartley couldn’t come up with a more applicable term than that. But introducing James as his Soulmate and former lover? Ought to be a test of the hypothesis. He mused, waiting for her to arrive, if the hypothesis was for him to overreact and the null hypothesis for him to do nothing, and amused himself for hoping to get null results, for once.

As it turned out, James didn’t overreact, but Shawna did. Apparently, not mentioning he had was Bonded was an incomparable offense. It was one of the times he was reminded just how differently he and Shawna saw the world, for all of their similarities in how they spent their time and the inside jokes they now had in spades.

“I spent how many months going on and on about how you were gonna’ find the perfect guy and you already had a Soulmate mooning over you?!”

It was James who defused the situation, with an altogether too dashing smile, a compliment, and an arm draped warm over Hartley’s shoulder.

And after that, Hartley was inclined to let him share the bed that night.

**********

His neck was stiff.

He wanted to stretch.

He wanted to roll onto his side, the way he preferred to sleep.

He wanted a lot of things, discomfort itching at him as he laid stock straight on his back.
He hadn’t anticipated this issue. He hadn’t anticipated his body’s reflexive memory from spending so many nights on a bed smaller than this one, still and stoic in cramped quarters because the alternative was to play Russian Roulette with the graze of skin when he tried to get comfortable.

Hartley knew he was being stupid. It was his own apartment, his own bed. He knew it was an infantile reaction that he wasn’t able to move, paralyzed by some learned response and a neural loop that refused to switch tracks.

Like many things, he also knew that knowing the process didn’t remedy the issue. But he was gearing up to move, to roll onto his side, steeling himself to just do it and then he could relax, when James’s voice managed to derail that train anyway.

“You keep thinkin’ that hard and it’ll be sunrise before you shut your eyes.”

Hartley’s heart ratcheted up and then he exhaled, and his body finally relaxed. He rolled onto his side, facing James. Even doing that, their skin didn’t touch. It had been a damn false alarm anyway. He didn’t bother suppressing that it made him bitter.

“Some of us don’t have the luxury of sleeping comfortably next to the other.”

James rolled up onto his elbow. He was in a threadbare white tank top and the lights from the city caught on his skin in the dark, making each muscle in his arms look like mountains and valleys.

“You can’t sleep because I’m here?”

“Evidently.”

James hesitated, “…should I go?”

Part of Hartley wanted that, just so he could sleep. More of Hartley felt bitter and pathetic that James was asking, that he was being coddled.

“No.”

He could feel the concern wafting off James and rolled over to face away. “I’m fine.”

James snorted. “Sure, doll.”

Oh that was it—

He sat up fast and sharp and glared down at James.

“You haven’t earned the right to call me ‘doll’, James. You barely earned sleeping in this bed and —”

He cut off before he could wind up. He slumped forward a little, sighing.

“And?” James prompted, sitting up beside him, comforting hand on his back. Hartley started at the contact.

“…and neither of us can expect issues we created to just magically disappear because you’re suddenly apparently ready to be with me.”

“…and sleeping near me is an issue?”

Hartley’s eyebrows drew together. He must know. He had to. But then, the idiot hadn’t even known
Hartley Rathaway was from the Rathaways, so… “You used to shove me to the floor, James. Whenever we brushed skin and you were awake to feel it. Whenever we got too close.”

He could feel the tempest that created, the emotions flaring up, anger and other things he couldn't place.

“I wh—you—that—” he let out a quiet string of Italian curses that Hartley realized were directed at himself as he started to move off the bed. “I’ll go. The couch is fine.”

“James—”

“I don’t even know why I—”

“James!” Hartley scrambled out of bed and grabbed his wrist. James had a pillow tucked under his other hand and his back was to Hartley, but he could feel a tremor run through the other man, see it in his shoulders, when Hartley touched his skin. He felt… something. It was too noisy to decipher. Hurt in all the wrong ways. Chest tight and tingly where Hartley was touching him, their bleed strong in the silent space.

“I’m so sorry, Hart.”

His voice sounded thick and the fight went out of Hartley. Maybe it was the exhaustion. “James…” he started again, feeling lost. He detested feeling lost, and rallied his frustration to push it aside. “Stop being a martyr and get back to bed. You won’t solve anything by running away and I don’t intend to either.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t… I never wanted you to sleep on the floor.”

“You could’ve fooled me.”

James turned and looked at him then, finally, features drawn together. “No, blue eyes, I just… I was awful. I lashed out. I pushed you away and I didn’t care if you got back in the bed or not. I didn’t want you to sleep on the floor, I just…”

“You were afraid.”

“Terrified.”

They made their way back to the bed, sitting on the edge of it. Hartley glared at nothing. “That doesn’t make it okay.”

“I know—”

“But—… but I understand. And I don’t actually hate you.” It was a concession he could make. “Thought at times it seems like the easier option.”

That got a laugh, at least. James was always so easy to brush off the barbs in what he said.

“Don’t get me wrong, none of this is on me, James. You treated me like dirt. But I let you. I was… low, after leaving STAR labs. I gave and gave and let you take, what little I had left of my heart to give. And I took your space and your bed and pretended it was enough because I didn’t think I deserved any better, not after…” He thought of the explosion and shook his head.

“You didn’t take, Hart, you only gave. You only ever gave. My space was nothing. Less than nothing. And I didn’t even share it with you right. I pushed you out of bed because I—I wanted you.
And I blamed you for it. For being so—” his voice caught “beautiful, Hart. You’re so beautiful. And I hated myself for wanting you. The more skin I saw, touched—and when we touched I just felt on fire and I needed to run away and it was never your fault. It was always me. It is me. I’m trying so hard, I just wanna’ make things right between us. I wanna’ make you happy.”

Hartley nodded in the dark. He understood, he did. It didn’t make it right. It didn’t make it hurt less. It didn’t make the compliments feel any more hollow. But it was in the past. It had to be. “I told myself… I told myself that if kept giving, kept giving in… that one day, you’d be ready. I let you walk all over me hoping you’d want me like I wanted you.”

“I always wanted you.”

Hartley’s eye stung. He balled his hands into fists. “You used me.”

He could feel the same pain inside James that was boiling around in himself. The same horror.

“I hurt you. I know I did. I tried so long to hold back and then I snapped ‘n I felt good for the first time in so long, Hart—I felt good for the first time in so long and I hated myself every morning again. I tried to tell myself that no one had to know, that in the dark it didn’t matter if you were a m-man, that it wasn’t hurting anyone, but that as a lie. It was hurting you.”

He nodded. He had to gather his breath to respond. “You understand, the difference between what I did and what you did is that I took my self-loathing out on myself, and you took it out on me too.”

James shuddered beside him. “I’m sorry.”

Hartley paused, thinking about what had happened since them. Thinking about bursting windows at Rathaway tower, throwing vans on the keystone Cleveland damn, trying to murder the Flash. Thinking about everything he’d done since leaving James’s trailer. He almost managed a wry smile. “Well… I maybe took it out on the Flash and his friends, too. On Harrison Wells.”

“That was different, Pipes.”

“It was. But it… I lash out. I still do. I get angry. I know what you’re feeling.” He swallowed. Empathy didn’t come easy for him. But he did understand, and he could feel it. He knew how angry and lonely it could feel to hate oneself. “So what I’m saying is… we’ll sleep together. I’ll learn to roll over and get comfortable. I’ll kick your ass if you come close to pushing me out of the bed. Either we’ll fix it or we won’t.”

“We’ll fix it.”

Hartley mm’d, a habit he was picking up from spending too much time around Leonard, and laid back into the bed, James finally crawling over him and laying down beside him.

After a few minutes, his voice drifted over. “I only ever feel like I fit when I’m with you. Even if we’re only ever friends, even if you decide you can’t do this, that you don’t want me… I still feel like I fit with you.”

Hartley swallowed. It wasn’t all or none. And that was maybe the only reason it was okay. James wouldn’t penalize him, wouldn’t leave if Hartley didn’t give him what he wanted. They could be friends. And Hartley wouldn’t leave either, not now, wouldn’t kick James out of his life because they could always have this, could always be close, be friends in the way they always had, trusting and respecting themselves, each other.

But just because it wasn’t all or none didn’t mean he didn’t want all. And maybe… maybe he could
“If we fit so well, James? Why don’t we sleep, and you can curl into me if you want. I’ll try to relax.”

He rolled onto his side, and after a moment of hesitation, James curled in behind him, wrapped an arm around his waist. And after a few minutes, Hartley did relax, and after longer still, he slept.

**********

It was two days later that he finally started to understand—really understand—where some of James’s issues stemmed from. He’d known the man was Catholic, they’d debated and discussed it more than once, but he hadn’t fully realized all the issues that came along with that, beyond the standard Christian rhetoric he’d been exposed to for the entirety of his life.

So it was a surprise when James started to open up about it, after a friendly game of chess and a debate, as per their usual when playing chess. This time, they’d been discussing the merits of being Bonded and whether it was an asset (which James maintained) or a liability (which Hartley was convinced of) to being a successful criminal.

But it spiraled into a discussion of reincarnation and Soulmates, and lead somewhere he hadn’t expected.

“You know, Catholics believe that humans don’t reincarnate, right?”

“I’m aware.”

“That you’re blessed if you’re born with a Mark. That it means the Lord has a special task for you, something you can only accomplish with your Soulmate.”

Hartley hmm’d, wishing he still had the game to distract himself from whatever James was about to say, lounging on the couch with his feet in Hartley’s lap, an indignity he was pretending he minded.

“My parents were Soulmates. Bond Baby, right here. Me and my sister were Marked but none of my brothers were. There was a pressure, you know? To be good. To be the type of child that was worthy enough to have earned my Soulmark just a few years into life, the day you were born. My brothers were allowed to be rampant little shits, but me and my sister were supposed to be better than that, because we were special.”

He was starting to gesture, getting into his own story.

“But I wasn’t very good at being good, Hart. I’ve always liked to lie, cheat, and steal a bit. And I love attention. Always too hyper, could never sit still. Used to drive my teachers wild. My parents didn’t know what to do with me. But you know, I repented every Sunday growing up and I went to mass, and I tried to steer clear of the deadly sins, the things that would damn my soul forever, nothing I couldn’t come back from. Learned to be real sneaky, too, after a while. But petty thieving, being mean, getting in fights—all things I could repent any Sunday with a squeaky conscience.”

Hartley squirmed. “James, you don’t have to—”

“It’s weird, you know? I know being gay isn’t any worse than say… adultery. Sex out of wedlock.
Stealing when you have no need. S’just… it’s not something I can repent, you know? Not an action that gets wiped clean. Looking at other men always felt like a stain that wouldn’t rub clean. You can’t pray your true heart away.”

Hartley, atheist or not, knew that all too well. He stopped trying to interrupt.

James raised his hand to stare at it, or stare beyond it, up at the ceiling. “I was supposed to be good in this life. To find my Soulmate, and together we’d walk into the gates of heaven. I’d be better when I met them. Not always so tempted. I was supposed to help my Soulmate get to heaven too—that was the deal. That was how it was for my parents, who were honest and hardworking, strict but fair. A travelling life but a godly one, if you can imagine.”

Hartley wished he had any idea what to say to that. James laughed, dry and coarse.

“I was told that a sinful life could lead my Soulmate to hell with me. That it was my responsibility to be good because… because I’d damn you too.”

His heart clenched tight, tongue-tied.

“I’m not a very good catholic, Hart. Never was. I grew up, moved away from my folks, my family, to a city, then another one. Never really felt like I fit with my family anyway—you know my dad died a few years back, and with mom settled down in Coast City now, sister’s too… I never fit. As soon as I was out from their thumb, I stole more, cheated people. Had sex and enjoyed it. Skipped mass. Stopped going. I always thought I would wipe the slate clean one day.”

“But then you met me,” Hart sounded dejected, even to his own ears.

“Yeah, Pipes. I met you—the best thing that ever happened to me.” James’s conviction came through in the bleed like the high note in an aria. But then it faded, and James curled his hand back into himself. “Only I was too dumb to recognize it. I thought… I felt like I failed somehow, that God was punishing me for being so bad all these years. That you were some final temptation that I was supposed to deny myself, and if I did, I’d be… we’d walk to heaven together. I’d save us both.”

Hartley unstuck his tongue. “It doesn’t work like that. You don’t get to decide for someone el—”

“I know! I know, Hart, I… I just felt like I was going to ruin you. I didn’t want to put you in hell. And I know, I don’t see heaven and hell the same as I did when I was a kid, I know I can’t take the Bible literally. But I didn’t want to hurt you. I did though. And you told me once that the only hell that exists is on this earth, that it’s the hell people make for each other, for themselves.”

Hartley remembered saying it. Hell is other people. He found his ‘faith’ much easier in the works of Sartre and his contemporaries than he did in Christian doctrine. “I still believe it.”

James let out a soft chuckle. “Then heaven is too. I made life hell for you, but being near you, it’s heaven for me. And when I think about God… He wasn’t testing me, He was giving me a gift I was too stupid to see. And if He was testing me, He was seeing if I was worthy of you, and that test I know I failed.”

Hartley captured James’s hand on instinct. “You didn’t fail, James.”

“I sure as hell did, blue eyes.” He kissed the back of Hartley’s hand and held it close. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate this second chance to get it right.”

He felt he should say something, address some of everything James had told him. “Who you are… it’s not a stain.”
“I know. I… I can admit that to myself, now. I love you, Hartley, in this life and any other. And if I’m wrong and we get dragged down to hell for it, then at least it was finally for something that was worth it.”

Hartley leaned over and kissed him then, to shut him up, to be close, to feel him. When he pulled back, they were both smiling. Hartley settled back down to drop his head onto James’s chest, listening to his steady heartbeat.

**********

When Mark disappeared, Hartley kept James in the loop and realized (belatedly, after giving him all the details) that he hadn’t questioned telling him everything about the situation. That he didn’t think twice about sharing this part of his life and the truth of it with James.

And maybe that was because James made it so easy. After a lifetime in circuses, metahumans didn’t seem to faze the other man in the slightest. He’d met Shawna by then, and her blinking in and out of a space barely made him pause the first time he’d seen it. Mark’s powers had just awed him. He thought metas were cool. And he thought that Hartley having a “criminal gang that you’re not calling a gang but is absolutely a gang, Pipes” was hilarious.

But he took it all in stride without a single concern, more worried what Hartley’s ‘gang friends’ would think of him than what powers they had. And when Mark disappeared, it was James, not Hartley, who suggested they bring Shawna over and let her stay for as many nights as she wanted, until Mark was back even.

Hartley had a hard time swallowing back the lump in his throat at the suggestion, because James was so kind when he wasn’t getting in his own way. It was almost hard to grasp how easily he let people in and wanted them near, how social he was, how easily it came to him.

Shawna never did come to stay. She visited often, but crashed at Lisa’s instead, a solidarity Hartley wouldn’t have necessarily expected from Lisa, but he was learning that both Snart siblings had a whole series of layers to them.

But James fit with all of them. Well, all of them except Leonard, but maybe that would come with time.

**********

The day before the museum heist, Hartley and James flirted their way through cooking dinner together. Because James… James was an incomparable flirt. And now that he was allowed to flirt, Hartley couldn’t help but make so many of the sly comments he’d bitten his tongue on before, with James alternating between bursts of laughter and flares of arousal in the bleed at different tones and suggestions Hartley threw his way. He was still testing the waters, not saying anything that would scare away an innocent Catholic boy.

And it turned out that, despite that cramped trailer he used to live in, James actually knew how to make one or two things when he wasn’t distracted. Dinner was shared with wine and long looks and
Hartley couldn’t help but think about how they hadn’t slept together yet. Yet, again. And they’d slept together, but not in the carnal sense.

James was clearing the dishes off the table when Hartley felt a flare of nervousness for all of a second, smothered quickly by him opening his mouth. “So, since now I’m officially a hom—”

“Don’t use that word.” Hartley snapped, instinctual.

“What? It’s not like I said fa—”

His glare cut James off before he could finish that word either.

“Come on! What am I allowed to call myself?”

“Gay?”

James sighed with his entire body, “right, well since I’m gay now—”

“Actually, you’re probably not suddenly gay if you weren’t before—”

“Since I was always gay—”

“I mean you could be bisexual?”

“Oh for the love of—Hart, doll, I’m trying to make a point. And I’m not some greedy in-betweener.”

Hartley was sure a vein in his forehead was going to start throbbing any second. “How did you learn everything wrong about human sexuality? Bisexuals aren’t greedy, James.”

“Well I want to be either-or. I’m an all-or-nothing kind of guy.”

He rolled his eyes. “Being bi or pansexual? Would be an ‘all’ kind of thing.”

James blinked, and seemed to consider that. “Huh.” Then he screwed up his face and shook his head. “Still though, nah.”

Hartley wondered… “Your attraction to women, was it ever genuine?”

James rolled his shoulders, dropped the dishes on the counter, “Of course it was—have you seen women?” Hartley almost rolled his eyes but James felt nervous again for a moment, his back turned, voice a little quieter. “I think it was anyway. Sometimes.”

“Then… look, you can use whatever label you want. But you don’t have to call yourself gay. Or bisexual. Or… have you thought about demisexuality?”

James came back to sit at the table and scooped up Hartley’s hand to hold casually, like it was such an easy gesture, like he didn’t think twice about it. “Doesn’t that mean you only ever feel that way for your Soulmate? Because you’re not the only person—”

“Symbosexual is just your Soulmate. Demi is attraction that depends upon an emotional connection.”

“Hmm.” James tapped his own lip with a finger, suddenly smirking. “How about Hartley-sexual?”

Hartley resisted the urge to snort and instead sighed in a put-upon way.

“Hey come on, that one is probably the most accurate. I haven’t even looked at another person since
the day we bonded.”

He… actually didn’t know what to say to that. But James grinned and pressed his advantage, leaning closer and Hartley was starting to flush at the frankly *appraising* look in his eyes, the heat that was suddenly there and the way he was having an issue looking away. At James having eyes only for him.

“You were, ah, trying to make some sort of a point?”

“I was going to sayyy…” James hand in Hartley’s became a little more deliberate, sliding their fingers together in a way that shouldn’t have been obscene but most definitely felt that way. “…that you’re gonna have to tell me about men like us enjoy, and what we do together.”

And oh, that sounded like a lovely idea. Except… “men like us? Not all men who like men like the same things.”

“Oh, that sounded like a lovely idea. Except… “men like us? Not all men who like men like the same things.”

“Obviously,” he huffed. “Snart’s a fairy and he’s nothing like you.”

“Don’t use that word either.”

“I miss being able to use words.”

Hartley rolled his eyes, even if he couldn’t pretend that he wasn’t at least somewhat affectionate in his frustration with James’s easy way of rolling with his demands with an off-the-cuff response. He took his hand back though and stood to stretch. “And I don’t miss not having to listen to homophobic bullshit. You don’t need advice on how to be gay. Just be yourself, I’m sure even you can accomplish that.”

“So I shouldn’t learn the history of our brethren?”

“Our what?” Hartley peered down at James like he had grown a second head and oh. Oh James was just grinning, a twinkle in his eye. “Are you just being a dick to rile me up?”

James’s grin grew and he stood up as well, leaning a little into his space. “Maaaaybe.”

“James.”

“Can I kiss you now?”

Hartley didn’t even know how to keep up with this James. James who was still utterly the same, except so open with his romantic affection in a way that left Hartley reeling. He’d always been tactile, needy for attention, abrupt and teasing. But asking for kisses… Hartley didn’t think he’d ever be able to say no if James kept asking in that sweet, mischievous way.

So he leaned forward and kissed his Soulmate.

And kept kissing him. Until James was slipping his tongue past Hartley’s lips and then more, again, deeper. He let James walk him back until they were at the couch and they tumbled onto it, breaking the kiss for air and to orient themselves before they started again. Hartley’s hands found their way to James’s gorgeous blond curls and James practically purred into his mouth.

Then it was Hartley’s neck, his ear lobe, his jaw—anything James could reach to suck on was being captured by the man’s lips. Their bleed was choked up with shared arousal and desire, intense and pulling Hartley deep into the sensations. He rocked his hips up against James’s stomach—James, whose long body with all of it’s muscles was overtop of him and *wriggling*—just to get some friction
on his aching cock.

It only occurred to him to feel nervous about it after James started to pull back from sucking what was almost sure to be a bruise against the juncture of his neck. Hartley felt bitter almost immediately, that the evidence of his very male arousal was enough to spook James, but the man was grinning far too wide when he met Hartley’s eyes to be considered spooked.

“Kissing really gets you going, huh blue eyes?” He actually looked down to pointedly stare at Hartley’s crotch and he felt his cheeks burning, something that he swore hadn’t happened in years.

“You’re sucking on my neck!”

“Like that, hm?” James did it again and this time rolled his body to make contact with Hartley’s hips at the same time. He dropped his head back and groaned at the sensation.

He could feel James’s swooping arousal in the bleed, a response to the sound, and he had to wonder how far this was going as James switched to the other side of his neck.

“James,” his voice was more warning than anything else.

“Si, mi amore?”

“If we’re not getting off we should cool down.”

“And why wouldn’t we be getting off?” James actually leaned up to look at him, something nervous coming through.

“Do you think you’re ready for—”

His face lit up. “Oh I’m ready, I’m ipso facto bonafide rea—mmff!”

Hartley kissed him to shut him up before he started to ramble. His legs were framing James’s and he stopped being shy about it, rolling his hips up with purpose instead. James slid his hands under his shirts and teased his skin, both of their breathing getting heavier. The other man’s fingers reached his nipples and Hartley let out a quiet whine, trying not to embarrass himself, but James seemed mesmerized.

“Your nipples are sensitive too?”

“You have nipples James, you must know that’s not just a thing for women.”

“Didn’t mean it like that, babe.” Hartley could tell that was a lie, but he was trying. Points for trying. So long as he didn’t stop doing that. “I just meant you like it.”

“Y-yeah, yeah, I do.” Hartley was a bastion of sensation and hedonism and he knew it. James seemed to take this as encouragement though and pulled him out of his shirt.

“God you’re pretty, Hart. All these little moles.” He kissed one. “Like stars.” Hartley felt himself flushing more under the praise, hand going to back to James’s blond curls while he kissed all over Hart’s chest, sucked his nipples, and all around drove him crazy. He was getting so hard he could barely stand the pressure of his pants confining it, already starting to ache for release.

And if James was up for it, then he already knew what he wanted.

“Sex,” he croaked as soon as his voice would let him, too raspy thanks to the catch of James’s teeth on his nipple.
“Hell yeah.”

“But I do need to know what you’re ready for.”

They’d done it before, but this was special now. It had been then, too, but not—it was different now and his brain had ceased to function well enough to figure out why it was special now and he’d worry about that later.

“Anything.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” he pressed his hips up and shot James a pointed look. “Pretty sure you’re not ready to suck my cock or let me top.”

James’ eyes widened and he shook his head then nodded—“No, I mean yes, I mean whichever of those means I’m ready.”

Hartley ignored the immediate reaction that had on his cock, already conjuring pictures of James’s very ridiculous mouth around it. He was partway annoyed at James’s eagerness because the man had no idea what he was even doing with that offer. “I’m not fucking you, James. You haven’t had so much as a pinky finger up your ass and I’m not patient enough right now to prep you for as long as it would take to get you to relax.”

He didn’t actually want to hurt the other man, and he’d go mad opening him up if they did that.

“I’m not a wimp, I’m sure I could handle—”

“Trust me on this. Besides, that’s not what I want right now.”

“So… you want a blowjob?” He shifted a little southward, hands dropping to Hartley’s thighs to pull them a little further apart and well, yes, yes he wanted a blowjob like he wanted air. But there was something he wanted more than anything—the thing he’d spent months inside that trailer hoping for but never getting, and if James were to peace out tomorrow, decide he couldn’t handle this after all, that would be the thing he would miss his chance to seize.

“Something better. I want you to finger me, facing me, kissing me, and then fuck me, still facing me, and maybe have me ride you.”

“Oh, oh wow, that sounds—yeah. Hell yeah. But that’s—how do we have sex facing each other?”

Hartley’s eyes popped open to stare at him incredulously. He leaned up on his elbows in abject horror. “You don’t know? James, tell me you didn’t think anal sex always had to be from behind?”

“…you’re about to call me an idiot.”

“You’re not that innocent, James, come on. Surely you’ve seen it in porn at least!”

“… I pretty much only watched it when I was with you? I’m not really into it, I just,” he looked down for a quick second and Hartley could feel the discomfiting prickle of shame. “…needed an excuse, a sound to cover up all the beautiful ones you made, so I wouldn’t go crazy and let myself kiss you, let myself fall to pieces. I probably would’ve came way too fast from just listening to you.”

He blushed when he said it, as if it was some deep dark secret and not a statement that was going to make Hart spontaneously combust and cry all at once.

When he was able to speak, the first thing that managed to make it’s way out of his mouth was the frustration. “I’m going to murder you. You complete and utter—I can’t even select a word capable of
“Sorry?”

“You’re damn right you’re sorry. Come on.” He scrambled up from other the other man and started pulling him toward the bedroom by the arm.

“You’re not mad? We’re still having sex?”

Hartley paused, horrified for a moment, playing back how James might consider his outburst. “Is that… did I murder the mood?”

James seemed relieved though, taking back his arm to wrap it around Hartley from behind, taking his ear lobe in his mouth to suck on it and blow in his ear. “Oh I’m very game if you are. I thought you were upset with me.”

Hartley tried not to shudder with how sensitized he was, how sensitized James was making him, how much he melted at having his ears touched. “Just with—the world. But, nnn, arguing with you just gets me going.”

James sounded positively Cheshire in his response, “this is why we’re a Pair, doll. Rile me up all day and see if I don’t salivate.”

Hartley felt a little warm from that, a mental image suddenly conjured up of playing chess with James, naked, foot working him under the table while James tried to focus. He was pretty sure James wasn’t that kinky—the man didn’t even watch porn and basically only knew a single sex position and oh his poor lovers before Hartley, they should probably start a support group—but Hartley was that kinky so he was just going to have to educate James about the finer aspects of hedonism.

But more immediately, he was going to have to educate James about how to have sex the way he liked it.

He tugged the other man into bed with him, and clothing was discarded in record time (except for the moment they bumped heads and Hartley would just pretend that didn’t happen), in between a litany of moans thanks to James being very handsy and Hartley demonstrating that he actually did know what to do with his own mouth when James wasn’t distracting him.

He wasn’t shy about ogling James as soon as they were both naked, his first time getting to take that sight in while the room was bright, light on and evening sun streaming in the window, the dips and curves of his body looking otherworldly. Hartley couldn’t resist stroking the other’s flushed cock, watching James’s eyes flutter closed, his lips fall open. He could feel that in the bleed, almost as if the hand was on his own cock instead, and he wanted to stay just like that for days. But James wasn’t about to let himself be distracted for long, kissing Hartley and, with a burst of nerves, sliding his hand down Hartley’s body.

“Just like I do to myself?”

“Yeah,” he breathed, stretching his legs out a little wider when nimble fingers found his straining dick, hard and pointing upward against his stomach. “Go slow.”

He wanted to be teased, to drag it out, but even just a bit of pressure from James’s hand was making his breath hitch. “Lube,” he pointed at the bedside table and James didn’t hesitate.

“How much?”
“Just get your fingers slick.”

He used too much, but Hartley wasn’t going to fault it for him. He laid back and spread his legs, tilted his hips and watched the nervous tilt to James face, the blush forming on his cheeks and the way he was biting his lip. He didn’t ask for direction though, just slid his fingers down behind Hartley’s balls and back, almost massaging around his entrance, obviously inexperienced at this.

Then a digit caught on the rim and pressed in. They both gasped. James did it again, pressed in deeper and more deliberately, swallowing hard and Hartley could feel how turned on it was making the other man.

“It’s so hot.”

“I’m—aware,” his own voice was strained and reedy.

“How does it feel?”

“Good.”

James hummed and pressed in a second, starting to pump them. He was actually half-decent at it, after the first minute, and seemed ever-more fascinated. “It’s so tight, and hot, and—and fun.”

Hartley groaned, half in humor and half in pleasure. He encouraged James to try scissoring them, told him where to press, how to find his prostrate, swearing loud when James found it, arching off the bed. He let the man work up to a third finger before he was too impatient for more.

“Need you,” he gasped at a hard thrust of James fingers, forgetting himself for a moment, now needy and desperate that would sound. But James just groaned, “yes” and reached for a condom in the side table, rolled it on and looked down at Hartley’s panting body.

“How—”

“My legs go around your waist or higher, just hitch them up and—yeah.”

James did just that, manhandling Hartley like he weighed nothing, biting his lip again and whispering “oh” when the tip of his dick fit itself snuggly against the rim of Hartley’s entrance, blunt and teasing with it’s pressure.

“Yes, ‘oh’, now would you—ooohhh!”

James pressed in and they both moaned. It was such a familiar feeling, James specifically, the feel of him, they way they fit together. But it was so different seeing the awe and desire on his face as he looked down at Hartley, eyes lidded and dark, lips flushed red. He was inconceivably beautiful.

And then they were moving together, gasping, and Hartley was clutching on to him, fingers in his back, his shoulders, mouths alternating between kissing and breathing, moaning. He couldn't stop moaning. It felt incredible, not just the sex but the way the sensations were encompassing everything, their bleed and his entire body, the emotions rolling off James making Hartley emotional too, almost choked up with pleasure and feeling.

So he couldn’t stop the sounds if he tried, the music pouring out of his mouth, gasps and stuttered breaths and desperate whispers of James’s name—“James, god, James, it was always you. I couldn't stop myself from picturing you—I only wanted you—god that feels—James!”—over and over until he was red with shame at not being able to stop it, arching up into each of James’s thrusts, clenching around his cock and begging for more until James kissed him breathless all over again.
When James sucked on his ear and rubbed his cock, ineptly but desperately, on edge, he almost shouted when he came, arching so hard he would have dislodged James if the other man didn’t have a grip around his waist tight enough to hold them together. He moaned as he came down, still orgasming, spasming and James’s thrusts sped up, wild and he clenched Hartley’s hips in his hands and groaned long and low and deep. Hartley forced his eyes to open, to catch James’s expression in the sunlight, thrown back and mouth stretched wide as he pulsed inside of Hartley.

They panted, after, and kissed again, and the only regret Hartley had was that they hadn’t started doing this back when they were in that cramped little trailer on all of their long, warm summer days together.

**********

The evening before the Sugimoto heist, Hartley kissed James before leaving. It was something so domestic and easy, something he’d never really thought he’d be able to have with a partner.

“Don’t wait up, I’ll be out late I’m sure.”

“Stealing art takes a while? Or staying out late with the fairy Godfather takes a while?”

Hartley couldn’t help but enjoy James’s jealousy even if he scowled at the newest in a long line of nicknames James had for Len. “No homophobic nicknames.”

“Sorry, the asshole Godfather.”

Well… it technically was better, so he let it go. “Both. The plan takes a while to set up, watching and going over details, then the extraction, and then bringing the stuff back to the warehouse and examining the loot.”

“And celebrating?”

Hartley smirked, pulling James in with an arched eyebrow. “And just what kind of celebrating do you think I’ll be in the mood to do after stealing?”

“So long as you’re not doing it with him…”

Hartley kissed him. “I won’t be. Besides, he’s got his own Soulmate to worry about.”

“Yeah, skinny brown haired kid, I remember.”

“Wh—you saw his Soulmate?” Skinny and brown haired…

“Yeah, when he clocked me. Wasn’t paying much attention to him, eyes on your precious Snart and his watch.”

“Did you catch a name?”

“Not that I remember? Why—you don’t know skinny’s name?”

Hartley shook his head slowly.

“Why so tense, blue eyes?”

James eyed him oddly then shrugged. “Hurry home.”

“I will.”

James kissed him then in the doorway, deep and affectionate, and if Hartley’s thoughts weren’t chasing themselves around in his head, he’d have indulged it a little more.

“I love you, Hart.”

That evacuated the thoughts about Leonard and his Soulmate (could it really be Barry Allen?) from his brain for a moment. “I—” he swallowed past the rasp. “I love you too, James.”

He could feel the swell in James, the bubbly emotions, and they reflected back into him. “Good. Now go have fun and steal something pretty.”

**********

He dreamt of his days with James and more while he was out cold. Or maybe he didn’t, too deep unconscious to dream. Maybe he just invented those dreams upon waking to help calm his nerves, his body aching. The pain and anxiety were the first things to filter back in to his brain as it came online. That and the cold feel of stone underneath him.

He groaned and tasted blood, trying to blink open his eyes.

“You awake, Hartley?” It was Leonard’s voice.

He groaned again in response, starting to stretch automatically, labeling the hard surface he was on as ‘concrete’.

“Good, because we have a very real problem.”

Chapter End Notes

Welp. That happened. In case it’s not clear (it will be in the next chapter), Hartley and Len got clocked while at the art gallery and knocked out. I wonder who might have done that…

I’m not sure if the voice for Hartley is totally consistent in this chapter, but I tried to keep it in character while showcasing his softer side, at points.

Anyway… sorry for the long delay, but I think this is the second longest chapter? So maybe that helps? In either case, I hope you enjoyed this ☺
Barry woke in the middle of the night to—*something*. He sat up straight in bed, gasping, breathing heavy with pain in the back of his neck that disappeared almost immediately.

A nightmare? He wracked his brain for the memory of it but couldn’t find one. Maybe he was getting better at repressing them—too many nights he still dreamt of black holes and red eyes, of Grodd, of tsunamis. All ghosts.

He got up and poured himself a glass of water, back sitting on the edge of his bed a minute later, sweat sheen on his skin starting to cool.

His alarm clock only registered the time as barely half past one and he was surprised. His dreams normally took him much later into the night. Hell, Len might still be awake at whatever heist he was up to and—

Len.

Barry felt it then—the absence of feeling. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he reached harder for the bleed, for anything. The telltale static of Len sleeping, the phantom feel of his emotions, the steady heartbeat he could sometimes tap into—

Nothing.

His heartbeat ratcheted up. The clock rolled over to the next minute.

There was only the presence of an absence. Not like life pre-bleed. The absence was noticed, felt. Like a weight in his hand that absorbed sensation. Like a body without a pulse. Something that should feel alive but—

“Fuck.”

He scrambled out of bed and to a mirror, lamp on, inspected his Mark. It was whole, unblemished, still white and slightly iridescent, catching the light.

Which could only mean one thing.
The Phan Gallery was empty when Barry got there less than a minute later, fast as his feet would take him. There was ice on some walls, the floor in a streak, and some things had been shattered, glass all across the ground. No signs of any people in the building, but a struggle. No alarms going off even now with all the disarray—someone must have cut the power. For some reason, he didn’t think it was Len.

The parking lot, the perimeter, the streets, none of them with anything suspicious. None of them with Len.

He sped to Cisco’s apartment next and barely spared time to knock on the door to announce his arrival before he was in the other’s house. Cisco flew (fell) out of bed and was shouting his name in confusion before Barry set him upright—

“Len’s missing, need you to track his gun, no time—” and they were gone. Cisco would forgive him for the middle of the night abduction, hopefully, and Barry had the presence of mind to grab his go-bag before speeding the other man to STAR Labs in his pajamas.

“YOW-za Barry Allen—do you know what time it i—oh that is a very dizzy feeling ‘n I’ma need to sit down stat and—” Barry rolled a chair under him before he fell on his ass, plopping him in front of his computer terminal “—thanks man now what did you say at my place?”

“Len’s missing—Eiling has him.”

Cisco went pale then animated, jumped up, and was in gear in seconds, barking orders, including at Barry, getting him to call Caitlin and bring her over while he tracked the cold gun. By the time Barry was back with her Cisco (still in his pj’s) was reporting that the satellites pinged the last use of the cold gun at—

“Phan Gallery in Keystone Cit—”

“I know, I looked there first. He was doing a heist tonight—I need to know where he is now.”

“A heist? Barry!” Caitlin’s disapproving scowl mollified under Barry’s gaze. “Right. Focus. When did he go missing?”

“I woke up—what time is it—twenty minutes ago—” he explained the rest of it in short stops, and only when Caitlin came over and told him to take a deep breath did he realize he was acting erratic.

“Barry—it’s okay, we’re gonna’ find him.”

Cisco nodded, pulling on sweater over his pajama tank top. “We will, man. Nothing can get past us for long.”

“But Mardon—”

“Isn’t your Soulmate, Barry,” Caitlin’s voice was soft and reasonable. “And Eiling didn’t take Leonard because he’s a meta, he took him to have leverage. That’s how I know we’re going to find out what’s going on soon.”

Cisco placed a call to Joe for him, and at Caitlin’s reassurance, Barry ran out of the city, retracing every military outpost where he’d looked for Mardon. He checked every exit out of the city he could think of, wondering if the metas were being held somewhere in the city. The only way he knew how to track Len was the satelittles, so he was back at the labs both sooner and later than he would have liked, asking Cisco if there was any sign of the cold gun on their satellites yet.
“I told you dude—if the cold gun was online, it would be traceable. But right now? It’s gotta’ be powered down and I don’t have a tracking device on it for our satellites, not since Leonard made me remake it for him.”

Barry ground out a sigh and forced himself not to think about that particular memory, another person he cared about missing and in the hands of an enemy.

“As soon as the cold cell is powered back up, I’ve got that temperature signature to ping on my alerts. But unless someone turns it back on, there’s no way to trace him with it.”

“And it’s gotta’ be Eiling, right?”

Caitlin answered, “you said he’s on Blockers, and that’s what you said Leonard said Mardon was on after he was captured.”

He nodded, swallowing hard. “That’s right—I should… fuck, I should call Lisa. Or Mick. No, definitely Lisa. But Len wouldn’t want her to worry.”

“Think you’re past that point, dude.”

Cisco passed him his cellphone and Barry was glad he and Lisa had taken the time to exchange numbers when she’d broken into his lab that one time.

She picked up on the second ring—“This is not a comforting time of night to get a phone call.”

“Len’s missing.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Come again?”

Barry forced himself to relax before his grip on the phone cracked the screen. “He’s missing. He was on a job tonight, maybe you know, and now he’s—I’m being Blocked, in the bleed. It woke me up and I—I’m pretty sure it’s Eiling.”

There was the slow sound of breathing on the phone. “Are you at home?”

“STAR Labs—I’ve been looking for him.”

“Looking—when did he go missing?”

He glanced at a clock. “About two hours ago’

“Two hours?! You wait two hours to tell me this!”

“I said I’ve been looking for him!”

“Where could you look for two hours?”

“Around the state, at every military outpost I can think of. Eiling cleared out of the one he was at before, it’s a ghost town now and I—”

“Why does the military have my brother in the first place?! He’s not a metahuman like Mark!”

Barry’s stomach clenched. “Lisa… maybe you should come to STAR Labs.”
“What do you expect me to tell the Rogues, Barry?!”

“The truth?”

“That their leader is kidnapped and our only lead is that the Flash is ‘working on it’?”

“I don’t know, Lisa! Tell them anything!”

It was well after 4am, no one had any coffee, and Cisco and Caitlin were wincing somewhere by a computer terminal while Barry and Lisa argued across the cortex at one another in increasing volume. She hadn’t taken kindly to finding out he was kidnapped to be used as leverage against Barry.

“Oh perfect, well if I can tell them ‘anything’ then I’ll be sure to let them know that a sadistic general took my brother because his Soulmate doesn’t know how to play nice with others!” Her voice was dripping in acid.

“This isn’t my fault! I’m doing everything I can! I didn’t know he was gonna’ take Len or I never woulda’ let it get this far!”

They both took a breath. Cisco edged closer. “Guys. Can we get a time out?”

Lisa flipped her hair and somehow managed an almost-smile over at him. “Of course, Cisco. Sorry about all this.”

It was alarming how she could do that.

“All I wanna’ say is—if there’s anything Eiling’s aiming for, dissent and discord? Sorta always it? We’re playing into his hand if we fight? Don’t you guys watch movies?”

Barry frowned but Lisa actually let out a little laugh, if brief. “Never change, Cisco.”

He smiled and Barry’s headache was growing. He was happy Lisa liked Cisco, really. He just had other things to worry about, and so did they.

“Barry—I don’t blame you. But I do expect you to make this right before my brother suffers because of it.”

He nodded, tight. “I will. And look, Lisa… just tell the Rogues whatever they need to hear not to have them panic. I mean, how many of you are even left right now? You, Mick and what, Shawna?”

“Three of us is more than enough to do some damage, and don’t forget about Hartley’s Soulmate. I barely know the guy but I know he’s a loose cannon, or didn’t you hear about him busting down Piper’s parents’ door?”

Right, that guy. Barry pinched the bridge of his nose. “The only reason they took Hartley was because he was with Leonard,” he sighed. He didn’t like Hartley, but it wasn’t exactly ideal he was caught up in all of this. Part of Barry was glad that Len at least wasn’t alone. A deeper part of Barry that he wasn’t examining was keenly jealous at the thought of Hartley being the one by Len’s side in a tense situation.

“Hartley, Mark, my brother. Half the Rogues, really. But Barry you…” her eyes widened a bit and
she blinked them fast and stepped closer, a too-stiff smile pulling at her face. “You’re gonna’ get them back. You have to.”

He swallowed hard against the feeling in his throat at seeing her this vulnerable, if only for a moment, underneath the protective anger. He reached out and tentatively put a hand on her shoulder, “of course, Lisa. I’ll do whatever I have to do.”

She nodded and sniffed, but didn’t shrug off the hand. “That’s all I needed to hear.”

**********

Barry got a call from work at 6am. For a moment, he’d almost forgotten work existed. Joe had stopped into the lab an hour before that with fresh coffee for everyone and even some reassuring words for Lisa. He’d left quick though, early to the office to see if he could turn over any leads there before the place filled up, and Eddie was the one who called Barry and told him he was needed at a crime scene.

He wanted to beg off, call in sick, but remembered that half the precinct was still giving him the stink eye and hitting him with stray shoulders and elbows in the halls, and didn’t want to give them the wrong impression of why he was out. He also wasn’t getting anything productive done at the lab, pouring over things he already knew and driving himself mad pacing, waiting for Eiling to inevitably contact them.

He had to contact them, right?

And when he did—maybe Barry should be thinking about that. About terms and conditions, or what Caitlin’s research held, or whatever else Eiling might ask for—

“Barry, hurry up!” Eddie’s voice jarred him out of his thoughts, picking him up at the lab. Barry would’ve preferred to run but it was easier to show up together and not look suspicious at this time of morning. Not to mention he still didn’t have the case details for where they were going, his mind a million other places.

He filled Eddie in on what was going on during the drive and didn’t register much of his surroundings until the car stopped at the Phan Gallery.

As soon as he saw it, dread pooled into something numb in the pit of his stomach. His hands started to shake.

“Barr? Earth to Barry?”

“Hm?” He looked at Eddie.

“Are you okay? You’ve been sitting there staring for like a minute. C’mon, let’s get out and go inside.”

“Right, yeah, just—no sleep.” He told himself to focus. Processing the crime scene was a good idea. There might be clues left by the military about what happened.

He got a briefing from the Keystone police when they passed the yellow tape. The KCPD had called in a few members of the CCPD’s taskforce (which included Eddie) because they suspected
metahuman involvement, as it turned out. For once, Barry didn’t even feel the urge to laugh at the irony.

One of the guys walked them through the scene and Barry’s mind picked out details, catalogued information, falling into familiar rhythms, everything but what was in front of his face muted. Like he’d guessed when he’d shown up during the night, the power had been cut to the entire building, that’s why the alarms hadn’t gone off to alert anyone. There had been a system reroute in the alarm system setup by someone to ensure that the power going down didn’t contact any authorities either. That was high-level stuff, and Barry doubted Hartley and Len would bother with the equipment necessary to make it happen. Equipment that had been since removed.

There was glass everywhere in the photography galleries. Hartley’s gloves? Or something from the military? Water was all across the floor and Barry could guess why.

“What did they take?” Eddie asked the detective liaison while Barry was bending to examine a shattered display case, all its contents still where they belonged.

“Nothing, far as we can tell. That’s the strangest part. Inventory comes back full. But some pieces were displaced.”

Barry stilled. His heart beat heavy in his chest, pounded in his ears. “Which pieces?”

“They’re right over here—one of the staff tells me they’re from some guy named Sugimoto.”

The pieces were out of their frames but had been moved down a hall, away from the glass and water, laid out on a table. Most of them were weird, grayish gradient photos of horizons, all with different levels of haziness. He wasn’t quite sure what the point of them was—he never was with art—but he couldn’t help but think that they looked so… lonely. These photos that Len came here to steal, to adorn his walls or hide away in his stashes somewhere, and all Barry saw when he looked at them was solitude.

All of them except one. When Barry saw it, his heart almost stopped.

It was at the edge of the table, and it was— god it was gorgeous. It was a lightning fern. A perfect white Lichtenberg figure on a black background, looking all for the life of it like a lightning bolt itself.

“I had a lightning scar—called an Lichtenberg figure—running up my front and sides, surrounding the Mark. It was there when I first woke up from the coma but it’s gone too now. It all fades.”

That’s what he had told Len, weeks ago, before the cabin, before Mardon went missing, before any of this. That’s what—

Barry let out a choked sound, halfway between a laugh and a sob.

“Barry?” Eddie’s hand was on his shoulder, face suddenly too near his, confused. He hadn’t told him yet—

“This is where—this was Len,” he tried to pull it together but it came out distorted, the obvious creak of suppressed emotion forcing its way out in his voice. He took a deep breath.

“I shouldn’t be here—I can’t—” fuck of course he couldn’t—“it’s a conflict of interest—I have to go.”

“Conflict of—oh shit—c’mon, let’s get you out of here.”
The Keystone detective was looking at them in complete bewilderment as Eddie ushered Barry out the door. Barry broke away from him almost immediately, forcing his roiling emotions to subside. He was exhausted and frustrated with himself and the situation but more than anything, he was angry.

He wasn’t about to let Eiling do this to him, take and hurt his Soulmate. He pulled his hands through his hair on the way to the street, away from the other detectives, while Eddie placed a call to Joe. Barry’s own phone rang while he did.

“Barry?” It was Caitlin. “Eiling sent a sort of messa-…enger.”

**********

When he got back to STAR Labs, it was approaching 8am and Kane was standing in the cortex. She was standing there with a creepy smile and otherwise still. There, holding a tablet, screen facing out.

“When is Leonard?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, I’m afraid.” She smiled in an unnerving way that really didn’t reach her eyes.

“Then what d’you want with me?!”

She arched an eyebrow. “It’s not what I want that matters here, Flash. Now that you’ve arrived, the general will see you and your… team.”

He glanced over at Cisco and Caitlin, both of whom seemed uneasy looking at Kane, and Lisa was there too, her features caught in a frown.

Kane pressed a button on the screen and Barry stood up straighter, refocusing on her and taking a step toward it. Kane’s eyes flashed him a warning about getting too close. As if he wanted to be on the receiving end again of what Cisco was referring to as her ‘mad blood-bending skills’.

The screens flickered to reveal Eiling.

“Flash, Mr. Ramon, Dr. Snow. Even Miss Snart, I see. Good morning.”

“Cut the crap, Eiling. Where’s Leonard?”

Eiling’s expression didn’t waver. “Kane.”

She pressed a button on the screen and it split into two feeds: one of Eiling’s face, and the other of Len, tied to a wooden chair, feet in a bucket of water, pants rolled up to his knees. Barry went cold and flashed closer to the screen without thinking, all but grabbing it from Kane, hands on either side of it even though her grasp didn’t let up.

“Len!”

“Barry?” Len’s face shot up and he must be looking into a similar screen—

“Are you okay?”

“Lenny?” Lisa was beside him in a heartbeat.
“Lise—either of you, do not give them whatever they’re asking for—don’t even think about—”

Kane flicked a button and the screen cut back to just Eiling. “Bring. Him. Back.” He ground out at her smug face.

“No.”

“Bring my brother back this instant you—”

“Allen,” Eiling’s voice interrupted Lisa and Barry glared at the screen.

“What is wrong with you?! You’re torturing him?!” He couldn't feel it, couldn't feel Len, he wouldn't know if—

“No yet, Allen. And we won’t need to, if this goes smoothly.”

He forced himself to calm down enough to step back. Cisco and Caitlin had crowded a little closer too but didn’t seem to want to approach Kane. He didn’t blame them.

“What do you want?”

“My demands are simple. First, I want Caitlin Snow’s research. All of it. On the metagene, on your powers, her private notes. Everything. Second, I want the Flash to publically endorse the programs we’re running with metahumans. An interview with the Picture News should do; I’m sure Miss West could help with that. Third, I want to negotiate the sale of STAR Labs to the military.”

Barry felt sick, jaw set and locked. He didn’t know what to say. It was—he had to do it. He had to. No matter how wrong it felt.

“If I do that, you’ll give me back Len, unharmed, and Hartley?”

“So you know about Rathaway?” Eiling’s voice was a displeased rumble. “Don’t be greedy, Allen.”

“He’s—” Barry let out a clenched breath. “I want all of them. The Rogues. I want for you to stop holding anyone against their will.”

“They’re criminals. All I’ve done is incarcerated them like they deserve.”

“Without a trial,” Lisa spat at the General, “with torture like some—”

“Maybe you should ask the Flash about his own private prison, Miss Snart.”

Her face fell into something hard. “There is a world of difference between locking people up to save others when you have no other choice and locking them up to hurt them.”

Barry couldn't help the jolt of surprise at Lisa being the one to defend his choices.

“No need to argue semantics. You, both of you, will get Snart back in one piece. That will be for cooperating with Snow’s research. The rest we can consider, Allen, after you meet my other demands and if you manage to behave.”

He knew he couldn’t agree to that, and knew he couldn’t not agree to it. Len would hate leaving Hartley and the Rogues behind, but there was no way Barry could just let him be—

“And what, exactly,” Caitlin stepped up beside him on the side opposite from Lisa, voice reedy with tension, “do you intend to with my research on the metagene, general? Or my research on Barry?”
Eiling actually looked a little less evil when he directed his attention to Caitlin. “Dr. Snow, your research has incalculable value to the United States military. I’m sure Allen has informed you that our current recruitment methods for metahumans aren’t what we consider a permanent solution to an era of superhuman fighters. Research on the metagene will allow us to seek out potential recruits who serve to make a difference for their country—”

“Seek out how? Criminal DNA registries? Bone marrow donation registries? Do you plan to comb medical records, steal from blood banks? If you aren’t just testing soldiers then who else are you looking into?”

“There will be leads, doctor, families with metahumans already, and we can access medical records as needed. It’s no concern of yours but it isn’t above the military’s jurisdiction to—”

“—families? What, do you plan to brainwash people’s kids into volunteering to be baby soldiers to be experimented on—”

“—if we have can find metahumans before they’re even born, Dr. Snow—”

“Wait what?! Barry cut in, finally, loud. “You’re seriously planning to use this to locate kids, babies? Are you insane—”

“It’s no concern of yours, Allen—”

“It’s all our concern!” Cisco jumped in, appearing on Lisa’s other side. “If you wanna’ raise little supersoldiers—and what, buy STAR Labs, use the accelerator to turn these kids into metahumans —”

“We don’t need your accelerator for that, Ramon. We have our own methods for making the latent gene express.”

The three of them went still together, with only Lisa not tensed up at that. Even Kane looked stiff. Barry’s eyes raked her face. Had she been affected by the particle accelerator blast, or had something else—

“How is that possible?” Caitlin asked first, voice barely more than a whisper but face scrunched in confusion. “We found that it was the dark matter from the blast that caused the gene to express, and you can’t create dark matter without an accelerator…” she looked at Cisco, “can you?”

“No way I know of.”

They all looked at Eiling. Barry had a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach he couldn’t shake.

“My methods aren’t a matter of public discussion. Rest assured that I can activate the metagene, and that it is in your best interests to provide me the research to know who best to use my methods. The results, when someone does not have the gene, are less than savory.”

Oh. Oh fuck—“you’re killing people as test subjects?”

“We’re advancing science. Until we have access to Dr. Snow’s research, we’re using our own trials to catalogue the DNA of those who survive and those who don’t.”

“You’re a monst—”

“Your opinion on my intentions doesn’t matter, Allen. The only thing you need to worry about is what I’ll do to your Soulmate if I don’t get what I want. Research, public endorsement, and the sale
of STAR labs. Give me that and Snart walks free, more than a criminal like him deserves.”

Barry swallowed. “I need time.”

He hoped Lisa wouldn’t hate him for asking for that much, at least.

“To meet my demands?”

“To think about it. To come back with a counter-offer. It’s not my research and it’s not just my choice. I need—”

“I’ll give you twenty four hours. After that, if you refuse to comply, you can consider Snart one of my next test subjects.”

Without waiting for Barry’s response, he called Kane’s name and she shut off the screen, a touch of smug resolve back in her face. “We’ll be in touch, Flash.”

**********

Barry had to go to work. He was pacing after Kane had sauntered out, anything to keep himself from shaking, but Eddie had had to tell Singh why Barry left the crime scene and now he had to go and report in directly.

It was the last place he wanted to be. He wanted to be with Caitlin and Cisco, who had called Iris and Ronnie and Martin. He wanted to be with Lisa, who was frayed and worried and hiding in Cisco’s little workroom when he left, needing space to herself to process. He wanted to be out hunting down Eiling.

He wanted to be anywhere other than walking into the precinct to tell his boss that his Soulmate broke into a gallery the night before and pretend he had no idea it was going to happen. Anywhere other than seeing the faces of his colleagues who hated Len sneer at him, each of them with no idea, just no clue.

He didn’t catch any elbows on his way in. The entire place went silent as soon as he was spotted. Lovely. Joe was moving over, but Singh beat him to the punch.

“Allen, in here.”

Barry sidestepped Joe and no one said a word until he was closing the Captain’s door, at which point he caught the sound of all of them starting to speak at once right before it clicked closed.

He tried not to let it make him bitter. And he’d thought being the son of a criminal had had a stigma.

The interview with the Captain wasn’t that bad. “No sir, I didn’t know he was going to do that” and “no sir, I didn’t know before I was at the crime scene and realized it there” and “I’ve already handed off my preliminary notes to Eddie, I didn’t take anything with me from the scene” and so on. Singh didn’t drill him. Spivot took notes and nodded before handing him his own statement to read back over and sign, along with a simple declaration.

It was, oddly, one of the easiest parts of his day. Something to focus on other than the gnawing absence of his NAB. Easy lies to spin, easy questions to answer, from two people who wanted
nothing more from him than to get this over with as quick as the three of them could.

It was after the interview that things got ugly.

He caught some stares on his way out of Singh’s office, had a whispered conversation with Joe agreeing to get out of there and meet him at the STAR labs, and was up the stairs, down the hall, and almost at his lab to pick up a few things when a hand landed on his shoulder.

His speed always kicked in when this something like this happened. He had to check the urge to whip around and throw the person against the wall. To speed into his suit and throw a punch or three. To do anything but just... stay. Slow and sloppy, while the hand took grip and turned him around fast (so slow, like through jello, and when he saw who it was he rolled his eyes too fast for the man to see and let himself resume normal speed). He stumbled back in all his gawky glory, letting some anger up to the surface.

“What was that for, Ramirez?”

“You and Snart—”

He stood up straighter, unsurprised, and started heading toward his lab, the other in step behind him as he replied. “We’ve been over this. Just a few days ago, in fact.”

“You help him pull this job, Allen?”

“Excuse me?” Barry whirled around, standing in the threshold of his lab. He would’ve shoved the other man if he thought he could get away with it.

“You heard me. I know the Captain thinks this is cute ‘n all but—”

“What is your deal? Just because he’s my Soulmate doesn’t mean I’m about to help him steal things—I’m the one who realized it was him and told the KCPD so knock it off!”

“He’s your Soulmate ‘n he’s a scumbag—you know that right?” The detective stepped closer, into Barry’s space. “He’s a goddamn supervillain and you’re protecting him. You know where he lives, where he sleeps, and you just let—”

“Hey! What—you think I’m going to turn my Soulmate in? Ambush him? Even the law doesn’t pressure me to do that.”

“You should do it ‘cause it’s the right thing to do—”

“Look I don’t have time for whatever this is turning into—” he moved back and took a step toward his desk.

“What, you going to meet up with him right now? Laugh about his little heist?”

Barry stilled, anger and anxiety warring him into a steady, unmoving state.

“You are, aren’t you? Off for a little play date. Does he dress up in that parka in bed too, Allen, or do you—”

Barry had Ramirez against the wall by the door in a second, hissing into his face, “do not ever talk about my Soulmate like that agai—”

Ramirez shoved him back and he resisted the urge to use the speed force with every fiber of his being.
“Don’t touch me, Allen. You don’t touch me.” His face was dark with anger, spitting mad, finger in Barry’s face and he batted away.

“What, afraid criminal Soulmates are contagious?”

“He’s a murderer, and you defend him. You know how sick that is? Just like your dear old dad—oh wait, he was innocent all that time, right? You think Snart’s just misunderstood too? Same with that Wells guy who murdered your old lady, he fall in love with you too? Left you everything and you’re still here. You seem to attract a lot of killers, Allen. Something we should know about you?”

That was—Barry was apoplectic. Only the speed force alive in his veins gave him enough time to reel in the urge to punch the other man in square in the face, getting his hands in Ramirez’s jacket instead, pulling them close, hissing in his face—“what is your problem with me? Seriously? Do you hate me so much that you want to pick fights over things I can’t control!”

He was shrugged off, Ramirez pushing him back, but didn’t threaten Barry again just pulled away with a disgusted curl to his nose. “The guy tried to kill the Flash and one CCPD’s own is sucking his cock and no one’s got the balls to do anything about it—what part of that should I be okay with?”

Barry’s hands shook with repressed rage. “You have no idea—”

“I was there, Allen! The night he and his partner tried to kill the Flash. The Flash is a goddamn hero and your ‘Soulmate’ makes a priority of trying to off him—”

“That has nothing to do with you!”

The other’s man face and voice got deadly serious. “The Flash saved my life.”

Barry stilled, and he took that as an invitation to keep talking.

“The night Morillo died, god rest his soul, when that freak gorilla took us all—you got no idea, Allen, no idea what that’s like.” His voice was strained, like he meant, but Barry did know. He knew too well. “Someone inside your head, the pain. I was ready to get shot down and the Flash saved my life and pulled me from the line of fire. So I got an issue with anyone who’s gunning for him, Allen. And that means you and your shitstain Soulmate.”

And just like that, Barry didn’t have it in him to be angry at Ramirez anymore. He didn’t have anger left for anyone but the ones who deserved it. He felt tired. So tired. “Rami—Alex. Alex, I’m sorry that happened. And I’m sorry about Morillo. He was a real hero that night, dying in the line of duty, responding first on the scene.” Barry thought about his body, about the bullet he couldn’t catch, about his bone-deep fear of Eddie caught in Grodd’s clutches. “I know… I know what it’s like to lose the people you care about. It takes a part of you.”

Barry looked down and drew in a breath, refusing to think about Len being kidnapped. “But Len and the Flash? You’re wrong. Len doesn’t want him dead. He saved the Flash’s life. The night you’re talking about, in the street with that gorilla. There’s news footage, you can google it, but they didn’t report on Cold. It didn’t fit the narrative.” He offered the other man a deprecating smile. “They said it was a military tool that hit the Gorilla and caused it to trip but it wasn’t—it was the cold gun, and Len, and he helped save the Flash more than once that night.”

“You expect me to believe that? Why would Captain Cold save the Flash’s life?”

“Because… because he’s not who you think he is. Who most of the world thinks he is. Who… I thought he was, at first.”
Ramirez was looking at him and Barry sighed.

“He’s a good man. I know you don’t believe me, and honestly, I don't care if you believe me. But even for all he’s done, all the people he’s hurt, there’s so much more to Len, so much good in him. Not just because of the Flash and not because of anything to do with me, either. He’s always been a good man. He just hides it very very well some days.”

The detective nodded, slow, mollified now if not actually agreeing. With an exhale, he moved toward the door, but looked back at Barry. “You really do love him, huh?”

Barry stilled for all of a second, but it was as natural as breathing. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

Chapter End Notes

What a weird time for him to finally come to terms with it and sort of say it!! Except not that weird a time at all. But it probably seems like it on the surface. More on that later. I promise though that it’s not just a “he’s in danger and now I love him because I'm about to lose him” thing. There’s a reason it took until now, and a lot of that ties into how he needed to have that conversation with Len and process everything in it and come to terms with that whole “life I was maybe supposed to live but now the timeline changed” thing. He needed a nudge. The timing just happened to, uh, suck. ☺

Anyway, hope you didn’t mind this final scene. To be fair, Ramirez is having a rough go of it. His partner died (thanks, Grodd) just a few short weeks ago and he just got back from leave after the Grodd attack to this whole “Allen is Soulmate is Cold” stuff at the office and he’s not coping all that well. On the one hand, Barry presents a seemingly easy target for misdirected rage, but Ramirez also did feel a need to sort of ‘defend’ the Flash, a sense of deep-rooted gratitude for him saving his life, and he feels a sense of betrayal that no one is doing anything about Snart (a known killer, out to hurt the Flash) being Bonded to one of their own.

Beyond that, the chapter title and songs took me FOREVER to select, and I only settled on this chapter title because I realized I hadn't used it before. Realistically, I should have used this up front and swapped this term out with something like "Bond" but meh, it's going here. It's just the science of studying Soulmates, which technically intersects with some of Caitlin's other research, so it fits as well as any other terms I have left to use up, heh.

ps - Sugimoto's Seascapes and again, Lightning Fields 225 (scroll through the gallery to 15/20)

pps - i promise i proofread but never hesitate to point out typos.
Lisa spent her morning with the Flash’s little team. Mostly with Cisco, after Barry disappeared off to work. She chatted him up as best as she could, trying to do anything to distract herself from her brother being missing, getting as much information out of him and Snow as she could about the situation, anything Len hadn’t bothered to tell her.

But it wasn’t long before Barry reappeared in a burst of lightning with papers flying everywhere. Lisa was almost amused at how nonplussed the two scientists were at this, each dropping paperweights on piles as if on cue, Snow catching the one that tried to fly past her face.

“Joe’s on his way.”

“Thought you were at a crime scene.”

“I was—Len’s crime scene. Not really a place they want me right now. I got sent home for the day.”

Lisa arched an eyebrow, “well that is convenient.”

She wasn’t quite sure why that earned her a scowl from the younger man but whatever it was, it was his issue. She didn’t have time to ask either, because a moment later, West strolled into the cortex with a folder in his hand, brandishing it ahead of him. “I got something!”

Barry sped forward and plucked it from his fingers, leafing through it at top speed. Seeing him use his powers for something so... mundane was weird.

“Something?” Cisco pushed off the desk he was leaning on next to Lisa.

“Dr. Elias?” Barry looked up in confusion at West. “What does this guy have to do wi—”

“Dr. Darwin Elias?” Caitlin whirled around mid-step on her way to the computer terminal and Lisa had a moment of sympathy where she thought the other woman might topple in her heels she’d spun so fast but the doctor had more grace than Lisa had given her credit for, marching fast toward the folder in Barry’s hands.

“That’s the guy,” West answered, looking at her, “you know him?”

She snatched the folder, “it can’t be…”

“A soldier on the military’s side of the taskforce let the name slip to me. Turns out not everyone in
Eiling’s command is a drone, ‘n some of them are pretty worried about what this guy is cooking up. That’s all the information on him I could gather before I made my way here.”

Lisa’s eyes were trained on Snow’s face, which had drained of its already-pale color, white as a sheet. “It is him, but… he should be in prison.”

“What?” all three men asked in unison. Lisa edged closer, trying to get a glimpse of the folder. All she saw was a picture of a decently-handsome guy with brown hair in a lab coat.

“Dr. Elias, he rather famously lost his license to practice and got tossed from Gotham City University’s biomedical department after it was found that his experiments seriously breached the Copenhagen Convention.”

Ah—oh. The Copenhagen Convention, the international laws protecting Soulmates. Lisa knew it was strict, but a researcher violating it must have meant something pretty dark if it was enough to get him tossed out on his ass.

“That part was in the file,” West nodded, “but he got off on appeal. Apparently experimenting with drugs on unwitting Soulmates isn’t enough to get you into prison in Gotham.”

“He got off? He was abusing psychiatric patients and experimenting on the homeless!”

Lisa’s skin started to crawl hearing about this guy. “And this man has my brother at his mercy?”

“Looks like it.” That was West.

Barry snatched the folder back from Snow. “If he was studying symbolonogy, what’s he doing with metahuman research?”

“Oh—”

“Oh no.”

Cisco and Snow looked at one another and the rest of them looked at the two.

“What?” Lisa couldn’t stand whatever they were silently saying to one another. Snow tucked her hair back and seemed to be building up to say something, but Cisco beat her to it:

“He made Grodd.”

Lisa had no idea what that meant. West swore and Barry looked alarmed. “He made Grodd? I thought that Wells and Eiling—”

“He worked with Wells because he knew more about psychic abilities than anyone, at that point, before his research was taboo. It was when I was just starting here as an intern,” Caitlin replied. “I almost forgot about that. The only reason I followed his career was because I’d met him. When his studies came to light, STAR Labs distanced ourselves from him. I forget I even told you that, Cisco.”

“We did have a lot of time swapping stories as the only two employees left.”

Lisa couldn’t help it, she had to ask, “who or what is a ‘Grodd’?”

The explanation wasn’t comforting in the slightest.
They broke for a while after sharing information. West had his actual job to focus some energy on, Barry needed to run after his pacing drove them all mad, and Caitlin and Cisco were making calls to their friends from Star City to see if there was anything they could dig up on this Dr. Elias that might help them out. Lisa wandered out of the cortex, feeling restless.

She had always thought STAR labs was creepy. Not just a bit creepy, but full-blown horror-movie setting. It was, as far as she knew, still classified as a hazard zone, with whole sections of the building permanently closed. The warehouse entrance area was cavernous and mostly empty, each sound reverberating before it was swallowed by the concrete. The pipeline was beyond shiver-inducing, garishly colored in the hall that had offshoots to it. She’d never actually looked into the accelerator itself, only the cells the team had made when she’d had to help with their little ‘plan’ to transport the metahumans out of town, but she didn’t want to look either.

The silence in the entirety of the structure always felt oppressive. The dimly lit halls with their bleak grey walls never seemed to end. Or never did end, always in a circle; it felt like going nowhere. No wonder the three people who actually spent their time here seemed to use approximately none of the research facility beyond a few rooms on the 6th floor. Each side room she poked her head into looked more barren or creepy than the last.

Her heels made a click-clack on the floor with each step that echoed down the forever-curving corridor and after two loops of the space, she couldn’t handle it anymore. She dodged into a side room, the only one with warmer lighting and things strewn about. It almost reminded her of Len and Hartley’s workbenches back at the warehouse, or any of Lenny’s spaces really. Always a sort of organized chaos that made sense only to him.

She was looking over half-finished metal objects, wires poking out everywhere, when a voice startled her from her reverie.

“Lisa?” Cisco was at the door of the little room she’d holed herself up in. “I see you found my personal office.”

Of course it would be Cisco’s space she landed it. “Only room around here that doesn’t make me feel like I walked into a horror movie.”

He laughed like she said something funny and slipped into the room, “yeah, the lab can be spooky. Especially at the time you showed up last night. I’ve pulled a lot of all-nighters in this place and I swear it’s haunted.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it.” She really wouldn’t. How many people had died in the building due to the blast, after all? Or even since then, maybe.

“Hey I came to check though, you need coffee? I just put on a pot.”

“I could be convinced,” Lisa pushed thoughts of death and destruction from her head and moved to follow him. She didn’t normally drink coffee, but she’d been up half the night with worry and it might help.

“Kitchen’s this way.”

“There’s a kitchen here?”
Cisco shrugged as she followed him out into the still-creepy hall, toward the elevator.

“It was just a break room once upon a time, back when there was an actual cafeteria in operation here.”

“You’re kidding me.” It made sense but it was impossible to picture.

“Trust me—scientists run off coffee and carbs.”

He smiled and she tried to in return, but it was wan and she knew it, too worried about Leonard. Still, she offered, “I wouldn’t know. I think us criminals normally run off booze and adrenaline.”

He laughed and she took it as a victory while they made their way into the elevator and down. “Well we get by with plenty of that here too.”

She didn’t doubt it, lapsing into silence on the elevator ride down. The 5th floor was way creepier than the 6th floor, as it turned out, automatic lights flicking on as they made their way toward the kitchen, the only room already illuminated, but Cisco took it in stride. Maybe he didn’t really believe in ghosts. Lisa told herself she didn’t either. Mostly.

“Cream and sugar?” he asked, pouring her a fresh mug.

“Let me,” she took the cup and started pouring in a liberal amount of the cream Cisco handed her. She couldn’t drink the sludge that was black coffee. She didn’t know why people felt the need to put themselves through that, honestly. Len was always drinking the stuff black and cold and gross and she was sure it was going to give him ulcers. As it was, it was almost too acidic for her own stomach without plenty of cream thrown in.

“Wow, haha, shoulda’ found a way to make you a latte.”

She felt a little embarrassed, “I don’t normally drink the stuff. I get up at 6 most mornings to go for a run, and that’s enough to wake me up.”

He whistled through his teeth, “that’s dedication.”

She shrugged and sipped the now-syrupy drink in her hand. It wasn’t really—dedication, that was. It was just… necessity. Her head spun itself round and round if she wasn’t running, moving. All her energy had to go somewhere, and it was easier to direct it to something before the day began, or else she’d be tense the rest of it.

That and… she couldn’t afford to slow down, or to stumble. People like Len, like Mick… they could afford to make mistakes. People who could get in and out of prison on a network of favors and intimidation alone, on her hard work to make sure they never stepped into it. People like her brother could charm and kill and piss off Vincent and Frank Santini and live to tell about it.

People like Shawna had ability, had options. People like Hartley had genius. People like Mark Mardon had more raw power than they knew what to do with.

But people like Lisa? People like Lisa worked. They filled in the gaps other people missed. They picked up the pieces when their brothers made plans too reckless with best friends that liked fire too much. They simmered their way into kidnapping the mark based on their observations because they’d been taught to observe and manipulate because they had to. Because survival depended on it.

So she pushed herself. Worked herself. Harder than anyone. The best driver for the mob. The only Rogue without a record, no priors, too fast to catch, too good to find. One of the best damn shots
you’d find in Central City. And definitely the most beautiful. Everything was a weapon. Even her glittering eyeshadow and dark lashes. Everything that could be. Because it had had to be.

Len understood. But he’d only ever understand half. Because the gazes of men didn’t linger on his waist and his hips with dilated pupils. Because he might’ve learned to cajole women but he’d never had to make himself vulnerable and surrounded by a group of dangerous men in order to create a diversion (not that he’d ever put her there, but she put herself there because she understood which risks were worth taking, balanced the cards in a far more reasoned way than her brother ever could). Because the visceral fear Len felt would always hold a different flavor than the fear she’d taught herself to stop feeling by the time she hit 19.

Lisa learned to leave the fear behind when she was too young, still. She learned to leave it all behind. She learned it when she had so much she wanted to run from—her father, her own feelings, her frustrations, the boys who looked too long, the teachers who chastised her grades and the ones who looked so pitying like they knew what her life was like but wouldn't do anything about it. When she learned to skate. When she discovered that the feeling between when her blades left the ice for a jump and when she landed felt like flying. Like gliding.

Running wasn’t like skating. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t the swoop in her stomach when she was suspended in air. But it was something. And if she could stretch her stride, sweat down her back, lungs pumping hard, one foot in front, the other behind, for one nanosecond in each single step, she felt like it could come close.

She woke up at 6am and ran because it was the only thing that kept her anxiety on a leash, and it was a reminder of how hard she worked, had to work. And it wasn’t like she could sleep later than that now anyway, hadn’t been able to in years.

But she couldn’t find words to explain any of that to Cisco. So when he continued to say that the only thing he did at 6am was complain that it was 6am, she just smiled and told him that that was because he spent his entire evenings up saving the city. It earned her another smile from him, and she relaxed a little with it. But only a little.

Because she had to ask… “this doctor, who has my brother, and this General… how worried should I be, Cisco?”

His smile dropped, “to tell you the truth… I don’t know. I do know that Barry’s gonna’ do anything he can to get Leonard back. He’d move literal mountains for the people he loved. Even run back in time if he had to.”

She blinked. Was that even possible?

“But what Eiling’s asking is gonna’ put a lot of people in danger—anyone with the metagene, any metahuman who’s not already on the military’s radar, families and kids even, and that’s even before the Flash gives a public endorsement that might make innocent people trust in the military with their powers. It’s not… it’s not ideal. Barry would die before he let Eiling hurt your brother, but…”

“But this isn’t dying,” Lisa knew. “This is sacrificing others instead. At least how he sees it.”

Cisco nodded, tight and obviously uncomfortable. She got it, she really did. Because Lenny was the same way. He’d put himself in front of their father’s fists a thousand times, but he’d never willingly let Lisa put herself in danger to help him, or anyone else. Barry’s problem was that he didn’t just have one person, one little sister, to protect: he had the whole damn world.

“Heroes,” she would’ve laughed but honestly felt like crying. Her voice quavered and she pushed
the feelings back. “Can’t live with them, can’t save your dumbass brother without them.”

Cisco laughed and at least something in the world was still beautiful.

But her phone vibrated a second later, interrupting the moment. It was the bedazzled one, for personal use. A girl might as well enjoy the little things in life, after all. She dropped her coffee on the counter to fish the device from her pocket, the dark black and gold of her nails contrasting against the glittery fake stones.

It was Shawna. “I gotta’ go.” She responded to the call with a text, on my way to the warehouse soon, with some news. Wait there.

Cisco looked honestly a little sad for a moment, like he was sad to see her go. “Totally, yeah. I’ll uh, tell the others you’ll be back later?” There was a note of honest-to-go hope there, and her heart actually hurt because of it.

“Sure, I’ll be back.” She slipped the phone into her pocket and smiled again, even if it was bittersweet. She should tell him she was seeing someone, much as what she was doing with Ross didn’t really count as a relationship or monogamous, and much as she needed to end it sooner rather than later. She should tell him it meant a lot, that he actually cared about her, even if she shouldn’t. She should tell him she wished she could deserve a guy like him. But she must have hesitated too long because then he was speaking again.

“You know…” he offered, tucking his hair behind his ear and she resisted the urge to do the same with hers. “We’re gonna’ find him, Lisa. Your brother. I just want you to know… it’s gonna’ be okay. I promise”

“Thank you, Cisco. I hope you’re right.”

“I’m pretty smart, you know. I’m right a lot.”

She laughed, waving goodbye in the doorway. Smart, considerate, sweet, and funny. If only.

**********

The restaurant front was quiet when she got in, just closed again until dinner. It opened for lunch from 11-2 and closed up again until 5 for dinner, staying open late into the night. The only people who ever showed up for lunch were wayfarers and criminals, people looking to ask her brother for favors, but that was always fine. But at this time in the afternoon, the place was a ghost town.

She pulled her bike around back and into the open bay door. Shawna was there, and Hartley’s guy. Shawna was at her side with a blink before she even had her helmet off.

“Lise what is going on? I’ve been texting you all afternoon! Where’s the boss? And Hartley? James said Hart didn’t come home last night and that’s not like him and now James says their bleed is all messed up and—”

“I know.” Lisa’s face slipped into neutrality as she stepped off her bike. “I was just getting an update about that.”

“About what?” James cut it, arms crossed and looked tense and angry, for all his bravado. “Your
ugly brother try’n make off with my Soulmate along with the goods or—”

“Don’t be an idiot, Jesse. They were taken.”

Shawna’s face turned almost sick and James’s went slack. Lisa fortified her own mask and walked over to Lenny’s table, the one with the notes and the maps on Mardon’s capture.

“It was the military, like Mark. But don—”

“What would the military want with them? They aren’t even metahumans! How do you even kn—”

“I know because Leonard’s Soulmate told me.”

Shawna’s jaw hung. James’s eyes narrowed. “What’s he got to do with—”

“Snart is Bonded?! He’s Marked?!”

Lisa winced, glancing at Shawna. “My brother is very private about his personal affairs. But he is Bonded and his Soulmate has a… unique line to some information. He’s the one who helped Len put together that it was the military and not the Santinis who took Mark. And now, the military has turned their eye to Len and Hartley.”

Shawna looked like she had a million questions and her mouth couldn’t decide which one to ask first. Thankfully, James beat her to the punch. “So what beef’d the military have with them? Shouldn’t the fuzz or the FBI or anyone else care, not some platoon of jarheads?”

Lisa wondered if James talked so weird because he grew up in the circus or because of his personality. “It’s Lenny they want. Hartley just got caught in the crossfire. Len knows… people, and things, and metahumans. And there are people he can be used against.”

“What—”

“Who—”

“I won’t say more.”

They both looked at her with disbelief.

“My Soulmate has been missing for weeks—”

“My Soulmate is missing for no reason—”

“And we’re working on it.”

“But who is we?!”

She exhaled, and when she did, her tight expression loosened a bit. “I know this is hard, Shawna. It is for all of us. But I’m telling you everything I can. I decided not to lie because you both deserve to know the truth. But Len’s Soulmate is in a complicated spot. He’s pulling a lot of resources for us, but he’s not gonna’ let Len or the others sit wherever the military’s holding them. He’s checked every military outpost in the state already and he’s negotiating with that General in charge of all this mess.”

Shawna’s face screwed up. “He has that type of connections? What is he, the mayor?”

James shook his head, “he’s just a kid.”
“You met him?” Lisa’s voice came out sharper than she intended.

“Not really. Snart socked me one while the kid tried to pull him along.”

Huh. She filed that information away for a later date. And then she sighed because, well, the cat was out the bag. The Santinis knew about Barry, which meant the Rogues weren’t far behind knowing, honestly. It would be better to hear it from her than anyone else.

“He’s not the mayor or just some kid… he’s with the CCPD. That’s why Lenny didn’t say anything.”

James whistled and Shawna looked up sharp and smart. “He’s with a cop?!”

“Not exactly. But it was never my place to say, even if you’ll hear about it through the grapevine before long anyway and it isn’t worth hiding anymore. Just know that Lenny, and that I, trust this guy. And he’s doing everything he can to get my brother and the rest of them back.”

Shawna sat down in one of the chairs, forehead resting on her hands. “He’s just a cop. A cop can’t do shit. I can’t believe this… no Mark, no Hartley, no Snart… we’re next. We’re all next. They won’t stop…”

James beat Lisa to her side. “Hey doll, no no no. It won’t be like that. We’ll get them back. We’ll go find Snart’s boytoy Soulmate and demand to help. Find out everything he knows. If he’s got connections with the military, if he’s also some Senator’s kid or something, it’ll be okay.”

Senator’s kid, if only.

“Maybe for Hartley, but Mark is a criminal, and so is Snart. The military won’t just let them go for no reason. They’re gonna’s wind up somewhere I can’t find them, somewhere I can’t get into—”

“No, James is right.” Lisa cut in. “Shawna, I know it’s hard. I know you want to despair. I know it feels hopeless right now, half of us gone and one evil bastard at the core. But I promise, I’ve never met a box that can hold Len and I don’t think for one second that Hartley’s about to take this lying down. Mark has probably already taken out half the guys they sent to his cell. You know they’re still fighting. And if they can, we can too.”

Shawna looked up at her with wet eyes and voice like fire. “Lisa—I want to kill them all.”

Barry might take some exception with that, but in Lisa’s perspective, “we’ll do whatever we have to, Shawna.”

James’s expression was hard too, and they all nodded decisively. And then she realized they were looking at her and waiting, expectant. She was in charge. She was the one with the information, and it was time to come up with a plan. One that wasn’t necessarily going to wait on Barry Allen to maybe play nice and maybe get Hartley and Mark back if he even managed to get Len. She didn’t trust that General as far as she could throw him.

Lisa picked up her brother’s notes. “I guess we should get to work. Because wherever they are, we’re going to need a plan.”
She phoned Mick not long later, and before she could even tell him her brother was missing, he said he was on his way and hung up.

Len’s notes had information she hadn’t expected, written in his cipher than only she knew. Military metahumans he knew about, information on Eiling, the men he commanded, the ones on the taskforce for metahumans, the history of everything related to it. It was invaluable, though she could only imagine what plans he’d had floating around in his head to get past Rainbow Raider, Kane, Nimbus, and some guy who could make earthquakes (seriously? Lisa was starting to hate superpowers), on top of everything else.

By her estimation, they would need the Flash’s help and then some. She laid out all the information she had with the team and her ideas for how to best use Shawna’s skills, getting as much information as she could from James on his own non-super abilities. Stacking it up, she seriously hoped Eiling didn’t double-cross Barry.

“Where’s yer brother?” Mick’s voice startled her out of her plans, in the doorway that led to the restaurant.

“About that…” she stepped toward him and then stopped, stomach dropping before she could register why. “Mick…” his eyes were red-rimmed. Mick’s eyes. With something haunted in his face, three-day old stubble growth not hiding how sallow his cheeks looked. “Oh Mick…” she whispered.

He turned his face away. “Where’s Snart?”

“Is Pam…”

Mick grunted. “In her sleep, on morphine. She didn’t feel any pain.”

Lisa strode toward him decisively, looped his arm in hers and dragged him toward the stairs that would lead to Lenny’s private office in the basement, away from Shawna and James. They were both worried about their Soulmates and Mick’s was dead. It wasn’t a good combination.

“Let’s get you the good whiskey. Then I’ll tell you where my brother is.”

**********

She waited to tell him until after he said what he needed to about Pam. For every shot he took, he poured one out for her, until he’d finally been ready to let go. Words came out, memories, and then, when she’d touched his shoulder, tears came out too. She’d never, ever anticipated that she’d live to see the day when Mick Rory cried. She’d take it to her grave for him though, arms around his too-broad shoulders while he cried into her stomach. She stroked his back and let him get it out, mind on him and a million other places.

He pulled away finally, wiped his face (her shirt was ruined but there were worse tragedies), and proceeded not to look at her when he asked in a much raspier voice where her brother was.

He took the news as was expected: roaring with rage and ready to burn down the city to find him. He actually jumped up with the heat gun in hand, swearing, demanding to know why she hadn’t led with that, ready to charge god knew where after him.
She calmed him down with soothing words and promises of vengeance, and told him ‘of course Barry knows’ when he voiced that concern. She shouldn’t be surprised that Mick would be thinking about Lenny’s Soulmate at a time like this, especially considering his own grief, but it still caught her by surprise.

“He should be here.”

“He’s pulling resources from his own side of the fence, I promise. He’s trying to make this go away without bloodshed.”

Mick’s eyes narrowed even as he snorted. “Dumb kid.”

Lisa felt tight but… Mick was right. There was no way this was ending without blood. Even if they got Lenny back without going full force against the General, he wasn’t going to take this lying down, no matter what his Soulmate had to say about killing. He would get the Rogues back and pay the military a vengeance. It was an awful enemy to make, but that bridge was already crossed and there was no other way to handle this without constantly looking over their shoulder, waiting for more of them to be taken.

“We were working on a plan upstairs—”

“Show me.”

She appraised him. He wasn’t drunk yet but that was only because he could hold an obscene amount of liquor. He definitely wasn’t sober though, and he looked like absolute shit. He was easily the loosest canon her brother had ever even considered working with. She felt a recipe for a disaster brewing.

But at this rate, what else could possibly go wrong?

**********

So much else went wrong.

The building was on fire. Why was something always on fire?

The four of them had been pouring over plans and details, Mick’s intensity all focused onto Lisa for once, her planning, her information, her sporadic updates from Cisco (more information on Dr. Elias that their team was trying to use). Then Frank Santini showed up, and he wasn’t alone.

The bar out front went from boisterous one moment to silent the next. Lisa and Mick looked up in sync, the sound of chairs scraping across wood floor putting the hairs on the back of her neck upright as people in the bar obviously headed toward the exit. Her first thought was the military, hand already on her gun, but the voice that came through the doorway wasn’t a soldier’s at all.

“Come on out, Snart! Time to turn in your toys and your little game!”

Lisa exchanged a startled look with Mick, both of them moving toward cover by the wall that hosted the door to the restaurant.

“Who is that,” James hiss-whispered after them, following close behind.
“Frank!” Lisa called back toward the door, “don’t think we’re in the mood to tango today, darling!”

“Get your ass out here, Lisa! And bring your brother, too! It doesn’t have to go down this way.”

She caught Shawna’s eye and pointed to Mick and then to the other side of the doorway. She got the message, and a second later appeared next to them and disappeared again (with Mick) in black smoke, positioning Mick right next to the door, invisible to anyone on the other side of it but ready to torch anyone who came through. Shawna retreated up to the catwalk and pulled out a gun while Lisa called back to Frank,

“What, and spoil the fun we’re about to have, Frankie? Last chance to back out!” They clearly had no idea her brother was captured, and she could work that to her advantage. “Before we surround you, that is!”

She had her gold gun out and slipped her .22 behind her to James with a hard look. His expression when equally hard when he took it, and he nodded slowly. “Don’t know how you pissed off the Families but I’m not even surprised, Glider.”

“Blame Lenny and Mick for this one.” Lenny, who she wished was here right now. He always knew what to do when things got ugly. But for now, it would have to be her calling the shots.

“He punch them too?”

Lisa almost laughed, but just let herself smirk, knowing her eyes were menacing with it, turning her attention back to the Santini problem except—

“Get on with it, Santini!” Mick shouted, “or I’m gonna have to come hunting!”

Lisa could have killed him, motioned for him to shut up.

One of Frank’s men tried to slink through the door and went up like a torch. The heat hit her like a wave (a small part of the back of her brain went straight to Cisco’s ability to name people) but he was screaming seconds later and the sounds was almost too much, horrific. She shot her gun at the more kid to put him out of his misery than anything else while James swore behind her and Mick went to the door without hesitation, torching his way into the hall.

“MICK!”

Gun fire rang out and bullets sailed through the door and Lisa curved her body around it, trying to cover Mick, but all she could see was an inferno ahead of him and all she could hear was his shouts and the screams and swears of the Santini men.

She moved to follow when a sound stopped her cold—metal on metal and screeching, scraping, the bay door made of thin steel. A second later there was a whhBOOOOM and an explosion rocked the whole building. She jolted on her feet, high heels almost throwing her down, caught herself on the stairs next to the bar entrance. Still ablaze. She turned to the smoke and shrapnel from the small-scale explosion and saw bodies moving in it.

“COVER—NOW!”

She shouted the command and threw herself behind one of the tables, knocking it over for a pitiful shield against the rain of bullets she knew would ensue. It was Hartley’s workbench, computer clattering down with wrenches and gear, some tech they stole months ago from Mercury labs for a lark, it was supposed to scramble brainwaves or something she didn’t even understand and oh—next to it was something that might be useful, prototypes for new gloves for himself and some smaller
gadgets for James she hoped packed a punch. Gunfire erupted from the far side of the room.

“SHAWNNA!”

The other woman appeared next to her and James. “There’s gotta be twenty of them, Lisa—”

She fired around the side of the table and then slunk back fast, bullets ricocheting around them.

“Do these gloves do anything?” Lisa shoved Mercury’s tech out the way to grab Hartley’s gloves.

“Not yet but these do—” James took three small spheres and volleyed them at the back of the room. Seconds later, more explosions were shaking the space and things were crashing, shouts were heard. “Shockwaves. No combustion, just a boom.”

Shawna disappeared and reappeared with some guns—swears and gunfire and a scream erupted even as she was setting down her loot.

“Four down. Maybe five, one of them just caught a bullet coming my way.”

“Nice.”

Lisa leaned up and turned another two into gold statues before they could get their bearings. Half of them had dodged for cover and the others were headed in that direction. James was firing now and if the responding shout was any indication, he was a decent shot. Shawna was using a semi-automatic she’d grabbed and it was a little inspiring to see the intensity on her face as she managed the kick before dodging back for cover.

“Shawna, can you find Mick?”

Smoke was pouring out the bar door and they could hear wood cracking. Mick would get himself killed if he wasn’t already. She tried not to contemplate whether that had been his goal. People did stupid things when their Soulmate died.

Shawna turned and blinked to the door and back again so fast Lisa almost doubted she’d been gone except she was coughing up a lung—

“I can’t see so I can’t—” Shawna devolved into more coughing from the smoke and Lisa tried to line up another shot. She could hear vehicles outside and someone—Frank—barking orders. So much for her bluff of surrounding them.

“Get James out of here and then me. We’ll circle around to see if Mick made it out.”

Shawna coughed and nodded, dodged a glance around the table and pulled herself back. “Gonna’ be a two-stager. There’s no way I can see all the way out from here.” She was already looking up at the catwalk and Lisa nodded.

“Hurry.”

James had a protest on his lips when they disappeared in a puff of smoke. Lisa shot around the edge of the table at anyone and anything she could see, gold arcing from her gun and splattering tables and cover and corpses, keeping their focus on her.

That’s when one of Hartley’s little spheres rolled out from the side of the table. She tried to catch it with her foot, sweating profusely with the heat of the flames now licking the doorway behind her, and a shot rang toward her leg.
She just had time for her eyes to widen when she saw another bullet hit the sphere. She didn’t really see the bullet, only the brief millisecond where the thing went blue and the sound of the shot. And then it hit her, the shockwave, and she registered being thrown back, head hitting the table and something else, a second wave, like bright golden burning but only if you could be burned alive by light, by—

The world went white for a single second of time; she felt like she was floating before it all went black.

Chapter End Notes

……… welp. Did I say it was going to get worse before it got better? Because I, uh, meant to say that. Because yeah. Shit got worse.

I’ve been planning this since… well, not quite the beginning of the fic or the first outline, but pretty much ever since I introduced Lisa’s role in the narrative. The first element related to this was introduced in chapter 11. So just know that, aside from the obvious cliffhanger element, this wasn’t in any way about shock-value. Beyond that, I have a lot of thoughts about this, but I’ll save them for later so this author’s note isn’t too spoilery.

Other than the “oh shit” factor, I hope you guys enjoyed a glimpse into Lisa’s perspective, how she’s hard on others but much harder on herself, how she really likes Cisco but doesn’t think she could seriously be with him (she thinks of herself as bad news), and so on. I sort of wanted to delve more into her as a character than I was able to here, more on her views of say, having kids, of relationships, of Soulmates and what it means to her to be Unmarked. But some things just don’t fit within a given space in the narrative. I wanted to do more of/with Mick’s grief too but there wasn’t much more expositorally to say in this chapter about it, alas.

Anyhoo. Hope you enjoyed it?
Hey Brother by Avicii and Come With Me Now by Kongos

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So what you’re saying is this guy is pure evil?” Eddie asked Caitlin.

Barry’s head was throbbing. He hadn’t felt so stressed since the first week he Bonded, one step away from panic every time he thought about Eiling having Len and what could happen.

He’d never forgive himself if something happened before he was able to tell Len that he was in love with him. That he had been for months. That he’d been so stupid. That—

“That’s the long and short of it,” Cisco cut into his spiraling thoughts, responding for Caitlin.

They were talking about this Dr. Elias guy. Lisa was off with the Rogues and Iris and Eddie had come back to the lab with Joe when they managed to get away from work at the end of their shifts. Felicity had pulled information on him from the military’s servers for them, but most of it was redacted anyway and useless. What they did find was discomfiting, to say the least.

“It’s not just what he did to create Grodd. The same chemicals featured in so much of his research. His older work is almost single-handedly responsible for the widespread use of NAB Blockers today, but shortly before his trial, he was working on NAB agonists instead.”

“Agonists?” Eddie asked, chewing on his thumb.

“Drugs that make something stronger. Blockers are antagonists. No one is using agonists commercially though. I never had a chance to read his research but I heard that the results were… striking.” She looked troubled.

“Why would he study something like that?”

“Like I said, it was similar to with Grodd—he was trying to study psychic powers. Remote sensing, physical bleeds…” Caitlin glanced at Barry and he glanced away. “He wanted to see how strong a Bond could get and what it could do.”

Iris reached out and took Eddie’s hand. Barry averted his gaze from that too.

“And if Dr. Elias is involved in whatever they’re doing to create metahumans, it must be based on his research for what he did to Grodd, and I don’t have any doubt he’ll be using those chemicals too.”

Barry shook his head. “We can’t let him do that to Len, or to anyone else. Even if it doesn’t kill them, if that’s how Kane became a metahuman…” and the more the thought about it, about the way
she looked when it came up, about how Eiling had her brainwashed, the more likely the thought it was, “it can’t be good.”

“So what’s our plan of action here?” Joe asked, looking as exhausted by it all as Barry felt. “The military’s gotta be desperate for Caitlin’s research, maybe we can use that.”

She sighed, “desperate to turn people into metahumans. The metagene isn’t common in the population, it’s less than one in forty thousand. Eiling won’t be satisfied in the 30 or so soldiers in the entire military who might test positive for it. We need a plan to stop him from experimenting on innocent people, from tracking families and taking positive-testing subjects from birth—”

“WHAT?!” Iris cut in, hand flying to her stomach. Barry started. She was showing now, her stomach protruding in perfect, if not too pronounced roundness. The baby was moving now, he knew. Her and Eddie were going to prenatal classes. The whole thing.

He was doing his damndest not to think about any of it.

Cisco answered Iris when Caitlin’s face twisted up into something tight and guilty. “That’s what Eiling said. He wants to track metas, and that means family lines or whatever he can get his hands on, probably stealing people’s medical records through the Patriot Act or something.”

“That’s not really what that act—”

“Yeah yeah, but you know what I mean, Iris. The dude’s gunning for any little meta-kids he can get his hands on to raise up into his supersoldiers. He wants to buy the lab, he’s got the resources to bust down a few genetic subpoenas.”

Iris was looking worse and worse and Barry glared at Cisco, responding, “don’t worry, Iris. It’s not like he’ll come after your baby. Neither you or Eddie are metahumans.”

Iris and Caitlin exchanged a look that he didn’t miss.

“Your baby… isn’t a metahuman, right?”

Caitlin had a bit of a panicked look on her face, Eddie was looking at Iris in confusion along with the rest of them, and Iris’s deer-in-the-headlights look morphed into one of resolve as she swallowed and nodded.

“I—yeah. We think it might be.”

“We?” Eddie demanded.

“I… Caitlin gave me an amniocentesis last Tuesday, when I hit the sixteen weeks mark. I wanted to make sure… with this baby, with who our great-great-great-whatever is going to be, I just wanted to be careful and—and she said our little girl is positive for the metagene.”

Barry’s heart beat a low drum in his ears, the rest of his body tingly and numb; Joe beat everyone to the punch, voice quiet and shook.

“You’re having a baby girl?”

God, she was having a girl. A little baby girl and—

“Y-yeah,” Iris sniffed, and Eddie had an arm around her, he must have already known that. “We were gonna throw a party to tell everyone before all this got so…I didn’t want to bring up the
“C’mere,” Joe gathered her in his arms and Barry tried to swallow back his feelings, to calm his
heart rate, to keep the world at a steady pace. Iris was having a baby girl and it was positive for the
metagene and it—she—would never, ever be truly safe from Eiling as a child, as a grown up, as…
god, this was so messed up. And if Barry ever had kids too, would they be safe? Could he keep them
safe in a society that militarized anyone with powers?

“Caitlin,” he whispered quietly to her while Joe was still congratulating the couple, hugging Eddie
too. “Can you get Ronnie and Martin back from Pittsburg? I think… I think we might need some
help with this one.”

He felt sick to his stomach.

She nodded tight, “I understand.”

An alert came over the computer terminal. “Anything important?” Barry directed to Cisco, who was
closest to it. Iris was busy collecting herself, Joe swiping at a few tears as he whispered the word
‘granddaughter’ and Barry wished he could share in their joy but didn’t have it in him.

Cisco rolled his chair over, pulling out a licorice too chew on. “Fire, looks like.” He tapped a few
buttons. “Some restaurant in the docks area, looks like it’s just off Marigold street. In that
neighborhood it’s probably an insurance scam.”

Barry nodded and went back to worrying about what he was going to do when the military called in
the morning, and if he could possibly find Len before then. He didn’t answer every distress call in
the city—it would be impossible to—and tried to prioritize things like apartments on fire or situations
where innocent lives were likely to be at stake. Restaurants were single-storey buildings with easy
evacuation routes if a grease fire started in the kitchen.

“Did you say Marigold street?” Iris pushed past her father and Eddie to move toward Cisco’s
terminal. He pushed his rolly-chair back to give her room.

“The one and only. That area is a dive if I ever saw one, amirite?”

Iris looked up at Barry, her face shocked and intense. “Barry—that’s Leonard’s restaurant.”

“What?”

“That’s the Rogues’ Den!”

His eyes went wide. Iris knew where Len’s hideout was? How did—she’d been kidnapped—of
course—but why hadn’t she said—it didn’t matter—

Shit.

“I’m on it.”

He was gone in a flash.
Well, if it had been Len’s restaurant, it wasn’t really much of anything anymore. But it also definitely wasn’t a grease fire.

The entire building was up in billowing flames and the sirens were still on their way. There was no way this could have happened that fast unless—

A window out front exploded and a screaming body was thrown out of it before hitting the ground with a crack that bled to silence. Barry went slack-jawed in horror for a moment before a jet of flame followed the body out. That could only be—

He rushed into the building with his breath held after passing the threshold, a full inferno of heat washing over him, fire crackling and beams falling. The only person alive inside was Mick Rory, a mask over his face, goggles and fire-retardant jacket on, gun aimed at the ceiling jetting out more flames. He looked like a demon with the air blurred by heat and red with fire, licking his clothes.

Barry took a second to stare before he could react, jolting forward with the crack of another, lifting the man off his feet and pulling him from the structure, ducking under the beam as it fell, flames encasing his arms on the way out. He dodged around all the black and sleek vehicles out front and around the building and—oh. More of the cars, more men with guns. Shit.

He dropped Mick and sped around the building twice, knocking weapons out of hands and rounding up what could only be mobsters—Santinis?—eight of them in total still alive. It took all of twenty seconds to tie them up out front, sirens sounding in the far distance. The cops could take care of this. Barry sped back to where Mick was stumbling onto his feet and pulling the mask from his face, shaking his head and coughing up smoke. Barry registered blood on his singed jacket and worried that it was his but he didn’t look injured.

“Mick?” He moved to touch his shoulder as Mick tried to stand but—

“Flash—” he raised his gun at Barry’s chest and he remembered, a little belatedly, that Mick had no idea who he really was. The blast streaked just past his head, a narrow dodge, while Peek-a-Boo and some blond guy—why did Barry recognize him?—appeared next to them and—

“Mick! Lisa’s bee—Flash!” Shawna raised her own gun, face going from concerned to livid in the beat of a second.

“Lisa’s what?” Barry asked, hands in front of him as Mick focused on Shawna and the other.

The blond guy—wait was that Hartley’s Soulmate?—pointed at the inside—“She’s—”

He didn’t wait, sped into the building, past enough bodies to make his stomach clench. There was gold and bullets everywhere, smoke pouring through a door frame that was on fire but—

“LISA!” The ground was hard under his knees but he barely noticed, cradling her head, tapping her face. She was breathing but didn’t move, gold gun loose in one hand and a weird device sitting on top of her body. “Lisa? Lisa—wake up!” He touched his comms, “Caitlin, get the med room ready, Lisa’s injured—”

“What?” Cisco’s voice was too loud in his ear and Barry winced but the rapid-fire questions were easily filtered out next to the click of a gun near his ear.

“Step away from Lisa, Flash.” Shawna had a gun to his head. Lovely. Mick and James (that was his name, right?) were beside her, eyes like daggers on him.

His hands slowly came up in a gesture of peace but otherwise he didn’t move. “Shawna, I need to
take her to STAR Labs—Caitlin can look at her—”

“You don’t get to touch any one of us again, Fla—”

“She’ll die!” He should be fast enough to get the gun away from his head before she could pull the trigger but Mick had his heat gun pointed right at Barry too and he doubted he could dodge both at this range.

“She’s already a goner! Just like Mark, just like all of us thanks to you exposing this city to the military and ruining everything!!” From the corner of his eye he could see tears streaming down her cheeks. Barry’s heart hammered in his chest.

“Shawna, I—I know about Mark, and I’m sorry. I’m trying to save him. I’m trying to save all of them. But I need to get Lisa to a doctor now.”

“What’d you even care, Flash?” Mick stepped forward with his gun leading, pressing the hot barrel to Barry’s chest and he let him. “Snart’s gone and the Rogues are on the out, cops are almost here—why not finish this, once and for all?”

There was a look in his eye, something almost manic beneath the black stains of smoke on his cheeks, his stubble. Barry swallowed.

“Mick, let me save her. Let me save Len’s sister. You can get out of here, just go.”

The sirens were blaring outside. They didn’t have much time. Not unless he wanted first responders to die too.

“I’ve got nothin’ left to lose,” he raised his gun—

“What about Pam? How would she feel if—”

“How do you know that name, Flash?!” he roared and even Shawna moved back as he raged forward, hand latching onto Barry’s neck in a vice, pulling him up to stand.

“Mick—stop!” He didn’t want to fight, he didn’t want to hurt Mick, or any of them—

Mick shook him like a ragdoll in his anger—“HOW. DO. YOU. KNOW. MY. SOULMA—”

“You told me—” His voice came out constricted and tight and he held on to Mick’s arm, trying desperately to de-escalate the situation without bloodshed. There was nothing for it. Not anymore. “You know me, Mick—it’s me, it’s—I’m—I’m Len’s Soulmate—”

His body skittered across the floor, thrown back down on his ass and he heaved in a breath.

“Now let me save Lisa—”

“Jailbait? You—” Mick’s eyes were wide and wild but his gun was down and Shawna was by his side, face slack with shock.

“Meet me at STAR Labs. And don’t kill any cops on your way!”

He scooped up Lisa with her gold gun and the strange device on her lap and was gone.

***********
“WHY THE HELL IS SHE GLOWING, BARRY?!”

That was a very good question.

“She just—it started on the run over here! She was fine before that!”

Cisco looked at him incredulously while Caitlin hooked her up to monitors.

“Okay, not fine—she was knocked out and but she wasn’t glowing!”

“Just tell me what happened!” Caitlin snapped. She was hooking up some monitors to Lisa’s head, a whole array of sensors really, looking as worried as Barry had ever seen her. “Her pulse is weak but I can’t find a scratch on her except for a bump on her head.”

“I don’t know—I just showed up, she was against the side of a table, I think something blew up and tossed her back into it. Just save her, Caitlin. I don’t care what you do, just—don’t let Lisa die.”

Caitlin gave him a look that said she was almost insulted but then caught his expression and nodded. He must look as bad as he felt.

The next twenty minutes were spent tossing theories back and forth about what was going on and her glowing state, the highly atypical neural response—“she’s not brain dead, Barry, that’s not what I mean when I say that her neural activity seems suppressed, but I would feel a lot better if we could get her to the 3rd floor for an MRI once her pulse is stabilized—”, and recapping what Barry had seen at the Rogues’ Den.

None of the team felt comfortable with Barry exposing himself to Mick. He didn’t know what to tell them. It was rash and crazy and sure to expose him to Shawna and James too, and it was only a matter of time before they found out that Len’s Soulmate was actually a CSI because that wasn’t the type of news to stay buried, and he had no contingency plan except that it wasn’t worth it to hide his identity and lie if it meant Lisa (or Mick) dying. And if they worked with the Rogues maybe they could find a way to solve this. Maybe… maybe he was too optimistic but he was in a chokehold much more constricting than the one Mick had had on him.

Joe hovered in and out but mostly out; Iris came in to hold Barry’s hand. “I’m sorry this is happening. Lisa was… she was good to me, in her own way, when I was kidnapped.”

Barry nodded. He had nothing to say to that. He wanted to ask Iris why she’d never said where the Rogues’ Den was, or talked about her time being kidnapped, but he knew he’d never asked, that a big part of him hadn’t wanted to know, and he felt sick over that too.

“What the hell is going on, pipsqueak?”

He whirled around, putting himself in front of Iris. Mick was in the doorway, still soot-covered, with Shawna close in half-behind him, James out a little further, tilting his body to the side and glancing around with undisguised curiosity.

“Mick!” His fingers twitched toward his cowl but it was pointless. Mick knew his name and his face, and Shawna and James had already got an eyeful now. He was just glad that both Eddie and Joe were back in the cortex and not in here.

“You really are the Flash.”
He swallowed. “Yeah, about that…”

Mick’s scowl was imperious. He dropped his jacket on a side table and made his way to Lisa’s bedside. Cisco and Caitlin gave him a wide berth.

“Why’s she glowing?”

“We’re… trying to figure that out still,” Caitlin wrung her hands, glancing fast between Mick and the other Rogues. James was already finding things to poke at and clearly trying to take in everything at once. Barry scowled at him. Shawna hadn’t moved from the doorway or put away her gun, eyes hard on Caitlin.

“Best we can figure is that she got hit with a blast from that—” Cisco pointed at the object Lisa had come in with, sitting at the foot of the med bed. “But we don’t know what it is.”

“She did,” Shawna stepped forward, then hesitated, glancing at them all. “Get hit I mean. I saw it from the catwalk. One of Hart’s concussive bombs went off and hit that, glowed all yellow and blue when it smacked her.”

“What is it?” Cisco asked, face tight and desperate. It was James, of all people, who answered, coming over lifting it off the bed, tossing it around in his hands with a careless grace that set Barry on edge.

“It’s Hartley’s neural decoupling device.”

Caitlin, Barry, and Cisco all reacted as one:

“Hartley’s what?”

“Len stole that from Mercury!”

“Hartley had it this whole time!”

James blinked and dropped it back on the bed. “He’s been tinkering with it. Think it could make ‘er…” he waved at Lisa, “glowy?”

Caitlin’s eyes widened and Cisco snapped his fingers; they both looked at one another in unison—

“If she has the gene—”

“With dark matter latent in her system from two years ago—”

“Because not everyone manifested at once! It could’ve been activated by the blast—”

“Or by the speedforce when Barry grabbed her!”

“Yes! With the properties of the device working on her neurology at the time so—”

“Of course!” the shouted in unison.

Barry was agog. “No way—you’re not saying Lisa is a metahuman now?!”

Shawna disappeared and reappeared at Lisa’s side, black smoke still on her fingers as she moved them to smooth Lisa’s hair back. “Lisa—if you’re in there—”

Something very strange happened then. Lisa’s body didn’t move, but the gold glow surrounding her
shuddered like a shape, like a body, and started to—

“Oh what the hell—” Cisco voiced for the whole room. Mick made a distressed noise and James said something that sounded like a curse while everyone else took a step back from the form rising off the bed. Lisa’s form. But not her body. Just—her form. Dressed the same way she was when she came in before she’d been changed into a med gown, hair floating around her, glowing faintly gold and monochrome, levitating above her body.

The form sat up a foot above the body and opened its—her—eyes. “Where am—”

“A-a—astral projection!” Cisco was pointing and half-shouting still, except now with an almost smile on his awed face. The rest of them were too paralyzed to speak.

Barry slapped a hand to his forehead and pushed his hair back. Len had been abducted for less than 24 hours and everything had already become so pear-shaped that his sister was a metahuman. He almost laughed but thought he might cry.


“Lisa…” Caitlin tried delicately, and that’s when Lisa took in the room around her.

“Snow? Shawna? MICK? How did I get—is this—Barry your mask, I—” she glanced around, realized she was up high, and made the mistake of looking down.

The shriek she let out was entirely justified, Barry thought to himself, even as his ears disagreed.

**********

Cisco cleared the room. Mick refused to go but Caitlin physically pushed him out (it was a sight to behold, both her hands on his back and not taking no for an answer) and James and Shawna filtered out in front of him with worried glances.

They all stood awkward in the hall.

“What’s your name, beanstock?”


Shawna nodded slowly. “You’re really Snart’s Soulmate?”

He nodded. “Yeah, and uh, I’m with the CCPD too, that’s part of why we were hiding it, before.”

He shifted awkwardly on his feet. It felt like a flimsy excuse and his skin itched inside his suit.

“So you’re a cop?”

“CSI, actually.”

“Still a badge,” Mick grunted.

“You already knew that, Mick.”
“Didn’t know you were the Flash.”

James made a whistling noise and Barry really didn’t like him. Shawna smirked but her eyes were angry. Iris edged a little further from Mick.

“Not really something Len could just tell people.”

“Let Snart fight his own battles, Speedy.”

Barry sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. “Whatever, look, we need to work together here. The military gave us an ultimatum till the morning and then they’re gonna kill Len and maybe Hartley—”

“WHAT?” James’s eyes were comically wide. “Why the hell are they killing them? What kind of ultimatum?”

Barry hesitated. There was so much to explain. “We should head to the cortex.”

Iris cleared her throat, “that might be…”

Right. “Joe and Eddie will just have to accept we’re working with the Rogues on this one.”

“Detective West is here?” Shawna’s eyes went narrow. Barry’s head was throbbing. He felt hungry and tired and worn thin and he didn’t have the energy to navigate the bad blood between the police and the Rogues.

“Well I don’t care who’s here—I want information,” James declared. “Where’s this cortex?”

Iris sighed, “this way.”

Barry glanced at Mick, “a word?”

Iris shot him a worried glance. He waved her off. “We’ll catch up.”

She nodded and turned, step in step with Shawna. “I think we got off on the wrong foot the last two times we met.”

“You don’t say…”

“Uh, why don’t we, um—” he glanced at Mick’s soot-covered face, streaks of smoke on his skin. “there’s a locker room with some showers down a floor. Why don’t I show you where it is?”

The other man just grunted. This was weird. His suit felt claustrophobic.

He made it to the elevator before the silence felt too oppressive. “He would’ve told you, you know. I didn’t make it easy on him, with my identity…”

“No, he wouldn’t’ve. Snart likes his secrets.”

“He didn’t want to lie to you—”

“Wasn’t the first time, kid.”

Barry closed his mouth. Mick had known Len a lot longer than he did. He honestly didn’t know much of the history between the two of them.
“Makes a lotta’ sense—he was obsessed with you. Now I know why.”

He grimaced, “no we… we didn’t Bond until July. He was just…”

“It’s still why. It’s always how it is with Soulmates.”

They made it to the retrofitted locker room.

“But we weren’t even Bonded. We weren’t anything, then, no bleed.”

“You know it’s more than a bleed, right? It’s the person you need, deep down in your Soul. Snart knew you completed him before he knew you were his Mate, even if he didn’t know he knew it.”

“I…huh..” Barry wanted to think that through, to process it, but Mick kept talking—

“It’s how it was with Pam.”

“…was?”


“Don’t wanna’ hear it.”

He snapped his mouth closed and nodded, eyes downcast. Of course he didn’t. Not from Barry. Or anyone, knowing him. But even so.

“It’s the worst though, kid. Losing your Soulmate. Don’t matter if they’re eight or eighty.”

Barry didn’t know what to say. Mick dropped his gun on the counter and glanced at the black streaks of ash on his face, wiping one of them, fingers stained.

“I don’t care if Snart would’ve told me. Lying’s the only way he knows how to survive. And he will survive, Barry.” Mick’s eyes caught Barry’s in the mirror, a dangerous glint to them, one that almost caught his breath. “Even if we have to burn this city down to make it happen.”

**********

Barry slipped into the cortex after talking to Mick, entering to the terse silence of the staring contest that was detectives vs. Rogues with Iris frowning off to the side. He did most of the explaining, people on both sides of the room chiming in, Joe going stiff when Mick slipped in a few minutes after him but Mick didn’t seem to care, looking around the cortex and mostly ignoring everyone else in the room. He only chimed in once Caitlin reappeared in the room, immediately asking what was happening to Lisa.

“Well,” she wrung her hands, glancing nervously over the Rogues, “we need to run some more tests before we know conclusively but... it looks like Lisa is a metahuman.”

Shawna whistled, “just because of Hartley’s toy?”

“Well, likely because of the shock to her system it created. She’s not the only person in the city who could be potential metahumans whose powers never manifest. It requires both exposure to dark matter, which many people received in the particle accelerator blast, as well as a... trigger, of sorts.
Lisa never had a trigger until, well, now.”

Barry frowned. He wondered if the machine was the trigger or his powers on the run. Maybe both?

“Does this mean that Len is more likely to have the gene?”

“Gene?” Mick asked, but Caitlin was already wincing.

“More likely? Yes. A certainty? Not really. Genes are complicated, and it’s not just a single allele that creates a metahuman.”

Barry nodded and chewed his thumb, tripolymer flavor something he was used to at this point. He didn’t know if that information helped or made him more worried, really.

“Is she gonna be okay?” Shawna asked after a moment and Caitlin’s eyes softened, slightly less wary.

“It looks like it, yes. Cisco’s with her right now, helping her calm down a bit more. Her body seems perfectly okay though, and once she gets a handle on how to work her powers, there’s no reason why she won’t be able to enter and leave it at will. A brain scan showed her she has a concussion but otherwise she should be okay.”

Some of the tension lapsed from the room and Barry realized that some of it was from him too. A knot untied itself in his stomach and it occurred to him just how devastated he would’ve been if Lisa wasn’t okay.

“Where does this leave us, then?” he managed to ask of the room at large.

Eddie spoke first. “Well, it looks like you’re still in the same spot, aren’t you? Eiling wants this research of Caitlin’s and Leonard life is hanging in the balance?” he glanced around as if seeking confirmation.

“As is my Soulmate,” James replied, with Shawna right after.

“Mine too.”

Joe frowned, “yeah they aren’t part of the deal Eiling’s offering. Barry even tried.”

Shawna looked surprised and Barry averted his gaze. He hadn’t tried hard enough, not really.

“So why don’t we take ‘em back?” James asked.

“Because we have no idea where they are,” Barry lamented.

“What—you guys don’t know either?”

“If we did, we wouldn’t be in this situation. Unless they take Len off Blockers, I don’t think we have any hope of finding him before morning when Eiling gives the go-ahead to…”

“To what,” Mick growled, proving he was paying more attention than it seemed.

“To use whatever the military has up its sleeve to turn him into a test subject for making metahumans.”

The room broke out at that, Shawna and James exclaiming, Joe startled at their outbursts and Eddie trying to call for quiet, Mick swearing in a loud and deep voice that was sure to carry down the hall.
“ENOUGH!”

Barry cut through the chaos, standing in the center of the room now, arms out in every direction as he turned in a slow circle, looking each of them in their angry eyes in turn.

“The situation is clear, okay? It’s ugly and I don’t like it, but we don’t have a plan B on this one and I am not about to let Len or the others die either, not when I have no other options.”

Mick’s eyes were the hardest, intense and unwavering and angry. “He’d hate it.”

“He does, but it’s not his call.”

“What about the metagene?” Joe asked, motioning over to Iris. Barry’s stomach turned.

“I don’t know.”

Caitlin wrapped her arms around herself.

The room was silent. But then, in a way that would be awkward but somehow seemed showy, James cleared his throat and stepped forward. “So, ah, if Snarty pants wasn’t on Blockers, how exactly would you find him?”

Barry blinked. “Uh… well I’d use the bleed, I guess. We have a physical one and if I focused long enough I could use it to figure out some of where he is, or communicate with him. That or try—”

“Remote sensing,” Shawna finished for him. “I can’t, I tried. It doesn’t work on Blockers either.”

James scuffed his toe in a way that was driving Barry mad because it was so clearly a calculated abashedness. “So then if I think they have Hartley on the wrong dosage of Blockers…”

“You wait until now to tell us this!” Barry exploded.

“I didn’t think it mattered!”

“You can find him?” Shawna was in front of James in a blink, eyes wide and the man stumbled a step back. “Hartley could do it with you, can you?”

He scratched his cheek, “one way to find out?”

**********

An hour passed. Cisco and Lisa were filled in. Barry checked on them, Lisa floating and clutching her arms, more calm now. Caitlin had given her an update and checked her vitals.

She followed Barry back to the cortex after, hovering on the edge of the group, watching. Her presence seemed to calm Shawna and Mick both down, even if she was floating and a metahuman. They both gravitated over.

James was doing a handstand when Barry had left the room, claiming stretching and tumbling helped him concentrate on his NAB. When he returned, the blond was sitting cross-legged on a table, fingers skimming over a map in concentration.
“You got something?”

“I think so. If I had to guess… this is where Hartley is.” He looked up. “D’you know what it is?”

Barry edged closer, saw the map, and his stomach turned to ice. He was such a fool—

“That’s Iron Heights Penitentiary.”

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh, Iron Heights!~~~~ hahaha I have been planning this for literally so long. I debated not having Barry’s last line in there, but meh. Might as well tell you guys, as you’ll figure it out immediately in the next chapter anyway, and it's fun to end on a tense note this close to the climax.

And would be believe that way back when I wrote Iris’s PoV chapter, my thinking at the time was “when the Rogues Den is burning to the ground, someone has to tell the team what’s going and that Barry needs to save Lisa”. I mean, I loved writing Iris’s PoV so much (I love Iris so much) but that was a legit thing I wanted to build in and leave hanging until it became relevant.

Anyway, the Rogues know! You all knew that was inevitable though. What a mess for Barry. The mob knows his true identity as Len’s Soulmate and the Rogues know his Flash identity and he’s just stuck trusting them not to let slip that “Snart’s Soulmate is the Flash” or else everyone could make the connection to “Snart’s CCPD Soulmate”. Yikes! It’s a good thing James doesn’t give a shit and Shawna hates the mafia for screwing her and her ex over and for taking her ex back under their wing…

Alright, I'll stop blabbing. But in case you don't follow me on tumblr, just a heads up: almost all of this fic is written now. I'm going to be posting the rest of it over the next week, or if I drag my heels, the next two weeks. But like, ASAP. Next chapter should probably be up tomorrow evening actually, unless my irl job takes over (which... it might, in which case, the next one will be up monday night). So stay tuned for that :)

And thanks to all of you here for sticking through to the end of this beast. The next chapter is a bit expository like this one, but then we get into the action! The finish line is so damn close, and I hope it pays off for you <3

PS - choosing songs is hard but I couldn't help but think of these two for this chapter for some reason?
Len cursed himself to hell and back for his idiocy. Not at getting caught, not at missing that the military was tailing him, not at things he couldn’t have seen coming. No, he cursed himself for shouting the wrong words for the half-second Barry and Lisa had been on that screen. Telling Barry not to accede to what he knew Eiling wanted was pointless—as if either of them had or would ever listen to him. No matter how offended he was at his predicament, it had been the wrong thing to say. The only words that should have come out of his mouth were two very simple and very handy ones: ‘Iron’ and ‘Heights’.

He’d realized it moments after waking on the cold floor of a maximum security cell. It was too familiar, the concrete and bars, the light in the hallway. Home away from home. Even through the groggy after-effects of whatever drug they military pumped him with, he’d recognize the stench anywhere.

“We’re where?” Hartley had taken some convincing. “Iron Heights is not a military prison.”

Len had leaned back against the cold wall, uncomfortable and chilled. “Metahuman wing, under construction area. Didn’t you know they cleared out the entire East wing to start construction?” He knocked on the wall behind him. “Guess who’s helping fund it?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Mm. None of us even realized it. They’ve been hiding Mardon and the others in plain sight.” He wasn’t pleased with himself for the oversight.

When they’d come to get him and put him in front of the screen, he’d managed to catch sight of a few hallways, glimpses of construction crews and military guards. He’d been left in his shirt and jeans, no jumpsuit (yet), but his sweater and socks were apparently a luxury the military didn’t think he deserved. He was fucking freezing even before they’d strapped him to a chair and stuck his feet in ice cold water with the threat of electrocution in case he tried to pull anything or say anything, rolled in a screen and he snapped off the first few words that came out of his mouth before it went black.
He was punished for it, a painful electric current running through his skin from the water basin at his feet, brief enough to be a warning but long enough to hurt like hell. Still his only regret was getting the wrong words out.

And now he was cursing himself, dumped back on the unforgiving ground of his cell.

“Are you okay?”

“Peachy,” he snapped, shirking Hartley’s attempt to help him up. He paced in the small space, ignoring the pins and needles in his feet. He needed a plan. It wasn’t long before Hartley interrupted him again.

“What did they want?”

He rolled his shoulders. “To flaunt me.”

He would have resumed pacing, but Hartley’s expression caught him.

“What?”

The other man’s apprehension shifted and he sat down slowly on one of the two hard bunks. “I can’t believe I was right.”

Len arched an eyebrow. If Hartley knew something he didn’t—

“The Flash—he’s your Soulmate, isn’t he?”

Oh. Well. Shit. That wasn’t ideal. “What gave you that harebrained idea?” Len made to resume his pacing, dismissive.

“That’s why the military took us, isn’t it? We aren’t metas, we aren’t anything to them, and they shouldn’t care about criminals. All that information you were getting—”

“I have contacts—”

“—about what the metahuman taskforce is up to? Or all the places that you could guarantee Mark wasn’t being held and—honestly, Leonard, I’m mostly embarrassed I didn’t figure it out before last night.”

He paused and turned to look at Hartley again, more appraising. His heart was beating slow and solo, his emotions (his anxiety) all his own, no bleed to speak of on whatever Blockers they must’ve pumped him full of. It must be a strong dose.

“Last night?”

He didn’t miss Hart’s lips twitch at the subtle confirmation. “James mentioned he saw your Soulmate at the circus. When he said he was young and skinny with brown hair, it finally clicked. All the things you said, all the issues in the way.”

Len was caught on part of that—“you know what he looks like?”

And oh, that was interesting, the sudden ‘caught in the cookie jar’ expression. “I may have, er, discovered the Flash’s identity shortly after my first face-off with him, when I stole his information off of the STAR Labs’ computers.”

“Does he knows this?”
“He’d be a fool not to. I even went to his CSI lab with Cisco.”

There was a story there, but maybe now wasn’t the time to hear it. “I… see.”

Hartley’s smile turned droll. “Sorry Leonard, you’re not the only Rogue who figured out about Barry Allen.”

He swallowed and nodded. This made things both easier and more complicated. He sat on the other bunk, opposite Hartley. “It goes without saying—”

“Don’t insult me. I’ve kept his secret until now.”

Len nodded. That was the most comforting part of all of this, really. “The military exposed our Bond to his day job. It’s public domain now, he and I. It’s more important than ever for no one to make the connection that he’s the Flash.”

Hartley whistled. “That’s… unfortunate.”

“Everything about this situation is unfortunate.” Len glanced at the bars of their cell. His feet were numb.

“I’d say this is a relief. The military are probably not in a hurry to kill the Flash’s Soulmate.”

Len frowned. That might be true. It might not. “They’re using me as leverage. I’m not a fan.”

“Well, you’re the one with experience breaking out of this place,” Hartley motioned to the bars, the walls. “Any insights you care to share would be timely.”

He shook his head. “Prison breaks take months of planning or a lot of muscle, and that’s when the military isn’t involved. Our best shot would be finding the others and muscling out.”

Hartley nodded and went to the bars, glancing each way. “Most of these cells are empty.”

“How nice of them to keep us together.”

“I see construction at that end,” he nodded, and yes, Leonard had been dragged past there on his little jaunt. There were guards stationed there, two of them that he had seen, with a rotation that had them walk passed their cell every hour, from what he could tell.

“That way is North.”

“Where does it lead?”

“This used to be a psych ward. That way was facilities, some other things. I’m not as familiar with this end of the Heights. Gen pop is across the way. Either way, it’s all under construction. But I know the exit’s there, which means that if this follows the layout of gen at all, a small block of solitary cells for the real headcases are in the other direction.”

Hartley glanced that way. “Okay so, Mark, Bivolo—”

“We can’t trust Bivolo.”

“We also need to consider every option.”

“And how do you think we’ll get out of this cell to even get to the meta ones?”
Hartley sighed. “If only the bleed could transfer skills. I’d use James’s conning knowledge in a heartbeat.”

Len snorted and crossed his arms, drawing his feet up off the ground to tuck under him. He missed his parka.

“We’re on our own for this one.”

They talked for a while, hushed voices. Apparently Hartley’s bleed was still somewhat intact, surprising both of them, no doubt an issue in the dosage. The military must not have factored in the year of distance and suppression between Hart and James. Len wondered just how strong of a dose he was on, sure they went overboard just in case Barry’s powers negated it somehow, if he couldn’t actually feel anything from his own too-strong Bond.

“You should try to sleep,” he said eventually. There were no blankets or pillows, nothing for warmth. The military must not want them to sleep, not with the sounds of construction at the far end of the hall, the fluorescent, flickering lights, the chill. His stomach rumbled and his throat felt dry. By his estimation, it had been at least twelve hours since they picked him up. He didn’t know exactly how long he’d been unconscious before waking up in the cell, but had to guess it wasn’t so long as all that. If he was right, that put him at fourteen hours already without water.

“Sleep?” Hartley indicated the cold, blanketless bunk. “How?”

“Determination.”

“Yeah right.”

“I mean it. We might not get too many chances.”

“Take your own advice.”

He glanced back at the bars. He’d like to. But it wasn’t about to happen.

“D’you think…” Hartley sighed, “what are the chances James can use my bleed to find us?”

His gaze flicked to the smaller man, curled in on himself, cloak and gloves and boots gone, stripped down his pants and t-shirt, looking tired and cold. He looked away. “You’re the numbers guy.”

“Not likely?”

“Not likely.”

“And even if he could…”

“The chances of him meeting up with Barry to use that information would be…”

“Laughably miniscule.”

Len nodded. “Right.”

They both went back to brooding.

**********
He was right about the no-sleeping rule. When Hartley fell into an almost-doze, Len resting his eyes, a guard was there almost immediately, banging his club against the bars, rousing them. He leered at them both with a grin,

“No rest for the wicked, huh boys?”

He really hated prison.

His head was aching more insistently after that, something he tried to ignore. When his stomach was ready to eat itself entirely, he went to the bars and hollered for some food. The same guard came back with a smirk and said they’d eat when they ate, jabbing the club against his stomach near the bars. He blamed that one on himself, leaving the opening, clutching it and stepping back with a glare to the man. It was a regular guard, not a soldier, and guards tended to be more power-tripping and less trained.

“This can’t be acceptable,” Hartley whispered, teeth chattering.

“It’s not. Three square meals and free room and board, that’s the joke. This,” he motioned to the lights and hall, the whole cell, “is the first chapter of the torture handbook.”

He couldn’t tell if Hartley got paler or if it was his imagination. “Why would they want to torture —”

“Dunno.” He wished he had a jacket to give to the younger man. Not having his sweater was making him feel incredibly bare, arms exposed in his t-shirt a way he couldn’t fix. He was trying not to dwell. “But the military knows what it’s doing. They grabbed us around 1am, my guess is that it’s mid-afternoon by now. No sleep, no food, but the worst is no water for all that time we were awake. Not a drop for all that time plus the few hours before the heist, ‘n that drug made me sweat bullets when I first woke up.”

Hartley was rubbing his hands down his arms, clearly trying to warm up. “So dehydration is torture now?”

“Dehydration with no sleep and no food? How’s your head feeling? Your mouth?”

Hartley frowned. “I’m aware it has symptoms…”

Len made a humming noise. “We’re not in Guantanamo. They must want us pliable but leaving marks leads to bad PR, not to mention it could piss off the Flash more’n he already is. Give it a few more hours’n dizziness and low blood pressure’re gonna set in. We won’t be putting up much of a fight.”

He frowned at the bars of the door when he said it. That was the only part that confused him. Exactly what would the General want them weak for? There couldn’t be any information they wanted from either of them, and compliance was pointless since they weren’t metahumans the military wanted to recruit. This could be for Eiling’s own jollies but pissing off Barry hardly seemed worth it.

“So a slow death by dehydration?”

He thought about his joints aching from the cold and electric shock, and maybe already some dehydration, shook his head. “Seems unlikely. But I’m not looking forward to the symptoms, regardless.”
He didn’t have all that long to ponder the issue. Within the next hour, two guards came by to collect him. His skin still remembered the shock of electrocution from earlier, brief though it may have been, more a warning than anything after the camera was cut. He wondered if he’d be able to get out more words this time, dodging Hartley’s worried frown as they led him away still barefoot. His toes were so numb they were shooting pains up his legs but he kept his walk steady on the cold concrete floor.

Instead of leading him toward the construction area, they took him to a small service elevator that took them down. He didn’t know Iron Heights went down any more than a floor below him. Maybe it was only in the psych ward, the reason they were retrofitting this wing, but he was still fairly confident it wasn’t on the blueprints for the complex. He’d poured over all of them in detail, after all.

Architectural concerns skipped his brain the second he was pushed out of the elevator unceremoniously. Magenta was in the hall waiting for him.

“Real homey place you guys’re running here,” he drawled, mostly cautious, trying to gauge her reaction. Stiff faced and silent. Tempted as he was to try something, a metal-bending meta wasn’t the person to try it against.

The floor here was even colder and rougher on his feet. He was glad they were mostly numb.

The room she led him into was massive and cavernous, like an underground warehouse, but felt small when taking into account the equipment strewn about, the way machines and monitors and wires and tubes filled it up. He stopped in the doorway on instinct, a wrongness about it that slid down his back, unnerving. The hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention. The lights were fluorescent but dull shadows filled each corner anyway, sheets over misshapen machinery casting shadows.

He didn’t want to go in. He didn’t have much choice.

Kane walked ahead of him as if uncaring and his metal handcuffs started to drag forward, pulling him along behind her, leaving him to decide if he was going to step or be dragged. He walked. Some dignity required.

“Ah, Miss. Kane, and I see this is—” a man was there in a white lab coat, a mop of brown curls on top of his head. He would be handsome if he didn’t look both tired and excited and dead-eyed all at once, his toothy grin not close to reaching his eyes but still stretching his cheeks. He adjusted his glasses and they caught the light. “… Mr. Snart, welcome.”

He was allowed to stop ten feet from the guy, Kane by his side. “How’d’you do?”

The man laughed as if it was a polite joke. Len’s eyes narrowed. This really wasn’t good.

“I’m quite well, Mr. Snart. And yourself?”

He glanced around. “I’d be a lot better with some lunch. Maybe a pair of shoes. An explanation.”

The man laughed again, quicker this time, closer to a normal chuckle. “Of course, of course. Please, have a seat.”
He motioned to a nearby metal table with two chairs, one with a loop for Len’s cuffs. It was a reminder that they were still in a prison and a small part of Len was almost thankful for it, eyes trying to catalogue the machinery, the catwalk, the empty glass boxes big enough to be cells, the massive circular thing that looked like a turbine with a control panel. Cold metal bit into his wrists as Kane adjusted his cuffs before stepping back, hands looped in and stuck to the table.

Lab Coat sat across from him with a clipboard in hand, adjusting his glasses.

“I’m rather sorry about the lack of lunch, I’m afraid that’s my fault. You see, I was told that you and Mr…” he checked the name on his clipboard. “Rathaway, that you were both going to be assigned to my care after today and well, an empty digestive system is best for my procedures. Nausea is not an uncommon side effect of the pre-treatment, among other reasons.”

Len was so tense he thought something might crack. Treatment? Side-effects? He swallowed around his dry throat. “What’s that mean, assigned to your care?”

“Mr. Snart—” the booming voice of General Eiling filled the lab and Len turned to look, his neck cricking. An assistant of some sort was at his side, both Eiling and the younger man in military dress. He almost expected to see Kane salute but she didn’t, just stood more upright and stiffer. Maybe that was only a movies thing, Len had never spent much time around the military, rather deliberately.

“Well well well, this party just keeps getting more of a crowd. Cute setup you’ve got here, General.”

The man was coming over and Len settled back into his chair, no less tense. The man across from him looked a weird mix of eager and apprehensive at the General’s approach.

“We’re just getting started, Snart.” He stood adjacent to their table and glanced at Lab Coat. “Doctor.”

“General, sir.”

“I see you’ve invited Snart for a chat.”

“Just some preliminaries, sir, in case—”

The General waved it away and Len’s stomach tightened. “You should have started with Rathaway, but no matter.”

“Care to let me in on the secret, boys?”

“Convicts don’t ask questions, Snart.”

“Don’t remember getting my day in court.”

The General snorted but pulled over a chair, “a courtesy, then. This man is Dr. Darwin Elias. He’s one of our best scientists, even helped us make Grodd. I’m sure you remember him?”

Len glanced at the doctor, cleaning his glasses on a cloth, looking embarrassed. “If only I had known the reaction necessitated dark matter exposure, I could have…”

“We’ve seen just what he’s capable of, Doctor, I’d say it was a successful test run, on the whole.” He glanced at one of the big squarish blocks in the room, the largest one, covered in white fabrics. A sound came from inside it and Len’s eyes widened.

“Is that—”
“He’s here, yes.” Elias was sweating, putting his glasses back on. “Quite the, ah, lab-mate. He’s no danger though, we’re keeping him in the same type of cell as the metahumans, insulated with power-dampeners.”

“Why’re you telling me all this?”

Eiling snorted. “Don’t ask me. I’d’ve rather seen you thrown down here only when the time was right.”

“Oh, but General, informed consent!” The doctor looked eager again. “Or well, informed anyway. It is a research staple on human subjects.”

A chill ran down his spine, sitting up perfectly straight. “Come again?”

The General leaned back in his chair, looking smug. “If the Flash doesn’t pull through on his end, Snart, you’re going to be the doctor’s next experiment.”

“And I take it I don’t get a say in that?”

Eiling snorted but Elias was babbling again.

“I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Snart. I’m used to working with volunteers, of course. You must understand though, you are the ideal subject. Well, perhaps slightly older than ideal, but robust nonetheless, I’m certain. Once I get some data on your blood type and general health, we can—”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Doctor.” Eiling warned. Len felt caught between a monster and a maniac.

“Ideal for what?”

“To become a metahuman!”

He swallowed back the bile trying to make its way up his throat. “That’s not possible.”

“It is! It was the most amazing revelation, to be sure.”

“Doesn’t feel so amazing from where I’m sitting.”

The doctor laughed. “Oh I’m sure, but you see, the science—”

“I need you.”

“You’re not the least bit curious about why you’d be the perfect candidate for me? Not even a little?”

Len eyed him. “No.”

“Well, since we have the time, please do indulge me a moment. Because more than anything, I’m hoping you’ll provide evidence for my hypothesis about the metagene, as it stands right now. You see, the General here has told me—the Flash is your Soulmate?”

Len tensed. His eyes skipped to Eiling and then back to the scientist, narrowed. “What’s that got to do with it?”

“Excellent. My original research was in symbolonology, here for the military. Not the most… public stuff, I’m sure you understand. I couldn’t publish almost any of it in our reputable journal system. It’s such a shame, you see, but the world tends to frown on that sort of thing.”
“The Copenhagen Convention.”

“Yes, well. It’s a little restrictive. Not that anything I was doing was unethical, Mr. Snart, you mustn’t misunderstand. As I said, my subjects were all volunteers.”

Maybe it was the cuffs or the subterranean lab, but Len figured this guy had a loose definition of ‘volunteer’. He would’ve snorted if he wasn’t freezing and aching. “That whole informed consent bit?”

“Precisely. And you know, I discovered, over time, some fascinating things about Soulmates. At times, a certain sort of resonance. Of course, the military was looking for practical applications, so I turned that to remote sensing initially, but there was so much more to uncover. For instance, I found that a resonance even existed among unbounded pairs.”

That tickled something in the back of Len’s brain. “Maws? Or spoiled ballots?”

“Either, both. I’ll admit, Mr. Snart, to a not wholly independent fascination with the subject. You see, I myself am a Spoiled Ballot. Was a bit of a sly shaker in my youth, or so they called me.” He laughed and Len could tell it was meant to be self-deprecating, the type of thing that would warm you to people, but it made his skin crawl. “And I couldn’t help but know my Soulmate was alive, though I came to dread more and more that I would never meet them. Until, well, the day that I was certain they were dead.”

“Oh?” He wasn’t trying to let himself get invested, but the doctor and his… whatever this story was, wherever this story was leading… he had a feeling it was going somewhere unpleasant, and as he was stuck, he might as well hear it out, at this point.

“Yes, it’s the strangest thing. I just woke up one morning and—” he snapped his fingers—“I said to myself “they’re dead”. I found myself crying. I just knew. Whoever they were, they had passed away. And I wanted to understand that… so I turned my attention to unbounded pairs.”

The way he kept saying it, ‘bound’ was putting Len more on edge, if that were possible. His eyes flicked to the woman in the corner. Kane. Another Spoiled Ballot.

“Ah, I see you have the eye of an observer, very good. You might see where I’m going with this. Ms. Kane is a prime example. Her Soulmate and her were both known to the military. They have a strict policy here, you know. Once they sign up, anyone Marked provides information about their Mark and Bond status, as well as an image of their Mark. The military lets a Pair know of their status, as there are several fringe benefits from having a Bonded Pair.”

“Yeah except ginger over there never Bonded before her Soulmate got iced.”

Kane glared at him, sharper and angry but didn’t move.

“Well, y-yes, that did happen. But that’s exactly it. Kane’s status allowed me to test a very particular hypothesis. You see, Mr. Snart, no one wanted to accept my theory about unbounded pairs having a sense of resonance. Biologists don’t want to believe what they can’t see under a microscope. We have, at times, somewhat limited imaginations. But having a Pair who refrained from Communing allowed me to examine these questions, test that resonance. Ms. Souci was the prime candidate before her, ah, unfortunate…”

“Just get on with your research, Doctor,” the General’s voice was less amused. “I don’t have all day to babysit and make sure you don’t jump the gun.”

“Ah, General, yes, well, perhaps you’ll indulge me a few minutes longer. Mr. Snart, let’s jump to the
crux of it, shall we? You see, one thing that my research uncovered during that time was that a surprisingly high number of people who were affected by the particle accelerator blast from Star Labs—the people who became metahumans—if they had a Soulmate, that person also became a metahuman. Not 1-to-1, but close.”

The lightbulb started to flicker inside Len’s head and also in the room.

“I began to suspect, then, that the resonance I was talking about might be found deep within the human genome, part of our most basic biology. It would be nothing short of astonishing were it true. Because after all, what does make one person Marked and another Unmarked? The answer must lie in our genetic code somewhere, don’t you agree?”

He’d never really thought about it or cared. Everyone wanted an explanation—god, science, evolution, the universe. It was always enough to him that it existed, he’d let others figure out the rest.

“So you’re saying that Magenta here’s a meta because her Soulmate was?”

“Precisely! Kane was my first successful test subject!”

He glanced over at her. She volunteered to become that? “She wasn’t hit by the accelerator, then?”

“Not at all,” Elias looked positively gleeful. “The first person who survived the treatment, and it was only after I surmised that the Soul Mark could be used as an indicator.”

“So if my Soulmate wasn’t a metahuman…”

“You’d almost certainly die. Like I’m sure your friend Mr. Rathaway will when he undergoes the treatment. Sometimes verification of a null hypothesis is also important.”

“Leave him outta this,” he growled, directed to Eiling that time, the man just sitting there impassive.

“The Pied Piper’s turn to pay up will come, Snart. Don’t worry about him. Dr. Elias, why don’t you tell Snart how the process works—”

“I couldn’t care less about a science lesson. Skip to the torture or give me a goddamn meal and let me get back to my cell already.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Eiling’s nostrils flared and he glanced at Kane. Len could still remember the sound of Barry screaming before her powers dropped him like a sack of potatoes.

Elias wrung his hands and continued. “Right, right. Well, the process works on a genetic level, of course. Without dark matter as was used in the STAR labs explosion, I’ve found that irradiating the body can work for this, if done correctly, and so long as there are a few other elements in the mix.”


“Absolutely! There are of course the chemicals needed to ready your body for the process. Without dark matter, we have had to improvise with some trial and error. Once your body has been prepared, we put you on a chemical formula of my own creation. Given that my research was originally on symbolonology before turning to psychic abilities, you’ll forgive that it implicates the NAB pathways a good deal. Along with a few other chemicals, stimulating those pathways have the added affect of inciting a seizure. Of course, too much of that after having been on blockers is problematic, but I’m sure I can calibrate your dosage accordingly, with no lasting damage to your Bond.”

“Lasting damage?”
He cleaned his glasses again. “Well, ah, experimental NAB agonists have been found to create localized apoptosis—sorry, that’s cell death, more or less a small stroke—as a result of the seizure, if not carefully managed. The results have been troubling.”

“And how many people volunteered for that experiment, doc?” If he didn’t feel like shit, head starting to pound, it probably wouldn’t have escaped Len’s mouth, but he couldn’t help it.

“Ah—oh. An unfortunate discovery at the time, to be sure, but of course, no scientific advancement is without it’s, ah, casualties. But! As I was saying, once the chemicals are in your system and procedure commences, a high dose of radiation within a calibrated electromagnetic field—I’ll spare you the physics but you’ll be in what’s more or less a modified synchrocyclotron—and you’ll be a metahuman! Provided we add final element to the mix though, or so we suspect.”

“Suspect?” His throat scratched on the word and he was frowning. He couldn’t help that he was leaning forward on his elbows, heart beating a little too fast.

“Well you see,” the man pushed up his glasses with the air of someone conferring a secret, looking properly alive. “This was missing from my earlier equations, some added element in the chamber itself that the genetic code will respond to and integrate. Miss Kane’s cells responded to the magnetic field of the chamber itself when she underwent her treatment, an incomparable insight. With you, of course, we’ll use something else to see how it works. And if I’m correct, then voila!”

“Voila?”

“A metahuman.”

“More like a dead human.”

“Well, yes, that can happen. So far, radiation and stroke have accounted for 95% of our subject deaths, with heart failure trailing after those.”

“And what exactly is your success rate?”

“That,” Kane stepped forward, a smug look on her face. “would be me.”

Just one. Len’s day just kept getting better.

Chapter End Notes

Eiling isn’t the sort of person to monologue, except about like… protecting the country, and the good of the people. So I let Dr. Elias do the monologuing instead. :D

I also realize… I wrote Elias as a bit of a stereotype, the nervous doctor wringing his hands and rationalizing his evil. I got a little trope-y on that one, I’ll admit. It was kinda fun and easy to just write him as this creepy sort of slightly-unhinged guy? He bears little to no resemblance to his comics counterpart in the New52 but he isn’t really meant to. In the world I’ve created, his mind got distorted both by power and by his obsession with never meeting his Soulmate, ultimately giving him a pretty deep damn grudge against Bonded Pairs, in case you didn’t notice that he mostly conducts experiments on Soulmates. The dude has unresolved hatred that he plays off on the surface with a self-
deprecating smile, pretending to be nervous and unassuming when truly he’s quite ready to unleash hell.

Actually, Dr. Elias is pretty close to Eiling in being lawful evil? I’d say Eiling is more lawful neutral whereas I write Elias as lawful evil. The man is purely self-interested, his only aim is advancing his research, and he’ll do it mostly within the law, but he sees the law more as a set of parameters that he can be really skeezy within, especially once he’s got military protection.

Anyhoo, if you think the last couple cliffhangers were bad, just wait until the next one!

(ps - I'm sorry at all if the electric shock seemed gratuitous? I was trying to minimize it but still make it clear that Len's in legitimate pain and having a quite shitty time and that Eiling's really not fucking around.)

(pps – can you believe that in the first, much much simpler outline for this story, both Kane and Dr. Elias’s roles in the narrative were just part of Eiling? Ah, things kept spiraling though. You'd never believe the original and quite simple outline for 14-15 chapters turned into… this).
Amygdalectomic Lesion Surgery

Chapter Summary

Bang Bang Bang by Dorothy and S&M by Rihanna

Chapter Notes

Extra trigger warnings: needles, canon-typical violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Iris, I need a favor.”

“Yeah Barr?”

He’d slipped into the room where she was sitting with Eddie, pouring over as much information as they could that might help with breaking into Iron Heights, officially the research team right now.

“What is it?”

His eyes held hers. “What’s the chances you could you get me on screen with Channel 52 for this morning’s news?”

**********

They had a plan. They had a team. They could do this.

They had to. The alternative was too much to contemplate.

They were taking an hour to prep themselves. Iris was at the Picture News making rapidfire phone calls. Shawna and James had things to collect from Hartley and James’s place, some tools, Mick was off ‘picking up’ the truck they would need.

“You holding up okay?” he asked the phantom of Lisa. Just Lisa, really. She was pouring over blueprints of Iron Heights on the big screen, eating up each detail, floating a foot above the ground. When she glanced at him her hair slid over her shoulder and fanned out behind her, ethereal.

“Never better.” Her smile was ice.
“You know, you don’t have to do this.”

He almost stepped back at the intensity of her gaze. “He’s my brother. It’s not a question.”

“You’re still injured.”

“Snarts are resilient.”

He swallowed and nodded. “Alright.” Caitlin had called Ronnie, but there was no way Firestorm could make it to Central from Pittsburg in time, even with superpowers. He was backup and guard for the lab, whenever he arrived. Which meant that they were going this alone, Barry and the Rogues. Lisa’s help was invaluable for this plan to work. He knew that.

He also knew Len would hate it if anything more happened to her.

The cortex was teeming with activity when Barry caught Cisco’s eye to motion his own exit. “I’m gonna take a five. I’ll be back soon in case Iris calls about the news.”

And then he was gone, the need to run filling his veins.

**********

They kept Len in his cell and awake for what he thought must’ve been the whole evening and night after his conversation with Elias.

By that point, he felt sick with hunger and lost the adrenaline from being so on edge down in that lab. His energy levels and mood crashed hard, the lights on and flickering still, too bright, no clue what time of day it was but his internal clock telling him it was late.

He wouldn’t talk to Hartley. He didn’t have anything to say. They wouldn’t let him sleep either, someone coming by to rattle a nightstick at the doors or shout him or Hartley awake when they tried, no doubt just short of pumping in noise to keep them awake. It would get to that point, if things kept up.

His throat had never felt so dry, his lips either. He must be at over twenty-four hours without water, maybe longer.

His headache was coming in waves, almost like a hangover, throbbing.

He hoped against hope that Barry would save him soon, hating himself a little for even allowing that feeling to take root inside of him, for recognizing it now.

**********

It was 7am. Eiling was going to call the lab any minute.

Barry’s palms were sweating inside his suit. It wasn’t the first time he’d felt nervous as the Flash, but it was his first time doing something like this, and doing it deliberately.
Iris had called him and told him the cameras were ready when he was. She wouldn’t be on screen with him. He didn’t want to expose her like that, the connection between them was already too strong and he was trying not to make his loved ones any more of a target than they already were. Never again.

On screen, two anchors prepared the viewers for his entry. “This morning, we have a special surprise for all of our viewers out there. For the first time ever, Central City’s own Flash has agreed to appear on camera. The Flash says he has a message he wants all of Central City and all of the nation to hear.”

“This is coming at you live from our studio. Take it away, Flash.”

He sped to the studio—4 seconds—and in front the cameras Iris had texted him a photo of. The camera guy was professional and focused, tilting the camera just so, but everyone else behind the equipment’s eyes went wide. Barry’s faced and voice were blurred, he forced himself to stay calm.

“People of Central City, there is something you need to know about what’s going on in this city. What’s going on in this state, and this world.”

Behind the camera, Iris nodded at him, hands tight in front her, eyes full of strained hope.

“When the STAR Labs accelerator released the dark matter that gave people the gifts we have, that created metahumans like me. There are bad people with these gifts, but good people too. The military… General Wade Eiling wants to weaponize people like me. He has invited metahumans to join him but it doesn’t stop there. He wants to force my hand and the hand over metahumans. Other innocent people. And when that isn’t enough, he wants to take ordinary people like you at home, kids of metahumans and anyone else he thinks might qualify, and make them into metahumans.

General Eiling plans to make more people into living weapons. No matter what he might have told you before, I don’t agree with that, and I don’t condone it. No person is a weapon.”

Iris was nodding harder, tears in her eyes. He gave a subtle nod back to her, and shifted for a final moment back to the camera.

“The only way to defend this country is to defend all of the people in it. And that means metahumans too. I know the people of Central will agree.”

And then he was gone, and the plan was already in motion. This distraction should distract the military at least for a little while.

**********

Step 1: Enter at the North Entrance.

James was in his element. None of these chumps had wanted to let him when he volunteered. Something about being unreliable. He snorted at them and cricked his neck, taking center stage room.

To impress, he’d dropped any vestiges of his accent and put on an east coast one with a hint of New England, north of Boston, south of Metropolis, peppered the way of someone who spent too much time in Gotham. He adjusted his posture to a construction worker and turned to the cute one with
long hair—Ramon? Clearly the one in charge of the planning around here—to drop into his role of being a tired crew lead just trying to start his day and could they fuckin’ let him past security already because he’s got a job to do and he doesn’t get paid enough to work next to a bunch of inmates let alone put up with this shit ‘n he might as well’ve never left Gotham with all the crazies showing up in this goddamn city these days.

He’d handed over a key-card slipped right off the desk in front of Ramon to illustrate his ability. The guy’s jaw was appropriately on the floor and even the Flash was looking at him surprised.

“Ah—oh-kay, you can take that job.”

The Flash and Shawna had procured them the suits and badges and IDs of some of the actual construction crew and Ramon pulled double time faking them up proper badges of their own. Not flattering, but James’d survive.

Then it was off to Iron Heights Penitentiary.

He pulled the accent and had a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in his pocket to flesh out the look, a day of growth that was helping sell it. The guards scanned their IDs, James and Shawna and even Rory’s who they didn’t seem to recognize despite spending time there, sitting next to James in an identical construction outfit. Ramon was hacking their system from the parking lot to make sure the IDs scanned right. They checked the truck Mick had lifted for the job just an hour prior. No contraband was inside, of course. Lisa was floating through the prison’s outer wall in some camera’s blindspot somewhere else.

“What’s takin’ so long guys? We gotta job to do.”

“Yeah yeah. You guys’re good.”

James drove the truck in with a little smile.

**********

Step 2: Get their gear

James started to whistle once they were through and in. Shawna could’ve killed him for how at-ease he seemed, but it helped the guards relax once he started chatting them up, and she forced herself to relax too. Mick glanced at the cameras and away and Shawna wondered how he must feel here, now.

They passed the metal detectors at the door and let themselves get pat down and their gear checked before proceeding in. Shawna smirked once they made it past the guards and into the empty hall beyond the many checkpoints. Cisco should have the cameras hacked by now. She looked out the nearest window and blinked onto the guard tower and then gone again immediately, out to the parking lot to his van.

“What took you so long?” Cisco was grinning. It was a good look on him, one that didn’t make her want to punch him in the face. Still, she rolled her eyes.

“We’re not all the Flash.” She hoisted the duffel of supplies over her shoulder. It was damn heavy, Mick’s gun and James’s toys inside.
“Barry’s news broadcast is about to start, it should buy you guys some time when Eiling’s seething and unfocussed. If we’re lucky they’ll send their resources to STAR Labs, but they’re not gonna be distracted long.”

“Good. Let ‘em come.”

She was gone again then, and back inside to the exact spot she’d blipped out of with a hop or two. Definitely let ‘em come. Once she found Mark, there would be one hell of a storm waiting for them.

**********

Step 3: Find the (other) metas

Lisa glided through walls. It felt weird that it didn’t feel weird, no more resistance than moving through air. The insides of walls were mostly ugly, solid in some places and wood in others and altogether unappealing.

She mostly stayed in them to hide off camera, in ceilings and floors. The construction areas were full of wood and rubble and glass, equipment and vehicles in some places, easy to flow through and hide in undetected. There were workers and guards milling about, starting their early morning shifts with yawns, setting up machinery or taking over from the night crew.

There were no cells here, and no signs of Lenny. She flowed lower, the only way to tell if solid ground or another floor was beneath her being to lower herself through it.

That was the hardest part, the instinctual fear that she would slide down and be met with pure darkness, buried alive but not, claustrophobia caging her in until she was through the floor and into another open space. She swallowed the feeling back each time. Fear was a luxury they didn’t have time for.

The biggest issue was the communicator, or lack thereof. She was incorporeal and not able to stick an ear bud in. The best she could do was find Lenny and the others and report back to the Rogues, provided she could find them at all. Cisco had made her pour over the blueprints of the place for as many hours as she could muster before coming, but her ability to find the others at the rendezvous point was going to be seriously put to the test.

And this wasn’t on the blueprints at all. There was only supposed to be a single basement and a few maintenance tunnels under it. She slid underneath the ground, finding a completely new floor. Then lower. And lower, to a fourth subbasement. She could feel her incorporeal heart racing. She didn’t find a fifth. Just cement and eventually nothing.

She shot up through the ground back to the open, dark hall of the first sub-basement, the one with actual guards and cells, gasping in air she didn’t need, wasn’t technically breathing in at all. She swore quietly to herself and gathered her wits.

Lenny needed her. Somewhere in this basement labyrinth, on one of these floors, she had to find him.

**********
When Kane came to get Len again, he forced himself to muster a frustrated face but didn’t doubt it was thin and transparent. Spots of black danced in his vision when he stood, vertigo making him feel sick, heart rate spiking; he pushed it aside and followed her down to that lab.

Eiling was there, face angry if he had to guess. He stopped walking but Kane shoved him forward and he tripped over a thick metal wire, swearing as his knees hit the ground hard, joints inflamed.

He wasn’t even back on his feet, moving to stand when Eiling said it. “He’s not coming for you.” Len’s stomach and knees dropped.

No.

There was no way.

Barry had said… no?

The do-gooder, the hero, had… there was obviously some reason. He pushed down the bile in his throat but couldn’t stop his hands from shaking with the cold. Barry would save a puppy. Barry would rescue a murderer. This wasn’t about him.

Except it was.

It couldn’t be, that wasn’t fair.

Except that it had to be.

If he was Iris then Barry would’ve—

He couldn’t think like that. He—

What could be so awful that Barry wouldn’t trade it for his life?

Was he really so awful that Barry was finally taking his chance to leave Len behind? To cut himself free of the Bond that was tying him down, tying him to Len?

He shook his head, vision narrowing. He was so fucking thirsty. His head was still throbbing. He had no exit strategy. He had no plan. He had nothing.

“You hear me Snart?”

He jolted, head pounding, and forced himself to get to his feet. “I heard you, just don’t care.”

“Oh?”

He swallowed around how sticky dry his throat felt. “Kill me with your little meta machine, I said I don’t care.”

The look of derision on the General’s face slid like water off Len’s back. He’d been seeing it his whole life from guys who thought they were better than him. It was no business of Eiling’s to care if Len cared about his own life. Maybe if he was out of here, if he had a plan, if he had the energy to pull it off.

But he couldn’t help the sick feeling at what came next. The two soldiers who’d followed Kane like
watchdogs grabbed him under the arms and hauled him over to a large medical bed complete with straps to hold him in. His instincts kicked in to struggle when one of them took scissors to his shirt, but it was far too late to bother, completely strapped in, leather holding down his legs, wrists, and across his chest.

“Sir.” They stepped back at Elias’s approach.

“My, my, Mr. Snart. We’re just going to start the procedure off with a few chemicals and an IV, shall we?”

“Go to hell.”

The doctor hummed and pulled out the biggest needle Len’d had the misfortune to see. He felt a migraine starting to build, pain lancing through his head and down his neck, the lights above his body feeling too bright.

“I hope the dehydration isn’t bothering you too much? Part of the process, I should have said. The dryer you are, the less likely to die from stroke before we’re done. It’s counterintuitive, I’ll admit I had the first few subjects replete with water to minimize stroke damage, but since the strokes we see here are hemorrhagic and not ischemic—”

“You must really like the sound of your own voice.”

The doctor chuckled and put the medicine bottle he was using to fill the syringe aside, readying it and stepping closer to Len’s arm.

“I do hope you don’t have a fear of needles—” something white and hot lanced through him “—but it will be over soon, I promise.”

His whole brain felt like it was lighting up and it couldn’t be whatever Elias was pumping into his arm, not yet, no matter how red hot his arm was starting to feel. There was the flash of an image, a red-hot rage, a feeling that wasn’t his—

Grodd?

There was a shudder inside his mind, just a tickle. But a moment later, he was screaming.

**********

Hartley was sore in a way he didn’t know he could be. Between how cold he was, how he couldn’t get warm, how sore from being knocked out and dumped unceremoniously, how thirsty he felt… he just wanted to sleep. He wanted to sleep so bad. He wanted to cry. He wanted—

“Hartley!”

His eyes snapped open and his whole body shivered. Floating above him was—

“Lisa?”

He was hallucinating. He had to be. She was golden.

“Shhh—”
He’d never been shushed by a hallucination. Then again, he’d never hallucinated before. This was all new territory.

“Wh-w-why am I im-m-m-agining you of all p-people?” his teeth chattered. Her face got hard.

“You’re not imagining me. Get up. Tell me where the others are. Where’s my brother?”

He sat up and shivered. “Wh-what?”

“Hartley, I need you to focus. Where. Is. Lenny?”

He pointed at the door, certain he’d gone insane but sure that fever dreams couldn’t be this lucid at the same time.

“They t-took him.”

“Who? Where?”

“Dunno. Down. Kane did.”

“Down, dammit, it’s creepy as fu—never mind. Where are the others?”

He hissed as he stood onto his cold feet, mostly numb but full of pins and needles. He leaned against the bars and pointed down the hall to where he and Leonard had pinpointed the metas must be being held.

“That way, we think.” His mouth was warming up to talking, jaw sore from chattering still.

He was so tired.

Lisa looked at him, floating in the cell like a beautiful specter. Maybe this was a dream before dying. He shouldn’t be dying yet, but it was hard to tell, he’d never died before.

If he could dream of anyone in gold, he wished it were James.

“Help is on the way, Piper. Be ready.”

She was gone then, through the wall, and he blinked in her wake.

Oh. Maybe… maybe this wasn’t a dream. That… would make some sense. He rubbed his hands up and down his cold arms. Be ready? He could give that a shot.

**********

Step 4: Make it to the rendezvous without getting spotted.

Luck was always going to run out sometime. Luck always ran out, even if Snart was planning the gig, and this was Lisa’s plan. She was good, always had been, but not good enough yet, not at this.

As it was, it ran out when a patrol of military guards ran smack dab into Mick and the others.

They were in the maintenance tunnels heading toward their rendezvous point with Lisa. The military asked what they were doing there and told them to turn back. Jesse pulled out his shtick but these
weren’t smuck rent-a-cops or prison guards.

Mick pulled out his gun when they pulled out theirs. They were on fire in and instant, orange and red, dancing and growing, screaming.

It wasn’t enough.

It never was. It was something, though, normally. But now, here, hands hurting they were clenched so tight, hot like dynamite ready to blow? It wasn’t enough by a mile. He wanted to burn the entire prison to the ground and reveal the sick, fetid underbelly to it. He wanted to see the whole system go up in fire.

In the flames, he felt a sense of release unlike anything else. A tension, a valve being opened, a sense of panic ebbing away. The flames always set him free.

He was born with fire on him. His Mark was a little flame. His Pam. His Bond had gone silent, his Mark turned as black as ash, and he wanted nothing more than to see the world burn.

Her death should feel like agony. It should make him want to scream. It should be so loud, so LOUD. But it was not.

It so goddamn, so fucking QUIET.

So quiet.

Mick’s heart beat alone now. A widower in his Soul, an orphan. And in that empty void… into that space inside of him, Mick did what he always did. He filled the silence with fire.

**********

James swore next to Mick and Shawna shuddered. The military’s screams were cut short by smoke in their lungs but it didn’t matter. An alarm went off. She could hear it, dimly, a resounding blare and a loudspeaker.

“We gotta go!” Shawna was tugging on James’s arm.

He glanced at Mick. “You gonna hold them off?”

Down the hall, Shawna could hear boots coming. More soldiers, no doubt. Mick’s face was red with the glint of flame, pulling his goggles down over his eyes. “I got this."

Shawna nodded and pulled on her abilities, the tight sensation of being removed and re-entered into existence, landing where her eyes had selected, right past the fire. The burning soldiers had a stench starting to fill the hall.

“What should I…?” James was looking left and right. They could hear footsteps.

“You got left, I’ll go right.”

“You think it’s a good idea to split up?”

“I think we’re sitting ducks. I’m here to find my Soulmate. You’re here to find yours.”
A voice blared into their ears, Cisco’s. “What the hell is going on down there guys?!”

James nodded at her and took off down the other hall. “Things got hairy.” She heard his voice in her ear.

“Talk to me…”

James was giving Cisco an update, all of them an update. Shawna was slinking up to a corner, gun drawn. She made the mistake of glancing around it.

“Well well well,” Bivolo’s eyes were blue. “Long time no see.”

She slammed her eyes closed and whimpered.

No. No he couldn’t, she…

How the hell was she going to stop Bivolo if she couldn’t look at him? How was she going to save Mark? How was she going to do anything? Mark was going to die and it was going to be her fault and she should never have come here and she ruined everything. She felt tears sliding down her cheeks, crying, already heaving in big, gulping breaths, crumpling on to her knees.

“There there, Shawna. There’s no need to be so sad,” Roy’s voice was singsong and she shuddered out a sob.

“I can’t—”

“There there. I’ll take you to Eiling, and everything will feel better.”

He took her gun and it fell limp from her hands. What was the point of it anyway? What was the point of anything?

**********

Lisa came across James on her way to the rendezvous point. She hadn’t found Lenny but Hartley and Mark were down a hall and she was ready to lead the others right to them when the sirens had started going off.

It really figured. Murphy’s law, which she ought to call ‘Mick’s Law’ at this point, but such was life.

James was throwing all his muster at this one metahuman when she floated into the open room they were duking it out in, James behind a row of hollow metal piping until the ground shuddered under him and cracked.

“You can’t run from Geomancer, little man!”

“Who’re you calling little?!”

Lisa would’ve laughed it she had time. She swooped in front of the meta, the quaking ground hardly an issue for her. “Geomancer? Awful name, don’t you think?!”

“Wh-a—who’re—what are you?”
She tittered and glanced over her shoulder at James. He was readying a bomb. Good. She moved to make sure she was in front of this guy’s line of vision. “Haven’t you heard? I’m the Golden Glider.”

“The who—”

The guy didn’t get a chance to finish. A concussive explosive went through Lisa’s body and landed against his chest. She recognized the polka dots on the outside of it, James’s little flourish for each of the weapons Hartley made.

“Oh shi—”

It went off and she almost thought she felt something ripple through her.

She glanced back at James, who was standing.

“Nice save, Glider.”

“Glad you caught on quick. Where’s Shawna? We’re going to need her help to get the boys out of their cells.”

**********

Barry was on his way to the prison when he fell out the speedforce, rolling across the ground and screaming in pain.

He clutched his head, white hot, trying to focus, what—

The pain ebbed slightly, still throbbing but he could breathe again, air like fire in his lungs.

“Ah, I forgot to mention just how painful this part can be. My apologies, Mr. Snart.”

His eyes were clenched tight, and when he opened them, he couldn’t see the ground in front of him. He could see—

“Len? Is that—what’s going on?”

The sound of his own voice reverberated around in his head and he felt his—no, Len’s—heartbeat skip a beat, painful in his chest.

_Barry?_

“Mr. Snart?” a man came into his line of sight and he felt trapped, so trapped, helpless, his wrists clamped down, he was on a table, he must be—

“Make a note that the subject’s pupils are fully dilated, not responding to light. He hasn’t begun to seize.”

He felt sick. “Len, is that—are you okay?”

“Barry…” his throat felt dry and cracked.

“Is that—oh Mr. Snart, have the agonists taken that much hold already? You can sense your
Soulmate again, I take it?"

Barry moaned against the spike of pain in his head when a needle came into view. “It looks like we won’t need the supplementary dosage after all.”

“What—”

“Now that the agonists have taken hold, you’ll notice your NAB is stronger than ever. Don’t worry, that’s natural for this part of the process. Provided the dosage is correct, the blockers won’t have had any ill effect on that, might make things more intense.”


“Now we’ll be able to set you inside the chamber to start the process.”

“NO! No—” Barry had never heard Len’s voice sound like that. “not while he can feel it. Not—”

“I’m afraid that’s how this works, Mr. Snart.”

Barry swallowed, eyes blurring. “Len, we’re on our way, just hold out a little longer.”

He forced himself to his feet and running again, screaming into the speedforce against the pain. He could see Len the entire time, see through his eyes, could feel—

_I am sorry, Cold One._

That was Grodd. Grodd was in Len’s head. In _his_ head. How?

Barry was at Iron Heights, inside the wall, going so fast he’d barely registered phasing through the perimeter gates, down the main hallway.

“Barr?” That was Cisco in his ear. “Head down three levels to the maintenance tunnels to the rendezvous point. We got fire down there, Mick’s holding off the military right now, Bivolo’s holding up Shawna and James and—”

Barry surged forward and then dropped with a suppressed scream to the ground, Len’s body seizing, spiking, and falling back down. He could hear Len screaming inside his head, hear blood pounding in Len’s ears.

“Stop them. Stop them, please—”

“I will, Len, I wi—”

“Please, Grodd.”

Barry shuddered. Len was in _so much pain_. Grodd was here somewhere, near Len, in their heads.

_My powers not enough. Must gather my strength. Must escape._

Barry choked back bile, in more pain than he could describe. He could smell smoke. He forced himself to his feet.

“I’m so close, Len. Where are you? I’m here. Please—”

_Down, Flash._
Barry phased through the floor three times, dropping down until his feet landed on something that didn’t sound hollow.

Len was screaming again, his blood felt like it was on fire with whatever they were loading him full of.

He ran through the halls, past soldiers, gritting his teeth against the pain, dodging bullets aimed in his direction until he came to a space that felt right inside his head, familiar. And then he stopped, or was stopped, a girder to the stomach.

He tasted blood in his mouth and felt Len’s pain in every fiber of his body. He looked up and forced his dual vision to clear and see—

“Kane.”

She was there with a grin that looked unhinged as ever.

“I was wondering when one of your pals would make it all the way down here, Flash.”

Barry, Len’s worried voice cut across his senses. Even in all that pain, he was worried about Barry.

Len, he choked back, forcing himself to stand. I’m almost there.

He felt Len’s body being moved, dragged, struggling, weak. God he was thirsty. So thirsty. Heartbeat too fast in his chest. Feet numb. Cold.

Barry dodged another chunk of construction metal swinging his way, Kane having zero compunctions about attacking her opponent when he was distracted.

“You just gonna stand there all day, Flash?!” she yelled, feet lifting off the ground. He sped forward and got in a punch, reservations about that gone, but a metal rebar-turned-to-weapon swung his feet out from under him, black spots dancing before his eyes and Len’s mindspace took over. Men on either side of him were dragging him, struggling and angry and desperate, cuffed. There was a circular room, smooth metal walls and just a spot to chain a person in the center.

“NO—Len, hold on, I’m—”

A foot caught his stomach.

“You’re not even worth fighting in this state,” Kane laughed, ugly. “Is it bad? I hear NAB agonists make things just crazy but you know, I wouldn’t know.”

She kicked him again and he tried to separate his mind from Len’s, separate his own gasping pain from Len’s, the shouting inside his head—get up Barry get up! Fight her! GET UP!—

Kane leaned down. “After all, no Soulmate to feel when I went through the process. Oh it was agony though. Your Mate is going to have one hell of a time. The worst is yet to come, you know. And that’s if he makes it.” Her eyes turned sharp with her smile. “No one else but me has so far.”

Barry clenched his teeth, forcing himself to stand, spitting out the blood he could taste. ‘I’m going to
get through you, and I’m going to stop this.”

Her laughter was pitched high and loud.

“No, you’re going to die, Flash.”

When Barry screamed next, it was from his own pain.

**********

Len tried to throw off the guards, shouting inside his head and out loud. Barry was going to die. Barry was going to die because Len’s pain was tearing his body apart. Len was going to kill Barry.

The only gifts he could give—bruises and pain. Pain and pain and pain and pain—

*Grodd, please—stop this, please—*

Elias was coming into the chamber, his clipboard with him, his glasses perched on his nose. Len would’ve spat on his face if he had any saliva left to muster that wasn’t sticky and tacky in his mouth.

*Not me. The*—there was an image of the needle, a sharp twist of pain.

*THEN SAVE HIM!*

*Cannot escape—*

*But you’re inside my head!*

*Cannot destroy cage, not strong enough yet—*

*Then do something, anything! He’s going to die he can’t get out of my head—*

*There may be something—*

*Anything—*

A blinding flash of pain hit him, visceral and in his bones like the marrow was on fire, spiking deep inside and then back. Len grit his teeth with a high, loud whine of pain, arching his body.

“Just one more chemical, Mr. Snart. And this, of course.” He pulled something out of his pocket and Len forced his eyes open to see it. If it were physically possible, he’d be even more tense. It was the cold cell from his gun. “The x-factor. Cold seems to suit you, so we’ll see if this works, then.”

He had on a smile without the pretense of nervousness, a full-on grin. Then he was moving past Len toward the center of the ring at Len’s back.

Behind his eyelids, Barry was arguing with Kane, on the ground. He got in a few hits, she kept up defense. He was breathing too heavy, too hurt, distracted, catching a pipe to the side of his face, an inch off his temple. She raised her hand, powers poised. She was going to kill him. He could feel Barry scream and swallowed around his own pain.
Now, Grodd—

In his mind’s eye, he saw a flash of Elias’s needles, the ones that held the agonists, more of them all sitting in a row on a tray.

*Overload your Bond. Seizure kills the connect—*

*Kills*—Len shuddered, an unmistakable image in his brain of patients screaming, crying, Grodd’s memory from sometime before. Their NABS, the bleeds—

*Unbound—*

Like the surgery that ended bleeds. It would—

His pain spiked sharp and he screamed. Barry screamed with him and Len felt it, building on his own pain, Kane’s ‘finishing move’, starting to pull at his very blood, the iron there.

Len was killing him. Len was going to get him killed with his own pain. Barry couldn’t see, couldn’t focus,

*Do it—*

Elias was talking. The door would only be open for a minute longer. The tray was outside, Len was inside.

*NO!* Barry’s voice was inside his head, screaming. He could feel Barry grit his teeth, stand and access his speed, punch Kane inside of a second, and then stop, panting. *No, not that, anything but that, I’m so close—*

*You’re dying—*

*I can save you—*

*My pain is killing you—*

He felt it flare again, as if to prove his point, and felt Barry’s body shudder in response, knew he couldn’t even see Kane for it. Len felt like he was bleeding out of every pore, bones like knives. His own vision was blurry. Barry couldn’t fight with this pain.

He could see, feel, Grodd using his powers, a shudder going through his mind. The tray outside was moving, wheels rolling closer to the chamber Len was in. He shivered.

*Don’t do this, I’m begging you Lenny, don’t do this don’t do this don’t do this don’t—*

*For the first time in my life,* Len forced his eyes open, unable to see, white light beaming down into them, feeling blind. *I’m going to be part of the solution.*

*What solution?! Len—*

*You’re going to be free—*

Kane punched him in the face. Elias walked toward the door. Outside, Eiling shouted orders.

*NOW, GRODD—*

Needles shot into the room through the opening in the door, into Len’s skin like uncharted knives,
depressing all at once. He couldn’t count how many. He was screaming.

**********

Barry slammed Kane into the wall, blinded by pain, begging Len not to. Kane punched him in the face and he slammed her hard before Len’s pain took over, more agonizing than anything he’d ever felt.

He dropped to the ground, screaming, and then—

He shuddered and threw up. The pain was gone. The pain was gone. It was gone. It was—

“Len? Len! LEN!!”

Barry screamed. He screamed as loud as his voice would allow, a screech that thundered and reverberated, echoed back to him, surrounded him, but did nothing to penetrate inside of him. Inside, there was only silence.

Hollow, empty, roaring, deafening, void Silence.

There was… nothing.

Chapter End Notes

So.
That happened. ὔ(⌜)⌜
No seriously, I was originally just gonna put in that shrug emoji and not write any author’s note for this chapter, but that seems cruel. I want you to know, it was always coming to this. It was always headed here.

Part of my goal for writing a Soulmate AU was to undermine and subvert the typical notions you see in them, because as much as I love Soulmate AUs like candy, I also hate the lack of free will inherent in them. The way people are ‘stuck’ and the potential for abuse and other issues and how difficult that would be to navigate that. In the vast majority of Soulmate AUs, once the characters find out they're Soulmates, the main conflict is over. The climax of the story tends to be the characters discovering that they’re soulmates. Miscommunication abounds in hilarity or discomfort until they realize they’re fated, and then it all makes perfect sense from there.

I didn’t want that. So I tossed it on its head.

Len and Barry find out they’re soulmates in the first chapter and then have 250,000 words of navigating the mess it makes. They have their entire history and all the issues that can arise in any relationship, except dialed up to 9000 because they didn’t get to pick this in the first place. There’s no way for them to set a healthy pace for the situation they're thrown into. They’re just trying their damn best to tread water, and at the start, they do an awful job of it. And even when they start to figure it out, figure out what this means for them, figure how how to be authentic not just with those around them and not just with each other but with themselves too... this happens. For a reason. Because ultimately… ultimately I have it so they throw away the one part of the Bond that technically binds them, allowing them (making them) choose this instead.

Because as much as I may worry about free will in these situations, I also wanted the characters to fall in love and be happy. And the more I thought about the notion of Soulmates, the more I couldn't argue around the idea that if they were to exist, it wouldn't be some accidental or incidental Bond, it’s one that has been fated, and so there has to be some reason for it. It’s not random – these people come together and are (according to the genre and the idea of Soulmates) supposed to be in one another’s lives in some way, and presumably some way that is positive for them and not detrimental. And I thought my way around the science and the evolutionary benefits, but it still comes down to having some faith in fate, and my personal ideas about a world with Soulmates is that fate would assign them on the basis of being a positive influence on one another, if not always a romantic one. And that's why it works, for Eddie and Iris, for Mick and Pam, for Hartley and James -- for all of them. Because it's meant to, and they manage to have a little faith.
So, there'll be more discussion on this next chapter. Just know, this had to happen. From the outset of this story, it was always meant to happen. No need to fret, I promise, the end of this fic is still going to be 'happy', and hopefully fulfilling.

Also, please don’t murder me.
For the split-second moment before he passed out, Len had a single thought. He had never felt so alone in his entire life.

**********

Barry had never felt so empty.

In the space of a second, his mind was filled with his memory of earlier that morning...

Before they’d gone to the Heights and started the plan, before appearing on the news, Barry had gone for a run.

He’d slipped out of STAR Labs, needing to clear his head, needing wind in his face and the feel of air rushing past. He didn’t actually feel the wind in the speed force, had to slow down to get it, had to run up the side of a building and stand on the roof to feel it swirl around him, buffet him. That was exhilarating, standing on a ledge and letting nature push him around, taking a dip at the last second before it pushed him too far, having to run down the side.

Some days, after throwing Eobard back through that wormhole, he used to leave the speedforce halfway through just to feel his blood rush in his veins and the wind against him before speeding back up a few feet from the ground, letting his momentum carry him safely for the last stretch, pushing it to the last second.

He didn’t have time to play that game right now though. Hadn’t played it in months, really, not since….
Not since Bonding.

His feet took him to the only place he thought he might find peace for a few minutes. He went to Len’s.

The house was so quiet and still he felt like an interloper in his red suit. He pushed the cowl down and walked slow though the dark space. Still no replacement mirrors, still the soft sound of his boots on carpet.

It had only been 24 hours and it already felt like so much longer.

He looked at the art on the walls and wondered where Len would’ve displayed his seascapes. Slipped into Len’s room and wondered if he’d replace the more romantic, gothic, whatever-it-was-called piece hanging over his bed for the more abstract photographs.

He sat down on the side of the bed and breathed into the quiet space. He stood up again. It was wrong, too wrong, to be calm when he felt so restless. To exist in a reverie in Len’s room when Len wasn’t there. When Len was in danger.

The only benefit of him coming here was that he could bring Len a change of clothes after being stuck in Iron Heights. He wasn’t wearing socks or shoes or a sweater over the video Kane showed them, and Barry doubted he would be faring much better when they go to him.

He moved to his dresser and closet, grabbing out some functional clothes, and noticed boxes in the corner of the closet. His eyes skipped over them then stopped, moved back, and stared. It took him a moment to figure out why, and why they were so familiar.

A small red box with a gold ribbon sat on top of the pile.

“You... got me... a gift... I, ah... no.”

“No?”

“I don’t want any gifts from you.”

His throat stuck and he fell to his knees, fingers reaching for it. Below it was a slightly larger box, royal blue and shiny, a silver ribbon.

“Stop doing this. Please. I don’t want anything from you.”

And below that was a shoe box, receipt sticking out the side.

“I’m returning the shoes.”

“Then what else can I do, Barry? I enjoy giving gifts.”

His hand trembled and he dropped it beside him, tears welling into his eyes, try to choke back the sob threatening to escape.

“...suffice it to say that no one’s truly given me a gift since my grandfather died.”

And all the gifts that Len wanted to give him were still here, sitting un-opened. An expression of his love when he didn’t know what else to do, and Barry spurned it without thinking twice.

Len had been trying to tell Barry he would love him since the day they Bonded, that he did love him. And Barry hadn’t been able to accept that. Hadn’t been able to accept that he was going to feel the
same way about Len, that… the part of him already did.

That was the whole crux of it. The part of it he couldn’t admit, couldn’t accept, even to himself, until Len shook it loose by being wrong. Wrong in saying that Barry would never choose this, choose him.

He sat back into the closet, unable to hold it together, biting his hand to try and quell the tears, the throat-stopping feelings bubbling up, the burning in his eyes at so many tears trying to fall at once, blurring the gift boxes into brilliant, shimmery mirages.

Barry would choose this. Wanted to choose this. Had wanted Len in some deep, core part of himself from the day they had met. Smiling on that goddamn train, heart thumping in his chest, aching to chase the other man down when he called the Flash out. In the casino, taking Lisa and her gun without trying to capture Len’s, without wanting their game to end. In the woods, his cowl down, charmed despite himself, wanting to step closer, to bridge that gap between them, a deep sense of synchronicity and understanding, agreement and trust. Trust he tried to deny, trust Len had abused, in Saints and Sinners begging for his help, too nervous, too foolish, asking for what he didn’t really need, the first easy excuse to track to the other man down, to try and see what was underneath. On the ground at Ferris Air, telling himself he’d never again make that mistake, never let his heart get ahead of him that way again, not when it meant the people he loved being hurt, the people he was trying to protect dying anyway.

He’d hated how badly he’d wanted to choose this all along. Bonding with Len a scant two months after that night at the airfield, after stuffing his half-formed feelings down deep inside of him to never see the light of day again.

How was he supposed to accept how badly he wanted the man he was most afraid to want? How was he supposed to admit he would choose Len in a heartbeat even before knowing he had good in him, before ever seeing how deep he could love or how noble his heart could be? How was he supposed to live with himself for wanting to fall in love and forgive someone who had almost killed the only friends Barry had managed to make since childhood?

He’d started falling in love with Leonard Snart the day the man grinned on a train of innocent people and derailed it in the same breath and he’d never figured out how to forgive himself for it.

It wasn’t the Bond. It wasn’t the NAB. It was just Len. It had always just been Len. And now Barry was going to risk his life on a half-cocked plan and probably get them both killed and he… He drew in a shaky breath and forced himself to let it out slowly. He only regretted that he didn’t tell Len sooner.

Barry had picked himself up off the floor and resolved. No matter what, he was getting Len out of the place alive, and he was telling him he loved him.

And now, in a dark hallways in the bowels of Iron Heights, Barry picked himself up off the ground again. He couldn’t feel Len, couldn’t feel their Bond, but that changed nothing. Len was his, and Barry was going to save him.

**********

James had never met Bivolo, but from the way Lisa hissed the man’s name, he got the idea that it
was someone they didn’t like. Shawna was a step behind the man in the hall, sobbing uncontrollably, arms wrapped around herself save for one hand clutching to the man’s sleeve.

“Well well, Lisa—what happened to you?”

The man’s eyes did something weird and Lisa darted in front of James, glancing back at him worriedly. He looked at her in confusion and she grinned.

“Don’t think your powers work through me, Raider.”

The man frowned. “I suppose not. Well, there’s only one way to handle this then.”

Bivolo raised his gun.

**********

Something in the entire building shuddered. Something beneath Barry’s feet. He forced himself to stand as Kane was thrown off-balance, fire in his eyes.

“I can’t feel him.”

She looked at him in genuine confusion for a moment. “What?”

“I can’t feel my Soulmate. Our Bond… I can’t feel I—he—it broke.”

Her eyes widened and he darted forward, getting in a hit, and another. She fought back, metal shooting at him but he was too fast by a mile, too fast for anything she could throw at him. He ducked and dodged, caught a pipe and hit her with it faster than she could register, swiping her legs out from under her. Her hands went up to pull metal with her but he caught her on her descent, threw her against the wall, hard enough for her head to smack against it. He had his forearm to her throat.

“Give me one good reason I don’t kill you right now.”

His free hand was vibrating, resting on top of her chest. Her hands were limp. Any sign of movement, of her powers, and he’d—

She making a gagging sound and he realized after a second that it was a laugh. “I don’t—erk—have one, Flash.”

His gaze hardened.

“Put m—ghh—e out of my miser—”

He pulled back his arm back from her throat, knowing he didn’t have time for this but he had to know—“WHY?! Why would you do this? Side with the man who killed your Soulmate—why would you be this!” His rage was infinite, filling the void inside him.

Kane shuddered against his hand, tears sliding down her cheeks, the first sign of honest emotion he’d ever seen her display that wasn’t full of hate. “Because she chose you instead of me.”

His face screwed up. “Bette?”
“She knew about me. She knew who I was from day one. But she was his best asset, and I was a nobody. And when she got hurt, she went to you—to the Flash—for help. She chose to die rather than to ever even try to Bond with me. She never wanted me.”

He was incredulous, seething. “You were jealous? You hate me because you were jealous?!”

She laughed, a wet sound in her throat. “Eiling killed her but you stole her, Flash. You stole her and she chose to die because of what you inspired.”

He snapped his hand back, threw his body back. Len.

“You have no idea how much I wanted to see you suffer like I have!”

He looked down the hall. He had to go. Kane didn’t even fight this time when he sped forward and tied her up, leaving her there, hands bound so she couldn’t use her powers.

She was still laughing as he raced to the cavernous room she was guarding.

**********

Len came to seconds after the pain had forced him to pass out. Elias was fretting and shouting, pulling needles out of his skin. The noises were muted like he’d gone through an explosion. Had he? No. Cotton-balls in his ears. Cotton? He felt light. He could hear—

Grodd was roaring from inside his cage. And maybe because of it, of him, the ground was shuddering.

Everything felt far away, a daze. Unreal. Maybe a dream?

Len mustered the barest hint of a smile. Hopefully he’d break out. If anyone deserved their freedom, it was Grodd.

He could hear people shouting in the room beyond him but couldn’t focus on their words, world a haze.

“General!” That was Elias, and it cut through the noise. The volume turned back on. Len heard the screeching of metal on metal and the crash of things breaking, being bent and torn and shredded. And then he remembered he was in pain, and everything turned to fire again. He gasped out loud, arching, whatever passed-out endorphins he was on ebbing back, heat lancing through his limbs.

Elias turned to him, fixing his glasses. “Well, then, I guess I’ll have to finish this on my own.”

**********

Lisa went high, rushed Bivolo and he freaked. He tried to shoot her, it went through her, bullets ricocheting across the ceiling.

She watched with no small satisfaction as red bloomed across his stomach. He looked down, hand
shaking as he clutched the bullet wound. The next one took him through the chest. And the one after.

Bivolo fell back, dead.

Lisa glanced back at James, ready to congratulate him on the shot, but Shawna was there, James’s gun in her hand, heaving in breaths, tears still on her cheeks. She was in front of James, who looked as wide-eyed as Lisa felt.

“He—I—”

“He whammied you.”

“I was so sad,” she shook her head, still collecting herself, lips wrapping in a grimace around the painful admission, “so ready to give up and die, but then there was you and I—I jumped to take a bullet for James, ready to just end it, and I felt like—like the only happy thing in the world would be making sure James got to see Hartley again.”

“Oh, Boo,” James whispered, reverent behind her. Lisa wanted to echo the sentiment.

“I need to see Mark.”

Lisa nodded, running her hands through her golden hair. She could feel what she did to herself. It was something, at least.

“This way.”

**********

“We don’t have time for this.”

“Shut up, Lis—ommppph.” Hartley had never been kissed mid-word before, mid-sentence, not like this.

He was sore and tired and scared and anxious and he’d never felt so alive as when James wrapped him up in his arms and kissed him.

“We really don’t have time for this.”

He felt James shift and cracked open and eye to see him flipping Lisa the bird. Shawna snorted and Hart smiled against James’s lips, the bleed surging between them, stilted with the Blockers but stronger with him here.

“Blue-eyes…”

“I love you too, James, and I have questions, approximately a million, but I think we’re about to get left in this cell if we don’t hurry.”

Shawna rolled her eyes and blipped them out.
The ground shuddered under Mark’s feet, all he could hear was sirens gunshots and explosions, smell smoke.

He couldn’t stop grinning.

And then, like the sunshine peeking through the clouds on a shitty, rainy day, Shawna was suddenly there, right outside his cell, Hartley and some other guy beside her. The golden specter that was apparently now Lisa (he couldn’t wait to get the story on that since she showed up outside his cell) was floating down the hall toward them.

“Mark!” Shawna’s face was covered in tear tracks, flushed from crying. He was at the glass in a second, cursing the Blockers he was on for not feeling it, for not feeling her.

“Shawna—babe, what—”

“Bivolo, nothing, don’t—” she shook her head but there were tears in her eyes, “you’re okay.”

He felt his heart swell with relief. “I’m okay. And very ready to be out of here. Early parole’s never sounded so sweet.”

She laughed, swiping her tears. He loved her so much.

“I’ll just—”

“Wait! You blink in here and you’ll be stuck,” he waved at the dampeners lining the walls, their weird yellow lights glowing in the space still, just like in that truck of Cisco’s all those months ago.

“I got this.” The blond guy next to Hartley stepped forward with a weird ball in his hand.

“Who’s this?”

Hartley was the one to answer, swaying on his feet now that the blond guy had stepped forward away from his side. “My Soulmate.”

Oh. Well. That was… interesting. Shawna had mentioned it, but Mark hadn’t even met the guy yet.

“Might want to step back, Weather Wonder. This tends to go ‘boom’.” The blond man grinned and Mark snorted, moving to the back of his cell while the guy armed what could only be an explosive in his hand, colorful though it was.

“I think I like this new style of the Rogues.”

He didn’t miss the way Lisa smiled, floating behind the others.

**********

The hall where Mick held off the military turned into a glorious inferno. He’d never seen anything so beautiful, skin hot and sweating, smoke billowing. No more soldiers were trying to get in.

He couldn’t wait to see Pam again.
Which was why he felt cheated when he felt a tug all around him, the impossibly black and instantly tight feeling of Peek-a-Boo’s power engulfing him.

He howled against the jump, lungs filling with fresh air, already past the flames, and then again until he was outside in the grey morning sun. Beside him was James and Piper and—

The Weather Wizard had his first raised toward the sky and a shout emerging from his lips.

Despite himself, Mick grinned. Oh, those military choppers were in for a real treat.

**********

The room was full of wires and equipment, giant chambers and metalwork, platforms and a catwalk. Barry’s eyes widened, a row of soldiers turned toward him.

Bullets flew through the air and time dilated around him. He didn’t know if he’d ever been so fast and in control. If he’d ever had so much rage to call upon.

He ran past the bullets as if they were still, dodged the explosion set off under his feet, felt another behind him, swore at the last moment as the blast lifted him off his feet, throwing him in slow-motion across the room.

He was back on his feet in an instant, heaving in a breath. He could taste blood.

Eiling was behind his little battalion, barking orders. Barry’s eyes narrowed and he dodged out of the line of fire, toward—

There was Grodd. In a giant reinforced glass cage, a terrarium too small for something so big. Barry made a beeline for it, eyes scanning the environment but Len was nowhere to be seen. All he could catch on was—oh. A mini *accelerator*. He’d recognize it anywhere.

It was behind the line of fire, a row of explosives and soldiers, Eiling.

*Fast, Flash.*

He didn’t hesitate, starting to run. Eiling called for his soldiers to halt their fire but it was too late, bullets already hitting Grodd’s cage as Barry ran up it. The glass cracked under the combined firepower, bullets raining down on it.

It was enough. Barry pulled a power cord out of the top with a shouted grunt, enough to kill the dampeners glowing yellow on Grodd.

*The enemy of my enemy is my—*

*Ally. At least Wells taught you something good.*

Eiling was shouting. A man in a labcoat was outside of the accelerator at a panel of controls, flipping switches. Barry’s heart went cold.

“Len,” he breathed.

The cage under him cracked and shattered, and everything sped up, so fast *he* had to speed up to
catch it. Grodd was rampaging, faster than Barry had seen him, a massive and unrestrained beast with ground-shaking angry howl. The soldiers’ guns all aimed to strike but not enough to stop Grodd’s speed and anger.

The walls of the accelerator chamber started to spin.

“LEN!!”

Barry burst into motion, headed toward the control panel. He passed Eiling, who raised the biggest rifle Barry had ever seen. It wasn’t enough. The deafening sound of it being fired reverberated through the cavern but Grodd roared, dodged it, and the explosion rattled through the space, the wall cracking.

Barry didn't care. He threw the man in the lab coat aside, trying to turn the machine off. He hit every button in sight that looked like a power switch, sweat sliding down his back, stinging his eyes. Nothing was working.

“Turn it off!” He had the man by the lapels, off the ground, shoving him at the controls. He wheezed in a wet laugh, “Oh my dear Flash, I’m—ah, sorry to admit but there’s no failsafe.”

He had to reign in himself from killing the man, focusing on solutions. He needed solutions. He needed— he shouted and used his speed, ripping the power cords out of the control panel.

The chamber walls continued to build speed. It was starting to accelerate.

He stared in horror.

Out of the corner of his eye there was movement punctuated by a scream and a sickening squealch. He swallowed, sick, saw Grodd start to move. Eiling was dead, his body torn in—Barry shuddered at the literal pieces.

But he didn’t have time to worry about that. He rushed forward and latched onto the side of the chamber, trying to slow it, feet sparking as the slid across the ground, digging in. He groaned as loud as the sound of the metal grinding, his fingers bending the wall of the chamber to gain purchase.

“Len—”

He wasn’t going to be enough. It was still accelerating. Even with his speed, he had no momentum, no force— *he wasn’t going to be enough.*

Barry screamed in exertion, feet making divots in the floor, breaking concrete, metal in his hands creaking and groaning. He felt blind by tears. He could hear Len scream, in his imagination maybe but he *heard* it—

“GRODD!”

Grodd was scaling the opposite wall, heading toward the ceiling when Barry cried out. The monster met his eyes and he sobbed out the word. “Please.”

There was a moment where he thought Grodd might leave. A slow, horrifying second where he thought this was it.

The gorilla lurched off the wall with a growl, flicking the last remaining soldier aside like a fly. Barry was sobbing. Grodd reared onto his hind legs, beat his chest, and grabbed into the accelerator wall opposite him. At his full height, Grodd was almost at tall as the chamber wall and Barry jolted when
he dug his massive hands into the metal, grinding it together, tearing it apart.

It stopped, broken.

Barry fell to his knees, breathing ragged and jagged.

Grodd didn’t look back this time.

**********

The walls around him shuddered and groaned, the deafening sound of spinning now grinding to a halt.

Everything hurt but in a new, duller way. A deep ache, the heat of the chemicals inside him no longer causing him to tense and seize, his bones throbbing but not splitting. Everything felt fuzzy and sharp and hot and tired.

His vision cleared just in time to catch lightning race toward him. He felt the manacles holding him in place give, felt his body fall forward as he let out a gasp.

Barry’s arms were around him, holding him, hugging him tight, face buried in his neck, “Len—”

It was choked up with so much emotion that Len felt his own throat catch, unable to speak.

Barry was here. Barry came. Barry was—

They fell to their knees. After a minute of Barry’s choked gasps in his ear, he managed to pull his sore arms around Barry, folding into him. Warmth. Safety. He let himself give in to needing it. Needing this.

It could have been a minute, an hour, a year, Len was too exhausted to guess. He just let Barry hold him up, hold him together, melting into the embrace. It hurt to breathe, hurt to move. The only thing that didn’t hurt was the gentle pressure of Barry against him, around him. Anywhere that Barry touched felt better.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the burn in them, dry, feeling the prick of tears. His mouth let words slip out. “You came…”

Barry pulled back and cradled him in his arms, tears spilling down his cheeks unchecked. His watery smile had never looked so sad. “Leonard… Lenny of course I came—I was always going to—Len I’m so so-rry—”

His voice cracked on the words and Len ached in an entirely new and different way.

“It’s okay…” he tried to thumb Barry’s tears away, cupping his cheek, but they kept spilling over his fingers anyway. “I’m fine, Barry. You got me in time.”

“Y-you,” Barry sniffed and caught Len’s hand to pull it away, wiping his own tears, gathering himself but not letting go of Len’s fingers. “Our Bond. It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t—”

“I made that choice,” Len coughed and swallowed, throat still too dry.
“No, I should’ve—”

“**Barry—**”

He stopped, swallowed back whatever protest he was trying to make.

“Please.” Len leaned his forehead against Barry’s, and for all the pain and exhaustion, for a single moment, he forgot all of it. “Don’t take it from me, Barry. Good is a thing you do, remember? Let me be good, just this once.”

Barry let out a sob and clutched him tight, so tight it almost hurt except he relished every bit of it. “You are. You’re good. You’re so good, you’re so brave and I—” he pulled back again and cupped Len’s face this time. “I love you, Len. I love you so goddamn much and I almost lost you and I couldn’t, not now, not ever—I couldn’t—”

“Barry—” he shuddered, brain turning to static, foggy and sharp. “No, you don’t have to—”

“I do. I mean it. I mean it so much, you have no idea,” his voice was so fervent. “I love you so much. So much more than I ever knew. I was so scared, Len, I—”

“Barry, it’s okay. It’s…”

“No it’s not. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” Barry leaned in and kissed him so gently, a counterpoint to the raw emotion filling his voice. “I should’ve said it—god I should have told you so much sooner. I almost lost you and I—Len.”

He wanted to believe it. “Barry…” it was the only thing he could say. He couldn’t feel Barry. Couldn’t feel his heart. The steady beat alongside his own, the way it welled with too much emotion even as that emotion spilled onto his face, his tears, out his mouth and into his words.

But there was nothing in the bleed. No bleed at all, to pull, to feel. He missed it like air. The only consolation was that Barry had no idea just how much pain that thought caused. “I love you.”

Barry’s face cracked into a smile. “I love you too.”

He swallowed and let it be, letting himself hold on to Barry, lean on him. Letting himself be selfish.

“Let’s get you out of here.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

**********

Barry carried Len outside, phasing through walls on his way, away from the chaos. He focused on the feel of Len in his arms, alive and whole, non-metahuman and not deathly injured. Just, himself. The weight in his arms had never felt so good.

Except he couldn’t feel him. Couldn’t feel if he was sore or relieved or where and how he hurt, what he needed.

He didn’t have time to dwell on it, to think about it. All he could do was follow the coordinates Cisco fed into his ear.
There was a stretcher on the floor in the back of the van Cisco was in. Caitlin was holding down the fort at the lab, Firestorm finally arrived and keeping guard in their absence. Considering how many military personnel were apparently sent there after Barry’s morning broadcast, he was glad she had the protection.

Cisco whistled through his teeth seeing the condition Len was in. “You look like shit.”

Somehow, Len managed a wry smile through his obvious pain and exhaustion. “Such a charmer, Cisco. You plan to woo my sister with a mouth like that?”

Cisco’s eyes went wide, flashed to Barry. “Did you tell him about Lisa’s…”

Barry’s chest clenched.

“Lisa’s what?” Len was already trying to sit, panic flashing across his face.

“She’s fine,” Barry said, too fast. “Just—it’s a long story. She’s fine.”

“But she’s not—is she here?”

“They all are.”

“Who all?”

“Mick, Shawna, James—the Rogues.”

Len’s eyes flashed to the windshield at the front of the van at the military choppers. One of which had just been hit by lightning.

Cisco’s thumb pointed back toward them, “they’re all out there.”

“What are they still doing out there?”

“Oh good point! Right, I’m—” he hopped back into the front seat to the comms. “Let’s go guys! Tactical retreat time! Do not try to face the entire military from inside Iron Heights. Shawna, get ’em out of there!”

Her voice crackled over Barry’s comms and Cisco’s intercom, “you’re awfully bossy, Cisco, anyone ever tell you that?”

“You said you got Mardon and Hartley, we got Snart, let’s move before our tactical retreat stops existing! They will roll tanks out here!”

Mick’s voice came over the comms next, “why would we leave when we’re having so much fun?! It’s a riot!”

Len groaned and leaned forward toward the mic beside Cisco. “Get your asses back in line or so help me, Mick, I will drag you out of there.”

Barry would’ve laughed at how empty the threat was—Len slumping forward to catch his breath after saying it and yeah, he wasn’t going anywhere—but seeing him like that was alarming.

Mick’s rumbled came over the comms. “Good to hear your voice, buddy.”

“You too.”
Barry wouldn’t leave Len’s side on the drive back. The vehicle would jostle him a lot less than a speedforce run all the way to the lab from here, he knew, since people tended to get sick from any runs that were longer than a hundred or so yards. He might also have some lingering paranoia from picking up Lisa and her starting to glow when he’d carried her across the city.

That, and he wanted time to tell Len about what happened to her. It wasn’t going to be a fun conversation. He’d have saved it for later but her body was in the med bay at the lab and he didn’t want Len to panic when he saw it.

“A lot happened in the past twenty four hours.”

Len was drinking water slowly, sitting up on the stretcher with his back against a cushion, eyes closed. He made an ‘mhmm’ noise followed by, “like you working with the Rogues?”

Barry felt nervous and then realized that Len couldn’t feel how nervous he felt. Couldn’t sense the waves of anxiety coming off Barry any more than Barry could tell his mood, except by the way his brows were drawn together, his breathing was slightly labored from the pain still. He shoved the realization aside, it hurt too much to think about right now and he needed to focus.

“Yeah, like that. They—they all know who I am, now.”

“What?!” his eyes snapped open and he was angry, definitely angry, but Barry knew he was always angry when he was worried. He waved it aside.

“I know, I know. I’ll fill you in later, but suffice it to say—it was very necessary. I’ll deal with that, don’t worry about it.”

Len’s eyes were on him like x-rays and Barry wondered if this was better or worse than dealing with the elephant in the room that was their Bond. He didn’t even know where to start with talking about that though.

“They know we’re Soulmates. And before—before you start to freak out, it’s okay. I promise. It was my choice to tell them and I don’t regret it.”

Len’s eyes narrowed but he closed them and emptied the water bottle. “Later. We’ll talk about that later. I expect details.”

“T-minus ten minutes, Barry. Caitlin just called and said the military’s men have left the lab. Any word on what happened to Eiling?”

“He’s dead.”

“Oh.”

Barry turned back to Len, ignoring Cisco’s worried glance. He’d explain Grodd later. “Len, before we get to the lab… something else happened.”

“This day keeps getting longer, doesn’t it?”
And Barry could tell that Len wanted to stop talking, wanted to sleep. It almost physically ached, coming to that realization without feeling it, just knowing it, knowing it from Len’s face and posture, his voice. But he had to say this. “Someone else has powers now. And it’s okay, it’s going to be okay, but you should know before we get there because—the power is the ability to leave her body like a ghost, okay? So the body you see, it’s okay, no one died, she’s okay.”

Len titled his head back down from where it was leaned back against the cushion and opened his eyes slowly. He looked more weary than anything, but somehow still sharp. “Barry…”

“Len, your sister—it turns out Lisa’s a metahuman.”

He knew Len was freaking out. Under the surface, sure, but his eyes went wide and worried and scared and Barry was already there, in front of him, hands on his arms, cradling him. “It’s okay, I promise she’s okay. No one did any crazy experiments on her, nothing like that.”

“But how—“

“I’ll explain the science some other time. Just don’t freak out when you see her sleeping at the lab. She’s fine.”

He was white as a sheet and went back to drinking, silent.

Barry hated this. Hated seeing him in pain and not being able to feel it. To feel him. To find the right words to say or the right comfort to give.

He hated the part of himself that was jealous of Lisa for captivating Len’s worry right now, for being the focus instead of their broken bleed. The only silver lining was that Len wouldn’t feel that petty emotion coming off him.

He almost started to cry at the thought, had to pull it back.

They had won. It was a victory. A goddamn Pyrrhic one.

He resorted to leaning by Len’s side and holding tight to him, physical closeness the only comfort he could give.

**********

Dr. Snow fussed over him, horrified at his state, wanting to hook him up to an IV but he vetoed that, much to her dismay. He was given water and food in measured portions and refused to rest until they’d let him see his sister’s unconscious body.

She looked… serene, in a way he hadn’t expected. Cisco had rambled on the walk into the lab about her ability—astral projection?—and he’d expected to find her body looking wan and in pain. But she looked younger like this, asleep, healthy.

He brushed her hair out her face and almost jumped out of his skin when she laughed. Except her lips didn’t move, or the rest of her face.

“Got you.”

He turned with no small amount of exhaustion plaguing even that small movement. But she was
there and it took his breath away. Floating, beautiful, golden like an angel.

“Lisa…”

She smiled and slid through the air to hover over her body, looking like she was sitting in midair looking down at it. He couldn't stop staring, agape.

“I almost didn’t believe them.”

“I almost didn’t believe myself.”

He held his breath. “You’re okay?”

She looked at him, considering. “Mostly. Though I do have a score to settle with the Santinis, when the dust settles a tad.”

There was a story there. The Santinis? He wanted to ask but he had more pressing matters. “Does it hurt?”

She tilted her heard. “No it… it doesn’t feel like anything, actually.” She glanced at her hand, semi-transparent, held up in front of her like it was a mystery. “Snow says I’ll be back in there before the day’s out if I can master how to do it.”

“You’re not…”

“Stuck like this? No. Thank goodness. I may have… panicked, slightly, when I woke up.” She looked ready to laugh and Len managed a wan smile too, and then his eyebrows drew together.

“You gonna tell me what happened? This?” he waved vaguely at her body.

“There’s a lot to fill you in on, when you don’t look dead on your feet. Get some sleep, Lenny. I promise it’ll still be the same world when you wake up.”

**********

Barry led Len to a med bed and had the presence of mind not to suggest an IV or any needles to help him sleep, just a few painkillers that Caitlin had handed his way. He sat next to him until he passed out, exhausted himself, but there were things he had to do, and Len was asleep in minutes.

The rest of the Rogues didn’t return to the lab. Lisa was there, close by Cisco’s side, but he came back to the cortex and Cisco was complaining to Caitlin and Ronnie (Firestorm? Barry wasn’t sure if Stein was in there too) that the Rogues were awful at listening and staying on plan.

“So they aren’t coming?” Joe clarified.

“Nope,” Cisco popped the ‘p’ in frustration. “Lisa?”

“Don’t worry about them. They’re going to lie low and then celebrate the take. It’s how the Rogues do things.”

Barry cleared his throat from the doorway, drawing their attention. Lisa floated closer.
“Lenny’s already asleep?”

“Yeah, he was… yeah.”

“What happened in there? At Iron Heights?” Cisco asked and Joe nodded. They both looked worried. All of them did, really. Iris and Eddie were across the room and he felt the weight of the audience, but he felt their concern too.

So he sat down and slowly, leaning on them for support, he told them.

Chapter End Notes

That's not meant to be a cliffhanger of any sort? He's just... being honest, and that's meant to parallel/contrast earlier in the fic where he didn't come clean about his Bond in the first place, for the record.

And that's it for the multi-PoV chapters. Next chapter we go back to Len's PoV, and the epilogue is in Barry's. They were a change of pace but I really didn't know how to do this part of the fic otherwise. This one especially jumped around a lot, but I didn't want to drag it out.

And I know this chapter doesn't begin to fully deal with it yet, but in the next one, they will talk about their broken Bond, about how they feel, about why Len did it, and about what it means for them.

Just as a primer, I want to highlight that in this fic, I've been trying to showcase that no matter what the issue between them, the solution has always been honesty and authenticity. Has always been communication. Sometimes the bleed facilitated that, but sometimes it got in the way, stopped them from being able to examine their emotions in private, caused them to misinterpret each other. The bleed wasn't always a solution. And now, though it's a bit like a phantom limb, a present absence, a loss, it's about what they mean to one another irrespective of that loss, of that absence. It's about what they mean to one another, full stop.

And though they'd always get there eventually, in any timeline, with or without Bonding, with or without their bleed and it breaking or not, this is how they get there in this timeline, and this is how they have to get there in this timeline. This is what they need right now, much as it pains both of them. This is about moving forward now.

So, I'll have more on that next chapter, which I'll be posting in a few minutes here after giving it a quick read through, but I wanted to get that out anyway.

ps - I did toy around with the idea of having Len actually turn into a metahuman, but I was on the fence about it until a friend highlighted something really important about it. Namely, that it might then feel like a 'consolation prize' to losing the Bond. And that wouldn't be right, so I scrapped the idea, and thank my friend for pointing this out :)
Soulmates

Chapter Summary

The Scientist by Coldplay and Sadie by Joanna Newsom

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Len woke up and checked the clock, he was almost embarrassed at how much time had passed. Maybe Snow had slipped him a sedative. He couldn’t imagine being comfortable enough in a med bed in STAR Labs to sleep for that long otherwise.

It was dark in the room, just light from the hall filtering in. Barry was dozing in a chair next to his bed, head at the worst possible angle, guaranteed to get a crick, just a little bit of drool coming out of the corner of his mouth.

Len couldn’t fight the knee-jerk, soft smile. The pull in his chest. And it—

There was no soft fuzz in the bleed, no quiet hum of ‘Barry’ in the background. He clenched and unclenched his fists, letting out a slow breath. He forced him to sit, to sip some water, to consider the monitors Snow had him hooked up to and slowly start unpeeling them from his skin. There was a shirt and sweater next to his bed and he hauled them on.

Barry began to shift, jolted a bit as he awoke, surreptitiously wiped the corner of his mouth and had a whole-body yawn-stretch that had Len tracking the lines of his body.

“You’re okay?”

“Never better.”

Barry heaved a full sigh, shoulders dropping. Len tracked them. Relief? It must be. He just—

He couldn’t feel it.

“Our bleed…”

Barry’s head snapped up, and immediately his eyes were red-rimmed. “Len, I—” He cut off and shook his head.

Len looked at his hands. The panic, the urgency, it all felt distant but present still. He couldn’t imagine making a different decision, but this one still hurt, still left him hollowed out. He didn’t
expect so much pain on Barry’s face, for it to be so raw.

“I’m sorry.”

Barry shook his head again. “Don’t—don’t be. You—this is my fault. If I’d just given Eiling what he wanted—”

“Then he’d never have stopped asking for more.” Len hesitated. “What did he ask for?”

Barry’s eyes went wide, “you don’t—of course, why would he tell you?” He shifted and explained it, Caitlin’s research’s potential to track people, registries and families, turning innocent people into metahumans using the research of that disgraced scientist.

“I could’ve given it to him. I wanted to. I was about to—but then James said he could find Hartley and everyone wanted to try and I… I never thought this could happen.”

He had questions still, about how James and the Rogues were there in the first place, about Lisa, but the despair on Barry’s face was more pressing. The hollow throbbing emptiness inside him felt less all-consuming when he took Barry’s hand.

“It was my choice.”

“You never should’ve been in that position.”

“In Iron Heights? Pretty sure you tried to put me there, once or twice.” Len smirked and Barry shot him a quelling look. For just a moment, things felt normal.

“I… Caitlin said there’s no way to fix it.”

He nodded, tried to ignore the rush of emotion that threatened to well up. He hadn’t even known he was holding on to hope, he’d even figured as much. “You were dying.”

“I… is that what you meant? When you said you wanted to be part of the solution?”

Len shifted, not sure he wanted to have this conversation yet, not sure if anything but more pain was to be gained by delaying it. The med room in STAR Labs wasn’t where he wanted to have it, but maybe that would make it cleaner, easier.

He took his hand back from Barry’s and arranged himself so that he was sitting with his legs over the side of the bed, facing him, even if he was glancing to the side.

“Since Bonding, since before Bonding, Barry, I’ve been… a thorn. Hurting you, your family, your friends. I’ve been part of the problem.”

“What? No, Lenny, no, that was—”

“The reality. And you forgave me, I know, but only because you had to.” He chanced a look at Barry, unable to just feel what he was feeling, lost without the feedback. Barry just looked confused.

“You saved my life. Even before, I mean, with Kane the first time, and—Len you’ve never been a problem. I mean, before we Bonded we were at odds, but you didn’t have to…”

“You’re free, Barry.”

“Free? From what?”
Len forced out the word. “Me.”

“… what do you mean?”

“I mean there’s no bleed to force you to my side anymore. No need for you to force yourself anymore.”

“I—what?! You think I was—I told you before, I’m not forcing myself, Len. I chose to be with you.”

“Choice isn’t a choice if it’s under duress. Our Bond, the bleed, how strong we had it… you never got a say in being with me. West had that number the moment he found out we Bonded. You couldn’t love me, can’t love me, and all the Bond was doing was forcing you to be with me until it stopped feeling like it mattered.”

“You make it sound like I have Stockholm Syndrome.”

Len titled his head. “More like our society has a collective delusion.”

“You don’t honestly think that I only love you because I’m forced to?”

He didn’t respond because he didn’t know how to tell Barry that he actually didn’t love Len at all.

“Len—you never forced me to be with you. You never did anything. I made my choices and they weren’t because of the Bond.”

“They were,” he snapped, hands digging into the mattress under the, “they always were, Barry. You hated me when we Bonded.”

“I didn’t.”

“I felt it, remember? You hated—”

“I hated myself! I never hated—I never could hate you. And that was my problem, Len—I was… I was already halfway in love with you and I didn’t want to admit it to myself! I didn’t want to admit just how much I did want this, how much I would’ve wanted to choose it, would choose it, if I ever knew it was an option. I didn’t let myself accept or deal with how you made me feel because I…”

He was standing, shouting, but he got abruptly quiet just at Len’s heart was beating so hard and loud it was almost hard to hear.

“Because I hated how far I was willing to go for a person I had no right or reason to love, not then, not after…” he let out a shaky breath. “And I felt wrong to want this when I knew there was another script I was supposed to want instead, but didn’t anymore. That other timeline. I couldn’t deal with letting go of that yet, the sane solution instead of… God, Len, I wanted to make you the exception to every rule and I wanted to tell myself I wasn’t being crazy for seeing more in you and that I wasn’t foolish but every time I felt like that I thought I was betraying everyone else so I shut those feelings away. I didn’t let myself believe I’d make this choice even as I was making it.”

Len’s hands were shaking. Barry kept talking.

“And that wasn’t fair to you… I let you believe you were being selfish all this time but you weren’t, Lenny. It was me being selfish, letting you think you were cruel to want me. I wanted you all this time. Before we Bonded. And you deserve so much more than someone who let you suffer because I was too cowardly and selfish to face my own feelings.”
“I love you. I mean it, 100%. And I would love you without the Bond. I always would, eventually, even if we weren’t Soulmates, if we were Unmarked. That’s… someone said to me that people aren’t Soulmates because of the Bond, that the pull and the feelings are there before you ever know, because that’s how it’s meant to be. And I think he was right. You’re my Soulmate because I’d choose you in any life, and nothing, not some stupid bleed, is ever gonna change that.”

Len’s throat felt thick and he was barely able to hold himself together. He was trying, white knuckled, but it was almost too much.

“But you’re…free.”

He looked up at Barry’s face and saw tear-tracks there. “I’m already free, Len. With you.”

He let it out then, a shuddering breath, tears slipping down his cheeks. Barry sat next to him and brushed his hand over Len’s cheek, soft and gentle. “I love you, and I choose you. I’ll always choose you.”

His words were choked out, more emotion than he could contain, welling up and out in a force that made him raw—“Barry. Our bleed—I’m s-s—fuck, I killed it. I wanted to set you free but—”

“It’s okay,” Barry wrapped him up in his arms, tight and warm. “It’s okay.”

“You’re free.”

“I’m with you.”

“The bleed—”

“We’ll make do without it, Len. We don’t need it.”

“You don’t—”

“I do, I love you.”

Len shook his head, nestled into Barry’s shoulder, pulled himself together with a shaky breath or three. “I know you think that, but it’s—you’re a good person, you want to love your Soulmate. I made you feel awful because you don’t but it’s okay Barry—you can…”

Leave.

Barry carded his fingers gently over the crown of Len’s head, his other arm around him, not letting go. “Good is a thing you do, remember? I wouldn’t be a good person if I lied to you about loving you.”

“Barry…”

“I love you, Len. And all I’ve wanted since the moment you got kidnapped was to find you and tell you those exact words.”

Len held him and pulled himself together inside a few shaky breaths. “How?”

“How do I know?”

Len’s throat felt tight and he nodded. He shouldn’t be letting himself soak up so much of Barry’s
comfort but he couldn’t help it.

“Because… because you have a closet full of presents that you let me refuse to open when I was too scared to deal with this. Because you loved a documentary about penguins so much you were scared to show it to me. Because you have a cabin in the woods that’s honestly the nicest vacation hide out I think I’ve ever been to. Because you challenge me to be more. Because you push me, and still make me laugh. Because you,” Barry chuckled, “say you have a thing for me but I still think something about sweaters do it for you.”

Len almost laughed at that one too, remembering.

“But you let us take this at my pace. Because you spent your whole life waiting to meet me, ready to throw the book out the window when you eventually did. Because you’re Captain Cold and the snarkiest asshole I’ve ever met. Because you saved me, you save me. And because… when we Communed, you promised that you’d love me. And no one else has ever loved me like you do.”

Len swallowed. He wished he could feel it, whatever welled up in Barry at the speech. The admission. It sounded beautiful. It felt beautiful, if painful for him. A kind of good-hurt he didn’t have a word for yet. Adjacent to hope, maybe.

“When…” he needed to know. His hands had long since found their way around Barry’s waist, holding him there. Both of them quiet and folded together still, as if being apart was too much to bear. It felt like it would be, right now.

“I figured it out when I realized… that I wanted to choose this. You. There was a guy at the precinct, it doesn’t really matter but… I was ranting about how you’re not who everyone thinks you are, who I used to think you were, before I knew you. That you’re a good man and always had been, even before I ever knew you and… I realized I loved you. It was just that simple.”

“That simple, hmm?” He felt tired again, not in a sleepy way but in how this conversation had exhausted him. “Ruining my reputation with the CCPD and everything.”

Barry laughed next to his ear. “One cop at a time, yeah.”

Len smirked then shook his head, voice a little colder when he replied. “Don’t you think it’s a convenient coincidence, you figuring it out right after I was on Blockers? When my life was in danger?”

Barry sighed, “You’ve got it all wrong. It wasn’t some last-ditch thing because you were in danger, Len. It took… it took you telling me I wouldn’t choose this to realize that’s what the problem was. That’s what rattled it loose, when I was ready to confront it again. I’ve loved you… for so long, Len. Before Joe ever asked, before you saved my life. I just couldn’t deal with it how deep it felt, how strong it was, how much I… I’d die for you. But I’d kill for you, too. And before, I wasn’t ready to accept that I started to fall for you the day you smirked at me across a train full of innocent people.”

“Really?” He actually jolted a bit, pulling back finally to look Barry in the eyes, not relinquishing his hold.

To his surprise, Barry’s eyes crinkled with a small smile, “yeah. I guess I have a thing for dangerous men who outsmart me.”

“Barry…”

“I’m not joking, Len. I wasn’t in love with you then, but I wanted to see you again. And again. And when I came to you for help with the metas… I wanted to work with you, to be in your orbit, to see
if you could be…”

“I disappointed you.”

“You saved my life.”

“I hurt you.”

“Yeah. You did. That happens, sometimes. I’ve hurt you too, remember?”

Len nodded, then found he could barely wrap his head around this. Part of him wished he could feel it, feel Barry’s heartbeat, figure out if he was lying. But part of him was terrified of that too, of what he might find if they did have the bleed. The dissonance was pulling at him. And it was written on Barry’s face, anyway, in his eyes, open and earnest.

“I didn’t want…” he tried to find the words. He wasn’t good at heart to hearts, not like this. “You were stuck by my side. You should at least take some time to consider…”

Barry snorted, shook his head in a way that was far too relaxed. “Consider what? The only other person I’ve loved in any form is happily Bonded and pregnant. Pretty sure getting a Tinder or Grindr account won’t change how I feel about you now, bleed or no bleed.”

It was so blasé Len had to shake his head, mimicking Barry. “There might be people who could… you could have a family with them, start a life less complicated.”

Barry shifted, tilted his head until he caught Len’s gaze and held it, more serious again. “I want this. I want you. Forever, if you’ll have me. And if that means that I never have kids… that’s okay. I’ll take it. I’ll be the best damn uncle to Iris’s daughter and leave it at that.”

Len swallowed thick and shook his head, “you don’t have to do that for me, Barry.”

“It’s okay. I choose you first.”

Len couldn’t meet his gaze. He wondered what it might be like, little mini Barrys dodging his feet, cradles, diapers, playing baseball… it didn’t really compute. The white picket fence, it wasn’t him. A mini-him would be picking locks and sneaking around, a kid to worry about when he was on the job, a brat for Lisa to spoil and teach all sorts of tricks to, for Mick to no-doubt give firecrackers to and for Barry to give that same affectionate smile to and…

He didn’t know what to do with the imaginings. “I’m too old to start a family.”

Barry let out a half-laugh half-sigh. “You don’t have to make excuses. It’s okay.”

“And hiring a surrogate would be a mess—we’d use your genes but what if the kid had powers?”

“Len, seriously—”

“Adopting’s not gonna work with my background.”

Barry was dangerously close to grinning, “are you trying to convince me or you?”

“I’m just running the logistics,” he grumbled, no heat to it. “The feasibility isn’t there.”

“What about the desirability?”

Len looked at a point on the wall, trying to collect his thoughts, sort through them. Now wasn’t the
time to talk about it, but then, it never was when they talked about it, and he was the one to bring it up.

If he still had his bleed—he tried to push the rush of emotion aside, but it was there, painful, like a hole in his chest—if it was intact, Barry could just pluck the feelings out of his brain and tell him what he was feeling. But Barry couldn’t tell what he was feeling, and the honest answer was... “I don’t know.”

He chanced a glance at Barry, who nodded, looking tired but not hurt, not angry. “That’s okay too. That’s... let’s not worry about it, for now. There’s plenty else we get to worry about in the meantime anyway.”

Len hummed, feeling more like himself. They were through the conversation, and somehow, against all odds, Barry was still there. Still by his side. It might be some wonderful hallucination, and might end yet. Might be born of Barry’s guilt, but as much as he was a martyr by nature, Len didn’t actually believe Barry would lie to him and pretend to be sticking around just because he wasn’t at full health yet. It wasn’t his style. And if he was lying about it, obligated because they were still Soulmates... he’d find a way to deal with it, he supposed.

But right now, Len was too tired to keep fighting about it. Which meant Barry won this round.

“I love you,” he said, because he hadn’t said it, not yet in the conversation, and he needed to. Needed to hear—

“I love you too.”

Len swallowed around the lump that still brought to his throat and nodded. “I want this too.”

Barry smiled, too warm. “Forever.”

And then Barry crawled onto the bed with him, and he spent the rest of the hour dozing with Barry next to him. He couldn’t feel his heart or the hum of him in the bleed, and couldn’t pretend that absence wasn’t palpable. But he could feel the beat of his heart against his back and the steady slow breathing near his ear, and the alive feeling of him at every point they touched. And that, for now, was enough.

**********

Len got a full explanation of what had happened from Barry, with help from Caitlin, Cisco, and Lisa. Everyone else was doing damage clean-up or returning to their regular lives. Len was given a clean bill of health from Snow except told to ‘take it easy’, given the scrapes, bruises, general exhaustion and poor treatment, and the effect pain could have on the body. He told her he’d think about it. After being out of commission for 48 hours at the lab already, he was eager to get back in the swing of things, but he wasn’t as young as he used to be and had to admit, he was sore as hell.

The most uplifting part was seeing Lisa slip back into her body. Not that he personally saw it, given how much time she was spending out of the lab in that golden form, but she walked into the cortex mid-way through Cisco giving Len an explanation of what had gone down at the Heights with the Rogues.

Cisco fell off his chair when he saw her, but Len was on his feet in a heartbeat.
“You’re okay?”

“Well my hair is a disaster and my legs feel like jello, but I think this is going to be just fine.”

He’d never been so relieved to hear her voice.

**********

As it turned out, he did end up taking it slightly easy for a day or two, but not because he wanted to.

His first order of business was to track down Mick. That had been a blow, in the middle of the explanations of what happened to his bar, the Santinis, for Lisa to quietly tell him that Pam had passed.

It put a lot into sudden perspective. About Mick’s reaction to Barry trying to save Lisa, about the urgency of him revealing himself to the Rogues. And now Len had to make sure Mick was okay.

Mick wasn’t okay. He wasn’t as bad as Len had pictured though. He opened the door and his little walk-up wasn’t burnt to a crisp yet, regardless of the matches lining the floor, the explosives that Len eyed in the corner.

There were bottles all over and for a moment, Len hated Eiling even more. That bastard had taken him away from Mick when he needed him. Had forced the situation, snatched Len away and made the Rogues vulnerable, had forced Barry to expose himself to Mick and made it so Len couldn’t tell his best friend himself. The betrayal was written all over his face when Len had knocked on the door.

But Mick let him in, and that was important.

“She gonna be cremated?”

Mick grunted, dropped into a leather chair, feet up on a trunk.

“We’ll hold a wake.”

“And invite who, exactly?” his rumble was low and angry. Len didn’t take the bait.

“Her cousins, her little brother’s still alive, yeah? Him. The nieces or nephews.”

“She wasn’t close with her family.”

Len nodded, understood. “Then the Rogues. Pay their respects. Angie’s old crew from Gotham.”

Mick grunted and he wasn’t quite sure if it was approval or not. “And the Flash?”

Ah. He didn’t have to take the bait, Mick got there fast enough on his own anyway. Trust him to be direct. “That’s up to you.”

“You sure about that?”

Len narrowed his eyes. Mick’s mocking smile didn’t extend to his eyes.
“We’ve always had our own secrets, Mick.”

“Not like this.”

He nodded slowly, almost rhythmically, an eyebrow pulling up. He couldn’t deny it, but… “Snarts aren’t supposed to be scared.”

That got Mick’s attention. Len’s eyes slid to him and off, to the side.

“Scared I’d knock his block off?”

He chuckled, “not quite. Scared I’d lose him.”

Mick was on his feet with speed and grace that surprised most people who had the misfortune to see him in action. Len was careful not to react.

“He hold this over you, buddy?” He was already reaching for an invisible weapon, but Len was waving the unnecessary threat away.

“Turns out he wasn’t, wouldn’t. Wasn’t a risk I was ready to take though. Not with…”

“A Soulmate.”

He nodded. “It wasn’t easy.”

Mick snorted, dropping back into his chair, posture more relaxed and natural this time. “Never is, at the start.”

“Tell that to the quiet bleeders.”

“Hmm.” Mick eyed him. “Lisa said…”

Len looked at his hands. “It was necessary.”

“So it’s gone, just like that? Gone bleed gone?”

He nodded slowly, stiff. Mick whistled.

“This calls for whiskey.”

Len glanced down, a little more at ease, then around. “Think you’ve had enough this week?”

“Judging’s for saints, and we’re sinners, remember?” Mick said it with a glare, one without any heat in it, and that’s when Len really felt like they were going to be okay. Maybe not today, not fully. He had amends to make still, he had to make this up to Mick, but they were good.

“Well, in that case,” Len stepped away from the wall he was leaning against. “Let’s go get a drink.”

They’d heal. Mick would heal, and Len would be by his side to help make sure he didn’t get too deep into this pit. But in the meantime, they were gonna get as drunk as they damn well deserved, after the week they’d had.
The next day, fighting a hangover, it was time to track down Mark and Shawna.

Not surprisingly, they were at hers. His safehouses were probably all compromised thanks to Bivolo. Len made a mental note to do something about that, leaning against the doorframe in the face of Mark’s stony glare.

“Gotta lot of nerve, Snart.”

“Air’s a little chilly, Mark. Might want to take it down a notch.”

“You think this is funny?”

“Quite the opposite, actually.”

Mark snorted. Len glared. Shawna came up to stand next to her Soulmate. “You know we’ve already been through this with your sister, right?”

“I like to cover my own bases.”

“Look, Snart, we’re done with you,” Mark’s voice was as angry as ever. “We won’t spill the Flash’s little secret, but that’s because he was the one who saved my ass and got me back to Shawna, not because we’re scared of what you’ll do.”

“You oughtta be.”

Shawna was the one who stepped in front of her Soulmate, all tight and hard anger, something she’d never directed at Len before. “No, we shouldn’t be. Your ass could’ve told me about the Flash any time after Mark got taken and you kept me in the dark. You kept us in the dark this whole time and I don’t care who he is or what his day job looks like, but I do care that you’ve been cool with lying to me since day one. We’ll leave Allen and the Wests alone, but I’ve had enough of men in my life who want to use my powers without treating me like an equal.” She let out a hard breath through her nose. “I thought that’s what the Rogues were for.”

He met her eyes. “It was.”

“Not with a leader who’s shacking up with our biggest threat.”

And there it was, the real issue. He doubted they’d feel so betrayed if his Soulmate was Cisco Ramon or someone at the CCPD. It was Barry specifically, and that was exactly why he never mentioned it. That and the fact that it wasn’t their damn business.

“So you’re out?” Len’s fingers tried to itch toward his gun but he held them in place. Not the time, not the people, not the solution.

Mark smirked, cocky. “Something like that.” He made to close the door and then stopped, a parting shot, “oh, and the next time the Flash interrupts one of my jobs? Let him know I won’t be going easy on him.”

“I’ll make sure he gets the message.”

**********
He was still mulling over the conversation as he dealt with the rest of what had happened in the short span while he was away. His bar was burned to the ground and he had a mess of insurance calls to deal with, calls from the city, all under his falsified name and company. The staff were another issue, getting paperwork in order for each of them, and he was starting to regret ever choosing to own a bar in the first place.

He wondered if Hartley and James would hang around after all of this, or if they’d want out too. He wondered about how to best retaliate to the Santinis and best send that message. He wondered in puzzles about all the ways the game had changed, again, and where the chips were going to fall.

His brain was still running iterations when Lisa dropped by his house. Something about the house, the space was bothering him, now. Some need for change. He had a feeling renovations were in his future, or maybe just a new property altogether.

Still, he quelled his restlessness and invited her in. They had a lot to discuss, he knew.

“You made a right mess of things, you know.”

“I’m not the only one,” his smile was wry, sitting on the arm of his recliner chair to survey her.

“No… we all did. But you made a mess of it with the Rogues.”

He tilted his head. “Yeah, I got that.”

She nodded, eyes appraising. “They won’t follow you, Lenny. Not right now anyway, not after that.”

“I spoke with Mark. I figure he and Shawna might come around, if I play my cards right. Hart already knew and James won’t care.”

Lisa pursed her lips. “That’s not what I’m saying. The Rogues aren’t yours now, Lenny.”

His eyes narrowed. “Come again?”

“They won’t follow you. Maybe one day, but not now. Not even Hart. He’s more frustrated than you realize, I think. He understands what a mess this makes, even if he sees the bigger picture. Even Mick has a sour taste in his mouth.”

“I talked to Mick already. We’re good. He might not like this, but he’ll come around.”

“He will, because he loves you. But Lenny, you can’t lead a mob of criminals when you’re Bonded to the Flash. I don’t know why you ever thought you could.”

“What are you not telling me?”

She hesitated. He waited.

“I’m in charge now.”

“Excuse me?” The dip of his voice into a drawl was automatic, eyes narrowed.

She pulled in a slow, even breath, stood to her full height, looked down at him straight on. “I’m in charge now, Lenny. I rallied everyone when you were kidnapped even after what happened, I gained their trust, I navigated working with the Flash and came up with the plan with STAR Labs, organized our side of things. They followed me. They listened to me. And they trust me.”
He leaned forward, voice icy. “You trying to steal my legacy, Sis?”

Her eyes were hard and he doubted anyone but him would ever see the insecurity in them. “Not stealing, and not trying. It’s done.”

“I see.”

Annoyance flashed across her face. “Do you? All I’m doing is taking part in what I helped build so that it doesn’t crumble like dust because you miscalculated. And I’m good at it!”

His eyebrows shot up. “That so?”

“Our territory, our connections. I know what I’m doing, I always did. I’m untouched by the cops and can operate in the open in a way you never could. And the Rogues know all of my connections, my chips are on the table and I’m Unmarked. I know how to lead.”

“It’s not that easy. There’s a balance, revenge—”

“We knocked over the Santini stronghold last night, after your conversation with Mark and Shawna.”

He stood up in anger, “that was my bar to avenge—”

“And my body! In case you forgot—” She waved her arm except her arm didn’t move, a golden arm stretching out instead, just the arm bizarre and detached, twirling until a perfectly glowing middle finger was raised.

He couldn’t help but let out the laugh. Her face broke out in a smile. “I’ve been practicing.”

“I see that.”

Her arm reattached to her body.

“They like following a fellow metahuman, you know.”

“That so?”

“Mark does. Shawna too.”

“And Mick?”

Finally, finally, her let her business face drop, sitting on the edge of the couch. He sat back down too. “Mick’s not well. He listened to me when we tore down Santini’s door, but he’s all fire right now. He needs… something. He’s a Rogue, always will be, but whatever you do next, keep him in your sphere, Lenny. He’s gonna need it.”

“My sphere? What’re you trying to say?”

Her voice relaxed into honey, knowing she’d won. “I’m saying, brother, that it’s time to start fresh somewhere.”

“So I’m out.”

She shook her head. “No. Never that. You’ll always be a Rogue, of course you will. But right now, you need—you deserve—a break. You’ve always been good at starting new things, but you get restless. Don’t tell me you weren’t hankering for a change. So take a while to go stretch your legs,
start a new project, and come back when you’re tired of that instead.”

He rolled his head to the side, trying to see it from her point of view. “Like what?”

“I don’t know, figure it out. STAR Labs has enough messes you could help clean up.”

He chuckled. “A hero? Really, Lise?”

“It’s just a suggestion. But fine, something else, I don’t care.”

“You don’t really think I’d give up being a thief?”

She dragged her hair over one shoulder. “Never. But we live in a crazy new world, Lenny. I believe in your ability to figure it out a new path for yourself. You were bored before your Soulmate came along and as soon as he did, you saved his life and got together a crew of all his most dangerous enemies just to make sure none of them would kill him so you could keep playing this new game with him. So whatever you do get up to next, I know it’s gonna be something you do with him in mind. So get a job, be a hero, or don’t. Go get a picket fence and have some kids.”

He snorted.

“I’m serious. Figure out your life with Barry and what you want from it.”

And just like that, the fight went out of him. He leaned back against the chair, stretched out his legs, wondered at how convincing she sounded, how easy she made it seem. Maybe she was the leader after all. Maybe she had been for a while.

“Dunno sis, pretty sure he does want a picket fence. Not sure if I can pull that one, or the kids.”

She rolled her shoulder, “lord knows I hate the little demons. But if he wants a brat pulling at his pant leg all day, at least it’ll give you something to do.”

He snorted, “you make it seem so compelling.”

“There’s a reason I got my tubes tied years ago. You never bothered getting snipped though, so I figured your little antics of handing out gum and buying ice cream for kids was going somewhere, one day.”

“Why does every conversation I have seem to come back to having kids?”

She laughed, “well don’t blame me. You’re the one who went into detail, I was tossing out ideas. With the way you collected the Rogues, I won’t be surprised if you’ve adopted some wayward youths within the year.”

He shook his head, “this conversation got off track.”

“Derailed. You have called me a train wreck.” Her her smirk, the tension left the room.

He couldn’t help the tug at his lips. “If the shoe fits…”

“So we’re… are we good, Lenny?”

A little tight-lipped, he nodded. “I suppose you wouldn’t be my baby sister if you couldn’t steal my Rogues out from under me. And it is stealing,” he arched an eyebrow at her guilty smile, clearly a little pleased with herself. She earned it though. So he stood up. “You’ll make a good leader, Lise.”
“Thank you.” She tucked her hair behind her ear, a gesture he almost missed, reminding him of simpler days. “And I mean it—you are welcome. Always. This is still… the Rogues are family. We might trade up in terms of location, get a better bar, recruit a person or three, but you’re still one of us. And who knows? After a year in charge, I might want a break. This isn’t forever.”

He thought about snatching it back from her. What a strange new family tradition to dream up. He almost wouldn’t have it any other way. “Might have to convince Mark not to strike me with lightning.”

“We both know Mardon will fall in line.”

He nodded. Mark would. They all would. Because it was Lisa.

“You’re amazing, Lise.”

“Thanks, Lenny.” She said it like she meant it, and he realized… the two of them, they really were good. They’d been good for a long time, and nothing was going to change that.

**********

Barry slipped in through the door a few hours after Lisa left. He’d been there each evening so far, more of his clothes and things finding their way into Len’s home, neither of them commenting on it yet.

If he was honest, Len was still trying to wrap his head around it, about Barry coming here, being with him, smiling and pulling him in for kisses, for more.

Making love the first time without the bleed was a painful and powerful experience. He’d put it off for days, disquieted by not being able to feel the rush of Barry every time they kissed, the feeling that was Barry in every fiber of his being when they were intimate, the thrumming of electricity in his veins. Just touching himself without a phantom reflection of arousal and need made him miss it.

But then… Barry had kissed him so deep he’d forgotten about it, for a moment. He’d slipped his arms around Barry and gave as good as he got, pressed him to a wall, hands running up the smooth skin of his back, sliding his shirts over his head, capturing him in a kiss again, breathless. Barry was supplicant, canting with need as urgent as ever, and it was contagious in a simpler way. He captured Barry’s nipple between his lips and watched him throw his head back to whine, pleased with the reaction, amused a little at how sensitive he was, always. He tugged on Barry's hair and didn't need the bleed to read how that made Barry feel.

It was easier to take control, to pull Barry over to the bed and press him down into it. It was harder to tease. He had to take stock of each little reaction—and Barry had so many reactions. Ones he was used to feeling but not really seeing, the way he would shudder, the way his thighs would flex when Len licked the hollow of his hip, the way his breath sounded when he was trying to swallow a gasp, on edge.

Len slipped a finger inside of him, just one, teasing still, and Barry didn’t last. He came before Len even got a hand on his dick, face flushed red with it, gasping out Len’s name.

Len leaned up and stroked his thigh, looking down at him with a grin probably a little too smug. “I wasn’t sure if that would still happen, without the intensity of…”
“The bleed?”

He probably shouldn’t have mentioned it, but Barry just groaned and threw an arm over his face. “It’s probably gonna happen more now.”

“Oh?”

“You—it used to keep me grounded.”

He was pretty sure his own expression had turned positively wicked. He could dwell on what he’d lost, or he could enjoy discovering this new dimension. “So now you’re more sensitive than ever?”

Barry glanced up at him from under his arm. “I’m a goner, aren’t I?”

“You might be. I’m going to enjoy teasing you.”

Barry smiled then, “you’re evil.”

“But you love me?” It sent his heartbeat racing, just to say it, to ask it, but—

“I do.” Barry sat up and leaned into Len’s space to kiss him. “I love you. Even when you’re a bastard.”

And just like that, he could relax again. “I love you, too.”

“Good, now, I believe you were about to do something?”

Len rolled his eyes but pressed Barry back down, taking his lips and kissing him while he fingered him, not letting him up for air until he was on edge again, until Len was pressing inside of him. And this, held together, Barry’s arms and legs around him, his hands holding Barry as they moved together—it still felt like Communion.

**********

“Do you… miss it, at all?”

“Hm?” Barry lifted his head off Len’s chest, apparently in a light doze.

“The bleed?”

Barry laid his head back down, over his heart. “I do. Do you?”

“I do.” It wasn’t worth dwelling, he knew that. But it was still there, the fact that it was gone.

“It’s okay like this too though… right?”

The note of insecurity in his voice wasn’t missed by Len. And then he thought about that, that he picked up on it. Even without the bleed, he knew what Barry was feeling, thinking. He always had, in a way, even before they Bonded.

“I should be asking you that.”

“It’s… I’m okay, Len.”
He nodded. “Me too.”

"We're okay."

"Yeah."

He smiled, soft. Barry relaxed against him and Len let himself start to drift off. After everything that had happened, he thought he should probably feel adrift, lost. Mostly, for all its imperfections, for all things had changed with Lisa, Mick, the Rogues, Barry, the cops, just everything, for all that he was going to wake up tomorrow and not know yet what he was going to do next… he knew he was moving forward. Forward with someone he loved and who, for whatever reason, was still here, was in love with him, against all odds.

For the first time in a long time, he let himself think of the future and knew he was gonna be okay. After all, he was with his Soulmate.

Chapter End Notes

On the one hand, this might feel wrapped up too quick and simple (minus the epilogue). On the other, it's pretty abrupt (hence the epilogue). And I get that some people are going to feel… sad? About this? Betrayed, maybe. But this is the story I knew how to tell, and I don't think I could have told it in any other way.

Also, I did my best here, but in case it doesn’t come across: this ending is an ending of hope. That’s what I wanted for Len in this fic: love, and hope. Things he’s lived without for too long.

He might not be the leader of the Rogues, but he’s still part of them, and he has a fresh beginning ahead, whatever it happens to be. And in spite of himself, he’s looking forward to that challenge. He’s always going to be a Rogue, but he needs to stretch his legs. After the mess of the past 4 months, he gets to focus on himself and what he wants, rather than trying to juggle the entire world at once. (I've also been planning for Lisa to take over the Rogues ever since the start of this fic, actually. I tried to slide in the notion throughout the fic of how clever she was, how she gave Len advice on how to deal with tense situations, how the Santinis were wary of her, and how hard she worked to be what she was. I wanted to make it seem natural, because, to quote the New 52, the Rogues always need a Snart in charge).

He might not have a bleed, but he still has Barry. Barry, who he’s still mesmerized by, and still almost disbelieving is choosing to be with him and love him, but he’s letting himself accept it, or trying to. Letting himself believe it, because he wants it so bad, and because there’s no reason not to believe it. His insecurities won’t disappear overnight, the pain of the absence of their bleed won’t disappear (for either of them) in a snap, but they have each other. And no, Len can’t feel what Barry feels when he says he loves him, but if he could, he might be confused, because what Barry feels has not changed. Barry has loved Len for so long before he clued into it that his feelings haven’t changed, it’s just that he realizes the truth of them now.

And I think it would be hard for Len to fully accept that love if he could feel that he
couldn’t feel a difference? But also, now he can’t assume Barry’s doing this because he’s forcibly bound to Len, consciously or unconsciously. They’re still Soulmates of course, but Len believed, deep in his bones, that the bleed itself was forcing Barry to be with him because they couldn’t escape the sensations or diminish their effects in any reasonable way. Now without it, Barry choosing to be with him is something he can’t rationalize away so easily. Sure, they’re still Soulmates, but there are many forms of Soulmates, and he wouldn’t be wounding Len if he left him, not with the bleed, not with an inescapable situation. The only conclusion he can bring himself to is that Barry wants this. Which he deserves, to know that Barry wants it, to not feel like the bad guy for wanting Barry to be with him. Barry wants it too, chooses it too.

I know it hurts, that it came to this. I understand if you guys lament, or are sad. I get that it might feel like Len has cut off a limb or that you’d think it’s cruel for me to make the assertion that this is better. That’s not really what I’m saying though. What I mean isn’t more that life wouldn’t have worked without their bleed. They’d have made it here eventually even with it. They’d have made it here eventually even if the bleed never existed in the first place. They’d have always made it here eventually. The point is more that they don’t need the bleed, that it was one way of relating to one another, one that caused as many problems as it helped solve, and that they’re going to be just fine just the way they are.

Which to me? Has always felt like a really positive feeling, a note of acceptance and hope for themselves and each other and this. And I hope I managed to get that across. In many ways, in most ways, this was really Len’s story, and though it’s not perfect, at the end of it, he’s okay. More okay than he’s been in a long long time.

Thanks for reading. Just the epilogue to go.
A week passed, the dust started to settle.

“And after a shocking display at Iron Heights Penitentiary last week, we have finally received confirmation that the military was in fact already on the scene supervising the construction of the so-called ‘metahuman wing’ being jointly funded by the state and the military.”

“That wing is now steeped in no small amount of controversy as of yesterday with an exposé published in the evening edition of Central City’s Picture News claiming the military was illegally incarcerating metahumans.”

“That controversy, of course, wasn’t helped any by the arrest of Dr. Darwin Elias, the notorious doctor responsible for resulting in the death of several patients at Gotham University Hospital, as well as breaching the Copenhagen Convention. We have received word that Dr. Elias was working with a United States General, Wade Eiling, who was killed on the scene in a gruesome attack in the prison.”

“52 news requested a statement from the U.S. military, who refused to comment on the association between General Eiling and Dr. Elias or the research being conducted, leading to rampant speculation.”

“That’s the thing, don’t we as Americans deserve to know what’s going on our own soil, Diane?”

“Well that is a great question for our on-site correspondent! Why don’t we go to Iron Heights to see what the scene of last week’s devastation looks like now, and what people are saying about it.”

Joe snorted, “why don’t you turn that damn thing off, Barry?”

He sighed and clicked the remote. The news was exhausting. They’d been playing the helicopter footage and getting soundbites from everyone they could pull in front of a camera—the Warden, the governor, the mayor, and even average citizens. No one had caught sight of The Flash on the scene except a couple of soldiers, and they didn’t seem to be talking.

There was no word of Kane on the news, which was maybe for the best. Barry already knew she wouldn’t get a reprimand from her superiors, not with her abilities, and didn’t know if he was frustrated or relieved about it. He’d almost killed her, blinded by his own anger and grief, and when his vision had cleared, all he felt for her was pity. Len suggested she was probably addled by all the shit Elias had pumped into her system coupled with the process of actually being turned into a meta.
Barry knew it was more than that, but if Elias was partly to blame, he wanted to help her, and Barry
resolved that if their paths ever crossed again, he was going to just that, if he could. If not for her and
what she cost him, then for Bette.

“I’m gonna head out. I’ve got my meeting in a few minutes.”

Joe gave him a searching look. “You sure about this, son?”

He nodded. “No one else is ever gonna use that lab against me again. It’s not even supposed to be
mine. This way… maybe I can turn all of this into something good.”

“You already have.”

He shook his head. “Not enough, not yet. I still have scales to balance.”

Joe nodded. “One day, you gotta stop beating yourself up.”

Barry smiled, recognizing the warmth in it. “Tomorrow.”

Joe smiled back and Barry felt a bit lighter, running out the door.

**********

“Are you sure you want to do this, Mr. Allen?”

“I’m positive.” He was in a tie and everything, the lab’s lawyers had written up all the paperwork
(and the one who dealt with Barry had actually looking relieved when Barry told him what he
wanted, telling him it was the best decision he’d ever made… until Barry had told him his price).

“You could charge ten, no twenty times this much.”

“The only reason I’m charging this much is so that I can make a half-decent donation to the
metahuman research center.”

It was part of the sale, that the new STAR Labs include the first dedicated lab for the study of
metahuman abilities with the aim of protecting their rights and making them safer. Turning over the
Flash lab was a small price to pay for it, especially since he was going to use a little bit of the money
he inherited from Eobard to get them a separate facility that was a little more covert (retrofitting
Eobard’s old house).

“But STAR Labs is worth—”

“A lot of money, I know. But it’s not worth the headache it’s caused for me.”

Tina McGee leaned back, lips pursed. “I can imagine not, after that rather public mess between you
and General Eiling. I assume that’s the reason for the stipulation in the sale about declining military
contracts?”

“Heh, uh, yeah, you could say that. Whatever STAR Labs becomes after all this, I want it to help
people, not hurt them.”

“I suppose that does fit the Flash’s ethos.”
“I—uh—what?”

She glanced at him over the paperwork, a little smile dancing in her eyes. “I’m very smart, Mr. Allen, and you’re not exactly that sneaky.”

He was sure his eyes were going to bug out of his face but she was just laughing.

“Oh, your secret is very safe with me, has been for ages. Did you think I thought that Harrison would have taken such a shining to just anyone?”

“How long have you known?”

“Approximately since the first time we met.”

He sat back in his chair, wind out of his sails. “Wow.”

“Not reconsidering the sale, I hope? I rather like your plans for the research center.”

“I—no, not reconsidering. You were… the only person I could think of who might want to buy it, and might do some good with it.”

She nodded, looking pleased. “I’ll be happy to be working with Dr. Snow finally. You know I’ve been trying to scoop her from STAR Labs for years.”

He finally relaxed, hard to stay tense at the fondness in her voice. “I’d be surprised if you hadn’t been.”

“Excellent. Now, do tell me—Dr. Stein and Mr. Raymond, will they be working here or am I going to miss out on getting to boss Martin around?”

Bemused, all he could do then was laugh and look forward to her changes with the lab.

**********

Inside the first box was a gorgeous pendant, one in the shape of their Soul Mark.

Barry was already getting emotionally compromised and he was still on the first of seven boxes. “Oh Len… it’s beautiful.”

Len nodded, lips pursed in the particular way that said he was holding in his own emotions. “Handcrafted.”

“Wow,” he breathed, but of course it would have to have been. The craftsmanship was incredible. He put it on around his neck and caught Len’s gaze, the sort of soft, mesmerized look on his face. He could almost imagine what Len must be feeling it, almost picture it.

It hurt, not to actually feel it. But maybe that was just his own emotions caged in his chest making his heart ache. Somehow, it was still hard to disentangle, even without the NAB.

So he leaned forward and kissed his Soulmate. “It’s perfect.”

“It’s okay, if you don’t want to wear it…”
“I’m never taking it off.”

“Well that’s impractical.”

Barry laughed, light, “okay, sometime probably. But not today.”

He moved on to the second box, a cologne he immediately liked the smell of, even if he’d never tried it before. The third had the damn pair of shoes that fit so well (yes he’d tried them on the first time they’d showed up at his door but hadn’t let himself enjoy them). The fourth had a paperweight in the shape of a microscope and it was made of brass. Barry settled himself into Len’s arms to keep opening them, pulling them toward him with Len at his back, basking in the feel of his heart against the back of his ribcage. The fifth had a Flash doll and a Captain Cold one, which he recognized from one of the many street vendors downtown and smiled. The sixth was a print, one that was clearly purchased legally (a gift receipt attached) of a lightning striking the earth. He kissed Len for that one.

In the seventh was a slip of paper, a date and time. He shifted to look at Len quizzically. “What’s this?”

“My next tattoo appointment.”

“You’re getting another one?”

“You told me that you can’t get one yourself so,” he shrugged, clearly trying to downplay it. “I thought I might get one for you. If you want to help design it.”

Barry had no words, but he was pretty sure that from the tears in his eyes, Len got the message.

**********

They were laying on the couch after dinner, beer in hand, Barry’s back against Len’s chest and tuning out to Netflix, when Len leaned his forehead against the crook of Barry’s shoulder.

He was learning to read Len’s body language. This, he was pretty sure, was code for anxiety. So Barry hit mute on the remote and titled his head to try and catch a glimpse of Len out of the corner of his eye. “You okay?”

“Mm.”

Barry waited, still relaxed.

“It’s been a month.”

Oh. “Yeah.” Trust Len to remember the date. “How do you feel?”

“How do you feel, Barry?”

He almost rolled his eyes at the deflection but caught himself. He didn’t really know how he felt, about the bleed, the loss. There wasn’t anything to feel about it. It was like a missing tooth that he could keep poking his tongue against to feel the loss, a smooth empty space, but aside from hating that he couldn’t feel Len inside of him, aside from missing it like crazy… it was okay. Something he’d lived without most of his life, something he could learn to live without again. A small price to pay for Len to survive, to be beside him.
“I miss it,” he landed on, “still.”

“I never properly said sorry.”

Barry turned to face him, cupping his cheek. “You never had to, Len.”

“I cost you this—”

“You saved me. You saved you too. I’ve lost a lot in my life, we both have, but what we have now? I don’t regret it. And I can’t spend my days wondering about what it would be like if things were different.”

Len nodded and pulled him in for a hug. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Thank you.”

He shook his head against Len’s neck, holding him just as tight. “Never thank me for that.”

Len hummed and they settled down into the cushions together, just feeling one another, and it was enough.

**********

The STAR Labs transition was a bureaucratic mess and a half, and Barry had a semi-constant headache for the weeks it was happening. Caitlin and Martin were a godsend in sorting out the details, Tina trying to make it as painless as possible, the public interest component being played favorably by the news, but he still wished he could wash his hands of the whole process.

Which is why he was ready to cry when Len randomly announced on a Sunday that he wanted to move. He’d just barely managed to finally admit to himself that he’d moved into Len’s place over time (without really asking, it just sort of happened, he hadn’t slept at Joe’s since their Bond broke but neither had mentioned him moving officially), and now they were moving?

Or was just Len moving? Had Barry jumped the gun, moving in? Had he taken up too much space? Had he—

“Barry?”

Oh, he was tearing up. Shit.

Len was in his space in an instant, concern all over his features but Barry had a hard time looking at him, embarrassed, wiping his eyes. “Sorry, sorry, I’m—”

“I didn’t realize you were so attached to this place.”

“I’m not.”

“Then what is it?”

He wrapped his arms around Len for comfort and let Len hold him. It only took a moment for him to
gather himself, feeling like an idiot, but he sniffed and shook his head when he pulled back.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“We don’t have to move if—”

“No! No it’s… we are moving, right? This isn’t some way to…”

Len’s eyes went wide, “are you—you think I’d what, leave you behind?”

Barry shrugged, a little embarrassed now for thinking it in the first place, for getting ahead of himself. He blamed stress, but Len’s face got softer.

“Don’t be an idiot, Barry. Of course I mean us.”

“You could’ve maybe consulted me on the moving decision then.”

Len winced, “right.”

“Well?”

“Well, Barry—can we get a new place?”

He sighed and went to sit on the couch. “What even brought this on?”

Len took his own spot and took a moment to answer, letting the seconds drag out. Barry tried to be patient. “I… don’t normally stay in one spot too long. Sorta felt like I overstayed my welcome here.”

“Overstayed?”

“A lot happened,” he drawled, clearly trying to make light of it. “Fresh starts tend to mean fresh locales.”

Barry tried to sort that through. Joe’s house had always been a home base for him, an anchor. The more things changed, the more he relied on always having that. But he remembered Mick teasing Len about being in this place for so long, long enough to put down—

“What about your garden?”

Len rolled his shoulder, “details.”

"I liked it."

"I'll plant a new one."

"I'll hold you to it... where were you planning to go?"

“I don’t mean to leave Central City, Barry. Just…”

“Be somewhere new.”

“Right.”

Barry nodded, starting to picture it. “Okay… what did you have in mind?”

They talked about it for over an hour, each with different ideas of the perfect place, each making concessions. In the end, they agreed they needed a somewhat remote house if possible, no
apartments and nothing downtown, not with Len’s history and Barry’s powers.

Len vetoed Barry using his powers to move them, saying they’d do it the old fashioned way. Barry told him he was on the hook for buying the obscene amounts of take-out he intended to order if Len made him actually carry boxes at regular speed.

In the end, they managed to laugh about it. Barry also made Len help with the frankly ridiculous amounts of paperwork he was dealing with courtesy of selling STAR Labs and yet still being involved in the creative planning of the metahuman research lab. That didn’t even touch on all the things Cisco was ordering for turning Eobard’s old house into the new Flash HQ all the papers he was signing for construction rooms he’d never guessed they would need.

When they did move though, he had to agree, it felt like a fresh start.

**********

Iris had her baby.

It was a little baby girl, and they named her Francine after Iris’s mother. Barry thought she was the most beautiful little girl in the world. Eddie cried more than Iris after she was delivered and he held her for the first time.

It took a week before Len met baby Frankie. Barry could tell he was nervous, coming over to Iris and Eddie’s apartment, bringing a little gift for Frankie (he always brought gifts, now, whenever he had an excuse for it. Barry couldn’t help smiling every time Len suddenly had another little gift bag for when they went to dinner or over to someone’s house. He always brought something).

But then Iris offered for Len to hold her and Barry’s heart almost melted. He’d expected Len to say no, to politely refuse, but after a moment of looking like a deer in the headlights, he moved over to Iris and slipped Frankie out her hands like a pro, cradling the head and holding her like he knew exactly what he was doing without being told. Barry had had to be told three times how to do it right. His jaw might be hanging a bit.

“What, Barry?” Len actually looked amused when he caught the expression. “Did you forget I practically raised Lisa?”

“Apparently.”

Len chuckled and turned his attention back to the newborn. She was awake, making little noises, a minuscule hand reaching up but not very far, reaching for his face. Barry thought his heart might burst. Len was making cooing noises, honest to god cooing noises, and Iris looked content to sit down on the couch and rest her eyes for a moment. Eddie was making dinner, and Barry just watched Len, physically incapable of wiping the smile off his face.

He didn’t miss that Len looked content, at peace, with Frankie in his arms. That his mouth was swelled to hold a real smile, and that he glanced at Barry and then down again but it didn’t falter.

Later, at home, Len looking more tired and tense as they filed in the door, Barry thought he should probably address the elephant in the room. He offered to give Len a massage, dragging Len onto the couch, sitting on the back of it for a good angle. His thumbs worked Len’s shoulders and back to relieve the tension for a solid twenty minutes before he moved over to the kitchen to grab them beers
out of the fridge.

“I just wanted to say, about earlier? Don’t worry, Len, please. I’m not going to bring up having kids. I’m happy that Iris is happy and that Frankie is healthy, but it’s not a discussion we need to have again.”

“Maybe it is.” Len took his beer from Barry and moved to a seat at the table, the one littered as much as ever with books and his laptop, blueprints for something Barry was purposefully not asking about. He was 90% sure it was just Len fucking with him anyway, because he had workshops to plan things at, not to mention Mick’s place.

Barry dropped down into the other chair, “you sure?”

“It would be better to discuss it than… not discuss it.”

He had to agree, but it still wasn’t easy to talk about, not really. So he said the only thing he could think of, the only thing he was certain was right, and mattered. “It’s okay, you know, if you don’t want that. If you never want it.”

Len took his hand, thumb rubbing circles over the back. “And… if I do?”

Barry swallowed, trying not to hope too hard. “Do you?”

Len stayed silent, staring at their hands. Barry wished he could tell what Len was thinking, feeling, but at the same time… last time he could and they talked about this, it hadn’t helped. And Len had said since then that he didn't know what he wanted. It was his place to figure that out though.

“If you decide that you do, then… we’ll figure out how to make it a reality.”

“And if I want it but I’m… not ready quite yet?”

Barry let out a shaky breath, “then that’s good because I’m not ready yet either.”

Len’s eyes shot up to meet his. “You aren’t?”

“I want kids someday, Len. Not tomorrow. I’m still figuring out being the Flash, there was an alien invasion literally three weeks ago—” and wasn’t that a riot—“and I always thought I’d be married before I had kids.”

“Are you proposing to me, Barry Allen?”

“I—uh, do you want me to be proposing to you?”

Len laugheded, low but easy. “You know you’re easy to derail.”

“I—that is not funny! No derailing with marriage proposals.”

“So you accept?”

“Where’s my ring?”

And to his complete surprise, one appeared in Len’s hand a moment later, an eyebrow cocked in his direction.

Barry spluttered. “Wha—wait—how did you even know we’d be talking about—?”
“I didn’t. I was planning to wait until this weekend, for our date. That much build up felt like a hassle though.”

The date where they had dinner reservations at a nice restaurant for once, celebrating Len’s new job offer (head of Luthor security and Barry had very mixed feelings about it, not the least because the commute to Metropolis was going to be hell if Len actually took the job).

“I… I do.”

Len smiled, tension slipping out of his shoulders as the ring made its way onto Barry’s finger. “I think you say that at the actual wedding, dear.”

“So we’re having an actual wedding?” His heart was hammering, the ring on his finger nice and snug, somehow almost warm. “And what’s this made of?”

“Cisco put something together that he said wouldn’t be affected by your vibrating.”

That explained the neat glint to it. That and the jagged little snowflake etched into it in place of a stone.

“And my other question?”

“A ceremony if you want one. I’m not fussed.”

Barry kissed him. It would be ridiculous not to, and was ridiculous that he hadn’t already, swept up in details. But he kissed Len until kissing turned into more, finding themselves occupied on the living room floor.

Barry had rug burns and no regrets.

**********

He was a little embarrassed that it had taken him so many months to figure out that Lisa and Cisco had started dating. He wasn’t quite sure when it had happened, only that he was officially the last to know. Even Joe knew. Even the Rogues knew! Barry was halfway certain even Captain Singh knew. He wasn’t sure how, but the disapproving frown every time Cisco was in the precinct suddenly made sense.

According to Cisco, it was sweet sweet payback for being the second last person to know about Barry and Len being Soulmates (Joe being the last, hence his approval and help with Cisco hiding this, to everyone but Barry’s delight). He supposed it was somewhat fair if a completely different situation, but mostly Barry was affronted to discover that Cisco had played pool with James and Hartley, had started a yoga class with Shawna, had even met the new Rogue who Barry had yet to even fight, and still hadn’t mentioned anything to him.

“Tit for tat, my man.”

“Does Caitlin know?”

“Y’know, I’ve figured out that Caitlin knows everything that goes on around here.”

“She really does.”
“So what’s it like to be dating the leader of the Rogues and still working with the Flash?”

Cisco snorted, “what it’s like to be the Flash and engaged to a Rogue?”

“Touche.”

“One rule though?”

“Yeah?”

“No double dates.”

“Oh thank god.”

And then it turned out that Barry was the one who got to tell Len. That was at least a little entertaining.

**********

It was a few weeks later and life was settling into something almost normal, or as normal as their crazy lives could be. He spent the whole evening fighting a metahuman and finally slipped into the room around 3am, being as silent as he could. He didn’t want to wake Len.

“You get the guy?”

Barry jumped a foot in the air and then hissed, toe stubbed against the dresser. Len snorted.

“You’re awake?”

“Mhmm.”

“Bastard.”

“I never sleep when you’re out there.”

Barry smiled in the dark and zipped out of his clothes, slipping into bed next to Len.

“I take it back. You’re a romantic.”

“You’re a cuddler. I’ve become habituated.”

Barry smiled and, true to form, rolled into his side. Len slipped an arm around him and they were quiet for a moment.

“You know what day it is?”

Barry squeezed his eyes shut, then open, rolling onto his back but keeping as much contact with Len’s skin as he could.

“Yeah.”

They were quiet for a moment.
“I’m sorry I stayed out so late.”

“Why did you?”

Barry took a calming breath. “This.” He paused, pushed forward. “I didn’t want to talk about it.” It was cheap and he knew it. He didn’t want to have to explain why their Bondiversary was bringing up emotions he would rather avoid, but he also needed Len to understand. “I almost can’t believe it’s only been a year. So much has happened.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No!” He leaned up on his elbow, looking at his partner. “No, not even a little.”

Len’s fingers grazed his arm gently, skimming. The need for contact that they both felt, to feel each other.

“Do you…”

“What?”

“Blame me?”

“For Bonding?”

Len nodded in the dark, a jerky movement that had Barry leaning closer, hand on his chest.

“No. I can’t even imagine my life without you, Len.” He couldn’t. When Len dropped a hand onto his bare shoulder exactly a year ago, his life had changed in so many ways. He couldn’t picture the year being anything different, and even if he’d been scared of it at the time, he didn’t regret it happening, not even for a second.

“And our bleed?”

Barry was quiet for a moment, feeling the hollow absence of it. It was different now. It hurt less now, to know it was gone. It was a duller sensation, almost bittersweet. He missed it, but he didn’t regret what he had now instead. If he had to trade, he never would. This was his life, and it was with Len. “Never. I’d never blame you for that either.”

Len rolled into him then, head tucked into the crook of Barry’s shoulder and he wrapped his arms around him. “I feel guilty some days, you know... knowing I get to have this.”

"Guilty?"

"Mm."

"Don't be," Barry ran his fingers over the back of Len's head. "Everything we went through, it got us here."

"And you're happy?"

Barry smiled in the dark, pulling Len's hand up to rest against his heart, where it beat too fast inside his chest. "I'm happy. I'm happy with you, and I love you."

“I love you too. Forever.”

“Forever.”
I’m a firm believer in a very happy epilogue. If it’s a little too saccharine for your tastes, sorry not sorry.

I like to think it wraps up any missing loose ends (I hope I didn’t forget any). I know the last chapter talked about kids, but this gives you better conclusion on that front, the only serious issue they’ve never really resolved. The way way that Barry came around to accepting that he'd loved Len from close to the start, Len came around to accepting he does want to raise kids in some form, he's also just been terrified of it and admitting it's something he wants. Unlike Lisa, who just didn't want them to begin with? I tried to show that both of those are valid, and being true to oneself is what matters.

And it’s deliberate that they don’t know what happened to Grodd, that Elias is in custody but not dead, that Kane is still with the military. It’s part of that whole ‘there are future adventures these two will have together’ feel. A sense of continuity, I hope. The story is over, but it’s also not over, in that in life, there’s always another chapter, right? These two will keep going on, even if I don’t write out how. In a sense, as with any story that ends, what happens next is up to the reader to imagine.

I’d like to take this final chance to thank you all for reading up to the end. I know this was long, very very long. I also know that many parts were incredibly painful for some readers. The emotions in this fic are heavy, the situations are bleak at times, the conflict and struggles hit home in ways that hurt. I hope that the positive moments ring through just as strong, that knowing they make it out and move forward and love each other gives you the same hope it gives me, here at the end.

Writing this has been… cathartic for me, and I’d like to thank you all for that as well. I found myself working through some of my own emotions when I poured them onto the page for this fic. There obviously aren’t any linear or one-to-one connections between my life and this story, but some of the emotions I put into it came from somewhere deep inside me, as it turned out, and it was an honor to share that with you and to have it received by you all.

Never underestimate your powers as readers. This story became what it did because of your faith in me and your investment in the story. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Thank you for taking this journey with me (and come talk to me on tumblr if you ever get the urge to say hello).

Works inspired by this one: [obscured in obsidian by writerdragonfly]

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!